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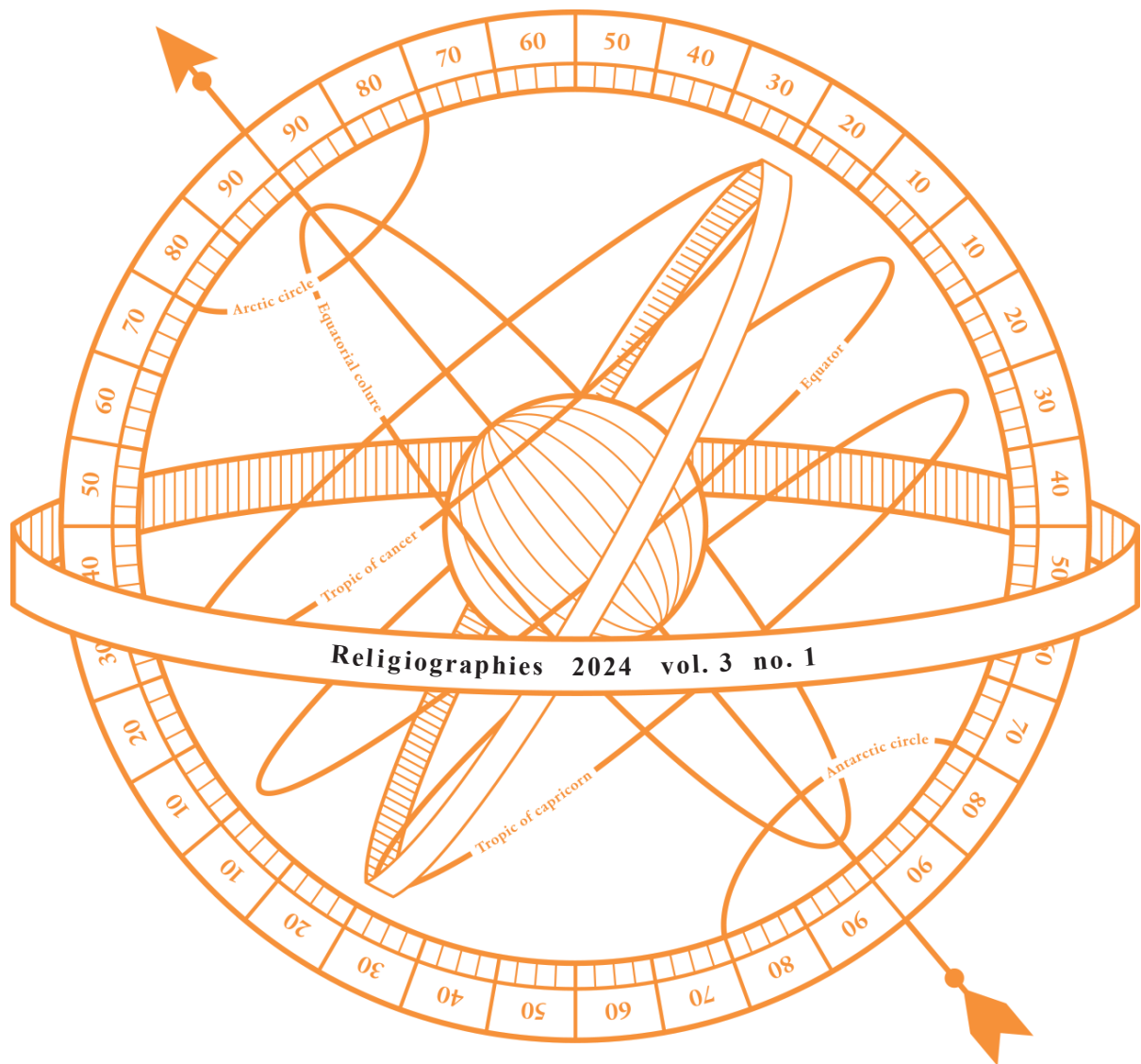
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Religiographies



Special Issue

“Zoroastrian Esotericism”

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Mariano Errichiello, Daniel J. Sheffield, and Yuhan
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Book review

Mark J. Sedgwick

Traditionalism: The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order

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Reviewed by SAMIR ABDELLI



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In this work, Mark Sedgwick seeks to introduce a traditionalist philosophy that remains relatively unknown and highlights the particularities of a radical traditionalist project that aims to restore a sacred order. Traditionalism is a polymorphic and multidirectional thought that claims an eternal, immutable, and transcendental metaphysical lineage. This book offers an intellectual history of traditionalism, from its beginnings in Europe in the early 1910s up to the present day. At the intersection of religious philosophy and political ideology, traditionalism remains a complex subject due to the philosophical and metaphysical notions it mobilizes, as well as the plurality of its uses, in ecological struggles or interreligious dialogue, for instance. It is also a sensitive subject due to the radical movements that claim association with it, notably with fascist and racist inclinations. M. Sedgwick offers a comprehensive perspective of the discursive realm of traditionalism and seeks to systematize its thought.

“Tradition” is understood here as a set of sacred teachings transmitted to humanity since its origins, with the aim of maintaining the sacred order of the world. The association with perennialism, the idea of a *Sophia perennis* as the philosophical foundation of traditionalism, traces back to the very essence of humanity and therefore to a meta-historical reference point. However, it also has historical roots tracing it back to the Italian Renaissance with Marsilio Ficino, who had already engaged with this idea to merge Neoplatonic philosophy with Christianity (pp. 28–29).

Functioning as an inverted mirror, traditionalism opposes the idea of modernity projected onto European and English-speaking societies, especially since the Renaissance era. Modernity is understood as the triumph of positivism and individualism based on a secularized model, contrasting with the traditional and sacred order. The traditionalist thought adopts a historical viewpoint that challenges the notion of modernity as a source of technical, moral, and social progress. It modifies the tripartite periodization of history (p. 71) to put forward the notion of the decline of the world—“for Traditionalists, modernity represents not recovery, but a continuation of the Fall (p. 68).” From the Ancients to the Middle Ages and the modern period, history is perceived as a witness of this departure from tradition. Moreover, in addition to its critique of modernity (pp. 93–96), the anti-modernism underpinnings of traditionalism align with a political opposition to liberal and democratic models, situating it in a political position underlined by the metaphysical foundations it defends. Its political rejection of modernity also makes traditionalism a radical political ideology that takes the form of an intellectual project more than an organized, institutionalized structure.

The difficulty in “grasping” traditionalism can be illustrated through the following statement: “All Traditionalists are perennialists, but not all perennialists are Traditionalists (p. 359).” Indeed, Sedgwick emphasizes that traditionalism is first and foremost what the actors make of it. Like in any discursive register, some elements coincide and coexist, but do not occupy the same places, do not arrange themselves in the same ways, and are composed, decomposed, and recomposed from one version to another. The diversity of approaches to religion among traditionalists is particularly emblematic. René Guénon and

Traditionalism

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then Julius Evola gave little significance to religion, which they associated with an “exoteric” dimension, perceived as “sentimental” and of lesser importance. This could be seen as a form of anti-religious traditionalism. However, Guénon himself revisited these considerations by making the “exoteric” a pathway to the “esoteric,” albeit in a secondary role. Then Schuon, with his “Transcendent Unity of Religions” (pp. 184–91), sought to rehabilitate religion, to merge this dualistic vision, and to establish himself as a religious figure (p. 197)—the religious dimension is articulated among Traditionalists both within Christianity with Jordan B. Peterson and within Islam with Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Criticism of the modern world underlines the works of traditionalists, analysts of the modern world but also researchers and cultural agents, such as Guénon—who used to openly express his apoliticism, his rejection of academic intellectual methods and approaches—as well as Mircea Eliade, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, or Huston Smith. It is also visible in the works of Alain de Benoist, advocate of the French *Nouvelle Droite* who did not adopt perennialism but subscribed to the criticism of the modern world while engaging in an intellectual and political form of activism. At the time of the publication of *Against the Modern World*, Jean-Pierre Brach mentioned that Sedgwick’s work constituted a valuable contribution in its assessment of the impact of traditionalism and its prolificacy in European and North American societies as well as in Turkey and Iran. He emphasized that the evolution of traditionalism has been oriented towards a greater “practical involvement” of religious, cultural, or political domains answering to new imperatives of “public visibility,” at times leading to proselytizing or “citizen participation” endeavors.¹

Rather than providing a somewhat biased introduction to traditionalist philosophy, Sedgwick situates this movement within contemporary intellectual (and political) debates, and refuses to reduce it solely to a thought framework on a disembodied eternal wisdom. The originality of this work lies in the attention given to the prevalence of traditionalism within the issues animating present-day societies and in demonstrating the interconnections at play. Likewise, the corpus of sources used in this work consists of a wide range of textual material in addition to oral sources. Combining historical inquiry and anthropological investigation, Sedgwick adopts a “field historian” approach. This book proves its fruitfulness and its necessity as “the field eventually reveals itself as an archive,” through oral inquiries, direct observations, and contemporary uses of the researched subject.² The sources used for this work reflect research conducted since the 1990s, beginning with Sedgwick’s encounter with traditionalism in Cairo while researching Sufism. While in Italy, he became aware of a form of traditionalism within the Sufi brotherhood of Shaykh Abd al-Wahid Pallavicini, where he noticed a stronger connection with Western philosophy than with Sufis from the Muslim world. He encountered several issues. Firstly, Traditionalists do not openly identify as such, making it a more challenging movement to pinpoint. Secondly, they do not aim to reach a broad audience and form a small, elitist circle. Finally, they are part of other discursive traditions that intersect, sometimes complement or hybridize each other, and simultaneously “blur” identification categories, as seen in the case of Sufism, for example.

1

Jean-Pierre Brach, “Avant-propos,” in *Contre le monde moderne: Le traditionalisme et l’histoire intellectuelle secrète du XXe siècle*, by Mark Sedgwick (Paris: Dervy, 2006), XII.

2

Augustin Jomier and Ismail Warscheid, “Pour une islamologie historique,” *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 73, no. 2 (2018): 314.

The findings from his research on traditionalism resulted in the publication of *Against the Modern World*, which laid the basis of an intellectual history of the twentieth century, tracing its origins, development, and dissemination since Guénon, offering an intellectual genealogy of traditionalism. About twenty years later, he revisited his initial conclusions: the decrease in traditionalist intellectual production did not lead to its decline. While Guénon had been the major reference point of the 20th century, Evola became prominent within the political movements of traditionalism.³ This can be observed not only in Aleksandr Dugin's bestseller *Foundations of Geopolitics* (1997), but also in the works of Gábor Vona and his Jobbik party in Hungary, or in the public statements of Donald Trump's campaign manager, Steve Bannon.⁴ The rise of traditionalist philosophy in right-wing political movements can also be explained by the decline of moderate parties, both left and right, making room for new parties, which engage with other ideologies, including traditionalism. This resonance of traditionalism in current political events, the fact that it influences and inspires new forms of (post-) traditionalism, attests to the vitality and pervasiveness of this movement, in contrast to others that have failed to leave a lasting legacy.

His analysis of traditionalism unfolds in four stages. The first part focuses on the foundations of traditionalist thought, which represent a common ground across its various expressions, relying on structural ideas and developed perspectives. Among these foundations, perennialism plays a central role based on the idea that all (religious) traditions share a single timeless and esoteric tradition—and thus constitute derived traditional forms—connecting human beings to this sacred order. Next is the traditionalist historical perspective, positing the decline of the world and humanity since the transition to modernity, leading to a departure from the traditional sacred order. The thesis of the decline of the modern world justifies criticism through a metaphysical argumentation, diametrically opposed to the positivist narrative, which sees emancipation through reason, moral, and technical progress, as well as individualism—although this definition of modernity is merely a projection, it nonetheless stands as a foundational idea. Finally, the traditionalist “solution” articulates thought and action within society, with the ambition of instigating a restoration of the lost sacred order.

The second part of the book focuses on the main projects of traditionalism, unfolding across three fields of human activity: self-realization, religion, and politics. Sedgwick revisits the various traditionalist approaches, their (re)configurations, and ramifications, as well as the wide range of positions towards these fields, which helps the reader grasp the volatility and versatility of traditionalism—despite the prevalence of these fundamental ideas.

The third part delves into other traditionalist projects from the same perspective as the previous section, exploring how Traditionalists think, appropriate, and express themselves on common grounds—here art, gender, nature, and interreligious dialogue—within societies, and drawing from a traditionalist philosophy. These two parts exemplify the tour de force of this work by incorporating marginal movements into the intellectual discourses and spaces of expression within contemporary societies. This section highlights the shift in the cen-

3

For the works of Guénon's European influence, see below: Jean-Pierre Laurant, *Guénon au combat: Des réseaux en mal d'institution* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2019); Francesco Piraino, “L'héritage de René Guénon dans le soufisme du XXI^e siècle en France et en Italie,” *Religiologiques* 33 (printemps 2016); David Bisson, “Soufisme et tradition: L'influence de René Guénon sur l'Islam soufi européen,” *ASSR* 140 (octobre-décembre 2007).

4

Anton Shekhovtsov and Andreas Umland, “Is Aleksandr Dugin a Traditionalist? ‘Neo-Eurasianism’ and Perennial Philosophy,” in *The Russian Review* 68, no. 4 (October 2009).

ter-periphery relationship of traditionalism according to specific fields of action. As per the issue of interreligious dialogue, it can be a valuable ally with the idea of the unity of traditions in the *Sophia perennis*. Similarly, the protection of nature, seen as sacred, provides room for traditionalists to engage in the fight against climate change, where they constitute a subversive, controversial, yet equally marginal movement in the political sphere.

Finally, the fourth part focuses on the extensive and adaptable aspect of traditionalism through the concept of “post-traditionalism.” Thus, the focus is placed on newer generations, while observing closely the discursive references of traditionalism in political and radical right-wing circles. From the *Nouvelle Droite* in France to identitarian movements or mere identifications among politicians, the author seeks to understand who the political beneficiaries of post-traditionalism are, and for what purposes.

The ambitious challenge of this work is met by presenting readers with a comprehensive approach to traditionalism that accounts for its theoretical foundation without confining itself to it. Hence, this book can be seen as a manual of applied traditionalism. The numerous case studies applied to various societal domains illustrate how the traditionalist intellectual project has intersected with specific struggles, manifested in concrete actions, and been supported by a significant diversity of (political) actors. It demonstrates how, from one actor to another, from one form of traditionalism to another, a structuring element becomes itself structured, an authoritative figure is established as a pioneer or even sacralized, and in other cases is relegated to the background, contradicted, or even appears non-existent. It would be interesting to extend this analysis to consider the case of French Muslim traditionalist movements with mystical tendencies, which contrast with the French political movements analyzed by the author in this work. The specific forms of criticism of the modern world and perennialist thought relayed in these circles are shaped by an effort to translate and publish works of known Traditionalists such as Lings, Burckhardt, or Chittick.

This work ultimately invites us to reflect on the complex nature of traditionalism, which appears to undergo a tension between doctrinal rigidity and the adaptability of its applications revealed by the cross-reading of current uses and its initial expressions.