

Am I My Brother's Keeper?

By ANANDA K. COOMARASWAMY

With an Introduction by Robert Allerton Parker

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INTRODUCTION

DR. COOMARASWAMY has been living and writing in the United States for the past thirty years, but the fruits of his mature thought have never before been made easily accessible to the intelligent layman. To remedy this lack, we have collected these representative essays, which throw so searching a light upon the problems of the present crisis of the human race. To certain readers, Coomaraswamy's ideas may seem highly controversial and destructive of commonly accepted assumptions. Such antagonists may object that this indictment of modern Western civilization is based upon obstinate age-old Oriental prejudices. But Ananda Coomaraswamy is not merely "an eminent Orientalist" (as Aldous Huxley characterizes him in *The Perennial Philosophy*); nor is he merely an authority on Oriental art. The ideas he formulates in these essays and reviews are expressed with the authority of a lifetime of scholarship. He writes, as he has elsewhere explained, "from a strictly orthodox point of view . . . endeavoring to speak with mathematical precision, but never employing words of our own, or making any affirmations for which authority could not be cited by chapter and verse; in this way making even our technique characteristically Indian."

Since Dr. Coomaraswamy deprecates personality and personalism, and condemns the contemporary mania for exhibitionary self-exploitation, he is the most reticent of men in furnishing biographical details. Yet, for lay readers, such details, and an outline of his crowded career, seem necessary for an understanding of the broad foundations of his thought. It may

come as a surprise, for instance, to know that his mother was English; that he began his career as a geologist—a petrologist; that he holds a degree as a Doctor of Science from the University of London; and that though he is without doubt the most distinguished exponent of the *Philosophia Perennis* in the English-speaking world, he is by no means the advocate of the vague, synthetic "theosophy" vulgarized in our Western world, nor of that theory of "reincarnation"—meaning the return of deceased individuals to rebirth on this earth—which is popularly and erroneously associated in certain circles with Hindu "philosophy." In the hope of clearing the air of such prejudices and misconceptions, I have collected the following biographical details:

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy was born on August 22, 1877, in Colombo, Ceylon, the son of a distinguished Ceylonese gentleman, Sir Mutu Coomaraswamy, the first Hindu to have been called to the bar in London, and author of the first translation into English of a Pali Buddhist text. Sir Mutu died before his son was two years old, and the child was brought up in England by his British mother (who survived until 1942).

Ananda Coomaraswamy did not return to his native land until nearly a quarter of a century later. He was educated first at Wycliffe College, at Stonehouse in Gloucestershire, and later at the University of London. Although, without doubt, the Ceylonese youth felt the all-pervading influences of John Ruskin and William Morris, in the awakening nineties, his deeper interests were focused upon science—in particular upon geology and mineralogy. At twenty-two he contributed a paper on "Ceylon Rocks and Graphite" to the *Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society*; and at twenty-five he was appointed director of the Mineralogical Survey of Ceylon. A few years later his work on the geology of Ceylon won him the degree of Doctor of Science from the University of London.

Life in Ceylon opened his eyes to the withering blight cast upon her native arts and crafts by the invasion of Occidental industrialism. Courageously and unequivocally the young Coomaraswamy became the champion of those "native" cultures and handicrafts which were threatened with extermination by the "proselytizing fury" of Occidental civilization.

Since 1917 Coomaraswamy has been with the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, as a research fellow in Oriental art, building up its unsurpassed department of Indian art; collecting, interpreting, expounding to museum curators the traditional philosophy of life and the function of art in human society; demonstrating that all significant expressions, whether in the crafts or in games and other "play," are varying dialects and symbolic activities of one language of the spirit.

Coomaraswamy has been labeled as an expert in Oriental art: but his "Orientalism" has nothing in common with the pseudo-occultism and syncretic theosophy that are volatilized by the self-appointed prophets of the "cults." He likes to puncture the stereotyped fallacy of the "mysterious" and "mystifying" East, and has asserted that a faithful account of Hinduism might be attained by a categorical denial of most of the statements (e.g. about "reincarnation") that have been made about it not only by European scholars, but even by Indians trained in the contemporary skeptical and evolutionary habits of thinking.

His pen is an instrument of precision. His closely and tightly woven fabric of thought is the very model of explicit denotation—a virtue of written expression that is nowadays being rediscovered. For this scholar the exegesis of ancient texts is above all else a scientific pursuit, considered as means to a more abundant life. He prides himself upon never introducing phrases of his own and never makes any claims for which he cannot cite chapter and verse. His compact, condensed prose often pre-

sents a forbidding mosaic on the printed page, offering nothing in the way of enticement to slothful contemporary eyes, but challenging attention nonetheless because of its rigorous exactitude, like that of a mathematical demonstration. Not infrequently matter that would suffice for a whole article is compressed into a footnote. But even when he is thus writing for scholars, it is certainly not only for scholars; and when expressly for those who are not scholars, he can, as the essays in the present collection show, write very simply, relegating footnotes to concluding pages where the reader can ignore them if he so desires.

In the unfolding of this "myriad-minded" intellect—from geology to archaeology and thence to all the arts and expressions, from the humblest to the highest aspirations of all mankind—one is tempted to find a parallel to Leonardo's universal interests.

Beginning, as we have seen, with geology and mineralogy, Coomaraswamy's researches have become universal and all-embracing, ranging from philology in a dozen languages to music and iconography, and from the most ancient metaphysics to the most contemporary problems in politics, sociology, and anthropology. As an admirer has recently stated: "Never has he had time for, nor interest in, presenting personal ideas or novel theories, so constantly and so tirelessly has he devoted his energies to the rediscovery of the truth and the relating of the principles by which cultures rise and fall." Nor does he ever compromise or pull his punches in stating these truths as he has discovered them.

This courage is especially manifest in Coomaraswamy's essays devoted to art. He is today our most eloquent defender of the traditional philosophy of art—the doctrine exemplified in the artifacts that have come down to us from the Middle Ages and the Orient. This philosophy Coomaraswamy has in-

terpreted many times and with a wealth of explicit references; and in contrast he has pointed out the pathological aspects of our contemporary aesthetes who collect the exotic and the primitive with the greediness of the magpie snatching up bits of colored ribbon with which to "decorate" its nest! The arts of the great timeless tradition move ever from within outward, and are never concerned merely with the idealization of objective fact. Modern art, on the other hand, has no resource or end beyond itself; it is too "fine" to be applied, and too "significant" to mean anything precisely.

For Coomaraswamy, as spokesman of tradition, "disinterested aesthetic contemplation" is a contradiction in terms, and nonsense. The purpose of art has always been, and still should be, effective communication. But what, ask the critics, can works of art communicate? "Let us tell the painful truth," Coomaraswamy retorts, "that most of these works are about God, whom nowadays we never mention in polite society!" One is reminded of the fact that our modern treatises on ukiyoye rarely mention the *hetaerae* upon whose lives the great part of this art centers. Youthful anthropologists, like Deacon or Tom Harnisson, retracing the continuous-line sand drawings on a lonely beach of the New Hebrides, re-enacting the *dromenon* of the last survivors of a forgotten culture, in this process of feeling-with, may come closer toward understanding alien races, to the heart of true art, than does the most ecstatic and hysterical of Picassolaters in a Fifty-seventh Street gallery. For, to understand and to appreciate the art of any people, one must become united with it in spirit; one must have learned to feel and to understand the cosmos as they have felt and understood it—never approaching them with condescension or contempt, or even with the sort of "objectivity" that, while it may succeed in depicting, always fails to interpret their works and days.

This is not the place to enlarge upon these arresting and challenging ideas. If we are "off the beam" today in our "appreciation of art," as Coomaraswamy diagnoses our current ailment, it may be, as he asserts, because we are living through "one of the two most conspicuous ages of human decadence"—that first being the late classical. Narcissistic exhibitionism and magpie aestheticism—with its greedy acquisition of the irrelevant—are but twin symptoms of our cultural schizophrenia. The manufacture of "art" in studios, coupled with the artless manufacture of the things that are made in factories, represents for him a reduction of the standard of living to subhuman levels. The coincidence of beauty and utility, significance and aptitude, must determine all human values. Artifacts serving such values are possible only in a co-operative society of free and responsible craftsmen—a vocational society in which men are free to be concerned with the good of the work to be done, and individually responsible for its quality. Coomaraswamy's ideas on art may be studied in *Why Exhibit Works of Art?* and *Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought?* (London: Luzac & Co., 1943, 1946).

Now this traditional philosophy of art is integrated with the whole traditional philosophy of human society, or in other words, and as the readers of the following essays will learn, with the concept of a kingdom of God on earth. Coomaraswamy's work is a monumental achievement in integration: he has become the foremost exponent of the *Philosophia Perennis*, of St. Augustine's "wisdom uncreate, the same now that it ever was, and the same to be forevermore." Across far continents and over centuries and millennia of recorded and unrecorded time, this doctrine speaks in varying dialects, but with a single voice. It is the *sanātana dharma*, the *bagia sophia*, the "justice" or "righteousness" of the tradition, unanimous and universal. All of Coomaraswamy's "myriad-minded" concentra-

tion, together with an almost fabulous self-discipline and positive "drive," have been yoked together to demonstrate the single voice of human aspiration. It is we, the contemporaries, with our genius for fission and division, who are lost—*nous sommes les égarés!* "We are at war with ourselves," as Coomaraswamy insists at the end of his compact essay on René Guénon, "and therefore at war with one another. Western man is unbalanced, and the question, Can he recover himself? is a very real one."

Coomaraswamy's essay on Guénon, included in this book, may be studied as a model of his precision, accuracy, and mathematical brevity. Within the space of a few pages, we are presented with a complete and accurate guide to the intellectual career of one of the most arresting and most significant of contemporary thinkers. This introduction to Guénon is worth the price of admission; for the author of *The Reign of Quantity*, of *East and West*, and *The Crisis of the Modern World* seems to have been, for the American public at least, one of the casualties of the war. It is reassuring to know that the *Études Traditionnelles*, the monthly periodical which for many years had been the vehicle of Guénon's expression, has now resumed publication. And *Le règne de la quantité* has appeared in book form in Paris.

I can only hope that the present volume may open the door, to some readers at least, to a whole "new" realm of thought, as did my belated discovery of Coomaraswamy some years ago. Even his footnotes contain more provocative reading and point the way to more explorations and discoveries than one can ever find in any of the standard-brand, ready-made, ready-to-wear opinions proffered in many noisily advertised best sellers.

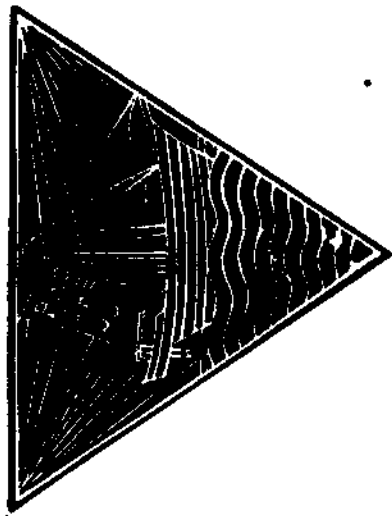
Robert Allerton Parker.

New York
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I: Am I My Brother's Keeper?

CAIN, who killed his brother Abel, the herdsman, and built himself a city, prefigures modern civilization, one that has been described from within as "a murderous machine, with no conscience and no ideals,"¹ "neither human nor normal nor Christian,"² and in fact "an anomaly, not to say a monstrosity."³ It has been said: "The values of life are slowly ebbing. There remains the show of civilization, without any of its realities."⁴ Criticisms such as these could be cited without end. Modern civilization, by its divorce from any principle, can be likened to a headless corpse of which the last motions are convulsive and insignificant. It is not, however, of suicide, but of murder that we propose to speak.

The modern traveler—"thy name is legion"—proposing to visit some "lost paradise" such as Bali, often asks whether or not it has yet been "spoiled." It makes a naïve, and even tragic, confession. For this man does not reflect that he is condemning himself; that what his question asks is whether or not the sources of equilibrium and grace in the other civilizations have yet been poisoned by contact with men like himself and the culture of which he is a product. "The Balinese," as Covarrubias says, "have lived well under a self-sufficient cooperative system, the foundation of which is reciprocal assistance, with money used only as a secondary commodity. Being extremely limited in means to obtain the cash—scarcer every day—to pay taxes and satisfy new needs, it is to be feared that the gradual breaking down of their institutions, together with the drain on their national wealth, will make coolies, thieves, beggars and prosti-



"Progress," by Eric Gill

tures of the proud and honorable Balinese of this generation, and will, in the long run, bring a social and moral catastrophe. . . . It would be futile to recommend measures to prevent the relentless march of Westernization; tourists cannot be kept out, the needs of trade will not be restricted for sentimental [or moral] reasons, and missionary societies are often powerful."⁵

Sir George Watt in 1912 wrote that "however much Indian art may be injured, or individuals suffer, progression in line with the manufacturing enterprise of civilization must be allowed free course."⁶ In the same year Gandhi said that "India is being ground down, not under the English heel, but under that of modern civilization." In an open letter to Gilbert Murray, the late Rabindranath Tagore said, "There is no people in the whole of Asia which does not look upon Europe with fear and suspicion."⁷ When I said to a working woman that what the Germans were doing in Belgium was very dreadful, she retorted, "Yes, too bad the Belgians should be treated as if they were Congo Negroes."

Modern civilization takes it for granted that people are better off the more things they want and are able to get; its values are quantitative and material. Here, How much is he worth? means How much money has he got? A speaker at Boston College lately described modern Western civilization as a "curse to humanity"; and those who now recognize its reflection in the Japanese mirror are evidently of the same opinion. Nevertheless Henry A. Wallace, then vice-president, in a well-meant speech, promised that when the war should be over, "Older [!] nations will have the privilege to help younger nations get started on the path to industrialization. . . . As their masses learn to read and write, and as they become productive mechanics, their standard of living will double and treble."⁸ He did not speak of the price to be paid, or reflect that an incessant

"progress," never ending in contentment, means the condemnation of all men to a state of irremediable poverty. In the words of St. Gregory Nazazien,

Could you from all the world all wealth procure,
More would remain, whose lack would leave you poor!

As for reading and writing, we shall only say that the association of these with "productive mechanics" (and the "chain belt" that suggests the "chain gang") is significant, since these arts are only of paramount importance to the masses in a quantitative culture, where one must be able to read both warnings and advertisements if one is to earn money safely and "raise one's standard of living": that if reading and writing are to enable the Indian and Chinese masses to read what the Western proletariat reads, they will remain better off, from any cultural point of view, with their own more classical literature of which all have oral knowledge; and add that it is still true that, as Sir George Birdwood wrote in 1880, "Our education has destroyed their love of their own literature . . . their delight in their own arts and, worst of all, their repose in their own traditional and national religion. It has disgusted them with their own homes—their parents, their sisters, their very wives. It has brought discontent into every family so far as its baneful influences have reached."⁹

Systems of education should be extensions of the cultures of the peoples concerned; but of these the Western educator knows little and cares less. For example, O. L. Reiser assumed that, after the war, American ideals and policies, so far from allowing for other peoples' cultural self-determination, would dominate the world and that all divergent religions and philosophies could and should be discarded in favor of the "scientific humanism" which should now become "the religion of humanity."¹⁰ We can only say that if Western races are in the future to do

