

Book Review

The Scientist and the Saint

by Avinash Chandra

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This is a work that could be “classified” according to different rubrics—history of science, history of philosophy, metaphysics, religion, cosmology, sociology—because it concerns several fields. But its importance in fact goes far beyond the rather limitative criteria of current academic categories. The substance of this work is a contrast of worldviews.¹ At issue is the difference between what may be called the “traditionalist” worldview,² which was universal among humankind—although manifesting itself in different modes—until about the time of the Renaissance in Europe with what we will call the “modern” worldview.³ The modern worldview has become so all-pervasive in fact, that many of our contemporaries are not even aware that it is a relatively recent development and one which has far-reaching and serious consequences for how we see the world around us and for our relationship with it. The fact that there is a valid worldview which predates and can replace “modernity” will come as refreshing information to those who sense the limitations of the conventional wisdom of today’s world. The author has done a very thorough job of delineating the differences and the ramifications of the two.

The initial premise of this work is that “Any form of thought starts out from a basis of premises and unconscious axioms we take for granted. Thus, every culture has its own axioms and principles, which we only become conscious of when confronted with other forms of

¹ A worldview cannot be “proven”. In considering various data, different minds may well arrive at different conclusions. One has only to think of the classic visual image of a water tumbler: is it half full or half empty?

² In simplified terms, according to a traditionalist worldview, the physical world around us is only the lowest and most gross degree of reality; it is an emanation of and is subject to various superior or “vertical” degrees, including psychic and spiritual degrees of an order that are beyond the limitations of time and space.

³ We set aside here current academic, philosophical definitions and define “modernism” in this context as the view that the world is a product of physical, historical, quantitative and basically “horizontal” causes. According to this worldview, only sensorial, scientifically “measurable” data are admitted as valid.

thought. ... Thus, modern thought is also based on a veritable ‘mythology’, and unconsciously takes for granted many metaphysical principles. However, this mythology and these mythological principles are not recognized as such, while at the same time other peoples have their visions criticized...”⁴ The author then proceeds to describe what the principles are of the “modern mythology”. What follows is then is to compare and contrast it with the “traditionalist” perspective. It is clear from the outset that the author’s perspective is that of tradition, but this is not a work undertaken in the spirit of a polemic. Indian philosophers have been characterized for centuries for their dialectical skills: the ability to approach a question through an intellectual process of discussion and reasoning.⁵ By presenting the premises of differing standpoints and examining all the consequences of those premises, one can then arrive at an evaluation of which perspective offers the most comprehensive and convincing response to the question or questions posed.

One of the indications of the thoroughness of how this approach has been applied is the range and number of authors cited, conveniently listed in an “Index of Proper Names” at the end of the book. Included are names ranging from Plato and pre-Socratics, to philosophers, sages, saints, poets, statesmen, scientists, contemporary theologians and other writers from many different countries, eras and civilizations. An observation is called for here: in setting out to delineate and defend the traditional worldview, Mr. Chandra has included quotations from quite an eclectic scope of authors. Overall, this adds to the credibility of his presentation. The reader must bear in mind, however, that for this very reason, the authors cannot be of equal quality, depth and consistency. It is also worth noting that statements from “the opposition” have not been left out.

The fundamental question at issue is: what is the origin, structure and determining principle of the universe, and concomitantly of the human state? Focusing on the human side of this, the author adds this question: “If man were nothing more than a rather special animal, generated by accident and the blind forces of evolution, why should he be in a quasi-permanent

⁴ Avinash Chandra, *The Scientist and the Saint, Archetype*, Cambridge, 2018, p. 31.

⁵ It is crucial to underline that in this context the “intellect” is not limited just to ratiocination. As Meister Eckhart said: “There is something in the soul that is uncreated and uncreatable, and this is the intellect.”

state of dissatisfaction? Why could he not live in peace, content to do no more than eat, sleep and reproduce? ... And yet, we see many who live in modern developed societies, with all their material needs satisfied to the fullest, sunk to states of frustration, depression or existential crisis.”⁶

Among the hallmarks of people belonging to the traditionalist perspective one finds: 1. the sense of an Absolute principle; 2. flowing from this, a sense of certitude regarding what the cosmos is and what man’s place in it is; 3. deriving from the preceding two, serenity—differing in degree and lucidity according to the scope of the individual. The author summarizes it this way:

“In a world in which nothing certain seems to be left, no refuge, nothing to hold onto, there is still one thing that has, always and everywhere, been considered true, having been explained and corroborated by the experience of many saints and mystics. It is what is known as the perennial philosophy, the *sophia* (wisdom) *perennis*, composed of the nucleus of metaphysical doctrines belonging to every place and time. ... Religions differ from one another, as do spiritual paths, and even many mystical experiences diverge. But although their expressions and emphases are necessarily different, what humanity’s most eminent sages have said ends up, in its essence, being identical or at least convergent. Saint Augustine spoke of that ‘uncreated wisdom the same now as it always was and always will be’.”⁷

“What humanity’s most eminent sages have said” are not merely mental constructions imposed upon credulous spirits. They are principles woven into the very substance of existence. Only this can account for the fact that for millennia, people of the most diverse ethnic backgrounds and civilizations—from illiterate nomads to the most sophisticated town-dwellers—have espoused the same principles and found their life’s fulfillment in them.

⁶ Chandra, op. cit., p. 45.

⁷ Ibid., p. 39.

The size of the book may seem a bit daunting at first glance, but the scope of the subject requires it; and not every reader will feel a need to study each page of the text. A one-page, summary “table of contents” provides an initial orientation to the issues dealt with and is followed by a more detailed and itemized table of contents. This enables the reader to focus on the topics of most interest to him or her. Some readers may not have the practice of paying much attention to introductions, but the one in this book is extremely helpful. It outlines the basic issues that are dealt with in detail later in the text. As the author mentions, much of the content is not from his own pen; rather, he has been the organizer and presenter of a great deal of information from very different sources, but all of which are brought to bear in a very cogent way upon the discussion at hand.

This book is well-researched, coherently presented and highly recommended.