

Traditionalism

Traditionalism, an intellectual movement combining esoteric perennialism and anti-modernism, now exists in three main forms. One, sometimes called "Integral Traditionalism", focuses on the religious; one, sometimes called "Radical Traditionalism", combines political and religious themes; and one combines both of these with music. Traditionalism first emerged in France in the 1920s, spreading first to Italy and then to Switzerland, England and America. It is now a loosely connected worldwide movement.

The term "traditionalism" has both a general and a special sense. In general, it simply denotes a respect for tradition, and there are thus several varieties of traditionalists who have nothing to do with each other or with esotericism. In a special sense, sometimes indicated by the use of a capital T, Traditionalism is defined by the work of René Guénon (1886-1951), who focused on religious themes, and Julius Evola (1898-1974), who focused on both political and religious themes.

It was Guénon who developed the distinction between esoteric and exoteric forms of religion, identifying the esoteric with the perennial tradition and the exoteric with formal religion, a definition of esotericism that has proved influential. Guénon's perennial tradition was very much the perennial philosophy of Western esotericism, a concept that can be traced back through the Theosophical Society in the nineteenth century, to the Florentine Platonic renaissance of the fifteenth century, and even to late antiquity. Guénon also developed the

Traditionalist understanding of modernity as the *kali yuga*, the final age of Hindu cosmology, in which humanity becomes remote from God and degeneration becomes general. Progress is thus no more than a dangerous delusion, and decline is the true dynamic of modernity. Evola generally agreed with Guénon, adding a broader social and political critique, seeing democracy as the triumph of the ignoble, for which Christianity was partly responsible. While Guénon was primarily interested in possibilities of initiation that were open to the individual, and himself adopted Sufism as Islamic esotericism, Evola was more interested in political possibilities, and engaged with various political forces. He had no interest in Islam or Sufism, and looked instead to Western esoteric traditions and to Roman paganism (Sedgwick 2004).

One major strand of contemporary Traditionalism, sometimes called "Integral Traditionalism", follows Guénon's interest in Sufism. There are two Traditionalist Sufi orders, followers of which combine Traditionalist analyses, including esoteric perennialism and anti-modernism, with the standard practices of Sufism and Islam. One, the Maryamiyya, is found worldwide, and was established by Frithjof Schuon (1907-98). Its most important branch is now in America, and is headed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (born 1933), who is also the most widely read Muslim Traditionalist. It now focuses mostly on the Islamic, not on Western esotericism (Dickson 2015). The other Traditionalist Sufi order is the Ahmadiyya-idrîsiyya-shâdhiliyya, established by Abd al Wahid Pallavicini (born 1926), and now found in Italy and France (Bisson 2007; Piraino 2016, 164-167). In addition, there are a number of Sufi orders which are not themselves Traditionalist but have many members who are influenced by Traditionalism (Piraino 2016). The two most important of these are the Boutchichiya, based in Morocco and found also in the West, especially in France, and the 'Alawiyya, based in Algeria and also found in the West, again especially in France. There is also some

Traditionalist influence in the Haqqaniyya, a global branch of the Naqshbandiyya (Piraino 2016).

The Maryamiyya remains the most important of these Traditionalist Sufi orders, since although it is small, its followers are often influential, especially in American academia. Maryamis are also prominent in the promotion of "moderate" Islam and in interfaith initiatives. Many were involved, for example, in the production of the *Study Quran* (Nasr 2015). Some Maryamis are on good terms with the important movement in American and global Islam represented by scholar-preachers like the well-known American, Hamza Yusuf Hanson (born 1960), as they agree on a number of points, though the intellectual sources of this movement are quite separate (Mathiesen 2013; Dickson 2015, 48), and many of its key figures are anti-perennialist.

In addition to the strand of contemporary Traditionalism that follows Guénon's interest in Sufism, a second strand follows Guénon's interest in Freemasonry. This, however, remains poorly researched. A third strand is found within academia and intellectual life, consisting of scholars who appreciate the work of Guénon for its interpretative power, but are not Sufis. This is found especially in France, Iran, and Turkey, though there are also non-Sufi Traditionalist scholars in a number of other countries.

The major political strand of contemporary Traditionalism, sometimes called "Radical Traditionalism", follows Guénon, Evola, and other sources. It divides on a geographical basis into three main streams, all of which overlap and cooperate. Firstly, the most important of these is Eurasianism, based in Russia and led by Alexander Dugin (born 1962), who draws on

Lev Gumilev (1912-22) (Laruelle 2008, 50-83) and Heidegger as well as on Guénon and, especially, Evola. Secondly, in Europe, the work of Dugin and Evola is popular in the milieu of the New Right, in which Alain de Benoist (born 1943) is the leading figure (François 2014, 90, 93-96), and in identitarian circles (Cahuzac and François 2013). Guénon and identitarianism were discussed in a successful novel by Michel Houellebecq (2015). Traditionalism is less important to Benoist than to Dugin, however, and he is more of a sympathiser with Traditionalism than a Traditionalist. Thirdly, in America, the work of the New Right, Dugin and the Traditionalists is popular in the alt-right milieu, promoted especially by John Morgan (born 1973) of Arktos, a publisher and website (Hale 2011, 93). Arktos has been especially important in making Traditionalist works available in English translation, though in 2016 it began moving away from Traditionalism towards anti-Islamic positions. The alt-right milieu includes the Traditionalist Worker Party, founded in 2015 ("Traditionalist Workers Party" 2016).

Dugin's Eurasianist geopolitics identifies tradition with the Russian sphere, and identifies modernity and decadence with the Atlantic sphere. His vision coincides to some extent with Russian foreign policy under President Vladimir Putin (born 1952), which has led some to overestimate his importance, even calling him "Putin's Brain" (Barbashin and Thoburn 2014). In fact, there are also important differences between Putin's policies and Dugin's theories (Antonovič 2013, 39). Dugin's views, while unusual by Western European standards, fit the mood in post-Yeltsin Russia, however, and Dugin himself clearly enjoys some degree of official support in Moscow (Umland 2010; 2016). It has been suggested that the Russian state may also provide some support for identitarianism and the alt-right in the West ("The Motherlands Calls" 2016). It is not Dugin's geopolitics that proves most attractive outside Russia, however,

but his "fourth political theory", the title of a 2009 book (Dugin 2012). This rejects liberalism, communism and fascism and proposes instead to "defend the ideals and values of Tradition." It defines Tradition in two ways: in terms of the work of Guénon, Evola, and Schuon, and as "religion, hierarchy, and family", a simpler definition aimed at a wider audience (Dugin 2012, 25-26). A similarly simplified Traditionalism also inspires the public declarations of the Traditionalist Worker Party in America, which uses the slogan of "Faith, Family, and Folk", and does not refer in public to more complex ideas such as the kali yuga.

Dugin generally refers to the Christian esotericism of Russian Orthodoxy (Dugin 1996), but the New Right and identitarians follow Evola's anti-Christian paganism, as do some in the alt-right milieu. They condemn Christianity for its non-European roots and its role in promoting egalitarian secular utopias, and emphasise the importance of pre-Christian European myth, especially Celtic and Nordic (François 2014). They see this as a basis for a utopia made up of societies that are local and hierarchical, much the vision of British writer John Michell (Hale 2011, 95). Although paganism was initially incidental to the New Right, some on the New Right are now promoting their politics among pagan audiences in Europe and America (Hale 2011, 92-93), creating a new connection between Traditionalism and Western esotericism.

Identitarians and many in the alt-right milieu stress the importance of protecting the European culture and identity from admixture, proposing in effect a form of Apartheid as a solution to the contemporary "Muslim question" in Europe, and merging with White Nationalism in the United States. Although in theory identitarians and the alt-right respect all traditional cultures and religions, some consider these positions to be no more than a cover for classic racism. Some also consider Eurasianism, the New Right, and the alt-right as no

more than old-fashioned fascists, but all these groups are as critical of classic fascism as they are of communism and liberalism. Morgan, for example, points out that unlike classic fascism, the New Right does not favour a powerful state, and is not interested only in the material (Versluis 2014).

These political Traditionalist organisations are all small, aiming to influence opinion indirectly. The Traditionalist Worker Party presents itself as a serious political organisation, but probably has only a handful of members. There are, however, also two European political parties with significant electoral support where Traditionalist ideas are important to the leadership, if absent from public political platforms, which are generally classified as "nationalist" or "far-right". These are Jobbik in Hungary (Korkut and Akçali 2015) and Golden Dawn in Greece (Tipaldou 2015, 198, 207). Some Eurasianist-Traditionalist presence is now found in most European countries (Laruelle 2015), and some individual politicians in other parties are also influenced by Traditionalism, one example being an influential member of Turkey's AKP, Yalçın Akdoğan (born 1969) (Par 2015).

The third and final form of contemporary Traditionalism, the one that focuses on music, overlaps to some extent with the identitarian and alt-right milieus, both politically and in terms of its interest in paganism, especially Nordic paganism. There are a number of neofolk, dark folk and black metal bands that refer to Traditionalism and paganism, of which the most popular are Blood Axis in the US and Death in June and its successor, Sol Invictus, in Europe (François 2008, 38; Gardell 2003, 299-301; Granholm 2011, 533). There are also some smaller bands, such as Ritual Front in Russia (Shekhovtsov 2009, 456) and the Swedish rap band Zyklon Boom (Teitelbaum 2017, 62-63).

Some of the leaders of these bands are serious Traditionalists, notably Michael Moynihan (born 1969), the founder of Blood Axis, who is also a co-editor of *Tyr: Myth, Culture, Tradition*, a heavy-weight Traditionalist journal (François 2008, 42). Solguru, the pseudonymous rapper of Zyklon Boom, is a blogger for Motpol, a popular Swedish identitarian website that cooperates with Arktos (Teitelbaum 2017, 63). The significance of Traditionalism for others in these music scenes, and for the hundreds of thousands or even millions of people who listen to their music, is unclear. At one extreme, it can be assumed that some who listen to their music online are completely unaware of the significance of the various references to tradition and paganism. Some, however, are likely to be interested in or influenced by these references (Shekhovtsov 2009, 456). Or is it simply posing, as when other bands refer to taboo topics simply in order to shock? Scholar Kennet Granholm has argued that this is the wrong question, that rock music is inherently rebellious, and that while part of the attraction of Traditionalist and pagan motifs in folk music is undoubtedly that they are rebellious, the same is also true of many people's motivations for involvement in other branches of esotericism. What matters is the involvement, not the unknowable motivation for it (Granholm 2011).

While much twentieth-century Traditionalism was derived primarily from Guénon and Evola or Schuon, contemporary Traditionalism is often combined with other religious, philosophical or political positions. Contemporary Traditionalism has maintained earlier Traditionalism's significance in religion, but this may fade in future years, if only because at present there is no Traditionalist author of the younger generation of the stature of Nasr or of some of the other twentieth-century Maryamis. Traditionalism's political significance is more diffuse now than

it was during the 1970s, when Evola's work was almost alone as an inspiration for the postwar far right. Dugin and Benoist both draw on other sources, as do members of the Eurasian, New Right, identitarian and alt-right milieus. These milieus, however, are more important today than comparable milieus were during the second part of the twentieth century, simply because the right in general is more important, so the total significance of Traditionalism is probably greater than ever before. Evola is now available in many more editions and languages than at the turn of the century. If the importance of the right continues to grow, so may the importance of Traditionalism. Traditionalism's place in music is a new development, the significance of which is not yet entirely clear.

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