

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy: From geology to *philosophia perennis*

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Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), an eminent historian and philosopher of Indian arts and religions, began his career as a Sri Lankan geologist. While his philosophical thinking was influenced by such great minds as Rabindranath Tagore and Rene Guenon, his methodology of researches and writings in the areas of art, culture, religion and philosophy was influenced by his scientific training. A large body of scholarly and insightful works that Coomaraswamy has left is a valuable and useful legacy for today's scholars and society.

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (Figure 1) stands as a towering scholar and thinker of the Indian subcontinent during the first half of the twentieth century. Many recognize him as a historian and philosopher of Indian arts and religion (Table 1), but few know that he was also a geologist (Table 2). As 2007 marked the 130th anniversary of Coomaraswamy's birth and 60th anniversary of his death, I undertook to study his geologic works and reflect on how Coomaraswamy's scientific training and attitude influenced his works in history, arts, philosophy and religion. Relatively little attention has been given by Coomaraswamy's biographers to this aspect of his life and work. This note looks at his many talents and diverse contributions. Aside from his scholastic works and findings, Coomaraswamy's viewpoints make him as relevant to our century and generation as he was a century ago, when humanity suffered from two world wars, the West–East tensions were high (the Indian liberation movement being a notable example), and Asian countries were struggling, to varying degrees, between tradition and modernity, science and religion, as well as between nationalism and internationalism. These issues are still with us, and Coomaraswamy's perspective is pertinent.

Life and career

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (AKC hereinafter) has not left any autobiography and did not like others to write his biographies either¹. Nonetheless, several biographies of AKC are available^{2–6}, and here I only give a brief sketch of his life as background for discussing his contributions and thoughts.

AKC was born on 22 August 1877 in Colombo, Sri Lanka (Ceylon). His father, Sir Muthu Coomaraswamy, was a legis-

lator (like his father before him) and the first Lankan to be knighted by Queen Victoria. Muthu came from a Tamil, Hindu family. The name Coomaraswamy

refers to two figures in Hindu mythology; Kumara (or Skanda, the son of Shiva) and the goddess Kumari (whose temple is located near Kanyakumari or Cape



Figure 1. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) (Photos from Lipsey^{4,12,13}).

Table 1. Ananda Coomaraswamy's major works on Indian arts, religions and philosophy

Year	Title	Publisher
1906	<i>Handbook to the Exhibition of Arts and Crafts: Ceylon Rubber Exhibition</i>	Colombo, Ceylon
1907	<i>The Deeper Meaning of the Struggle</i>	Essex House Press, UK
1908	<i>The Aims of Indian Art</i>	Essex House Press, UK
1908	<i>Medieval Sinhalese Art</i>	Essex House Press, UK
1908	<i>The Message of the East</i>	Ganesh Press, Madras
1909	<i>Essays in National Idealism</i>	Apothecaries, Colombo
1909	<i>The Indian Craftsman</i>	Probasthain, London
1910	<i>Art and Swadeshi</i>	Ganesh Press, Madras
1910	<i>Selected Examples of Indian Art</i>	Essex House Press, UK
1910	<i>Indian Drawings, 1st Series</i>	India Society, London
1912	<i>Indian Drawings, 2nd Series</i>	India Society, London
1912	<i>Burning and Melting</i> (Being the <i>Suz-u-Gudaz</i> of Mohammad Reza Nau'i) (with Mirza Y. Dawood)	Old Bourne Press, London
1913	<i>The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon</i>	Foulis, Edinburgh
1913	<i>Thirty Songs from the Panjab and Kashmir</i> (Foreword by Rabindranath Tagore)	Luzac & Novello, London
1914	<i>Myths of the Hindus and the Buddhists</i> (with Sister Nivedita)	George Harrap, London
1914	<i>Vishvakarma</i>	Luzac & Co., London
1915	<i>The Taking of Toll (Danalila)</i>	Old Bourne Press, London
1915	<i>Vidyapathi: Songs of the Love of Rudra and Krishna</i> (with Arun Sen)	Old Bourne Press, London
1916	<i>Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism</i>	George Harrap, London
1916	<i>Rajput Painting</i> (2 vols)	Oxford University Press
1917	<i>The Mirror of Gesture</i> (<i>Abhinaya Darpana</i> of Nandikesvara)	Harvard University Press
1918	<i>The Dance of Shiva</i> (Essays)	Sunwise Turn, New York
1923	<i>Catalogue of Indian Arts</i> (Parts I and II)	Boston Museum of Fine Arts
1924	<i>Portfolio of Indian Arts</i>	Boston Museum of Fine Arts
1924	<i>Jaina Paintings and Manuscripts</i> (Catalogue Part III)	Boston Museum of Fine Arts
1923	<i>Introduction to Indian Art</i>	Theosophical House, Madras
1925	<i>Bibliographies of Indian Art</i>	Boston Museum of Fine Arts
1925	<i>Rajput Painting</i> (Catalogue Part IV)	Boston Museum of Fine Arts
1927	<i>History of Indian and Indonesian Art</i>	Weyhe, New York
1928	<i>Yakshas</i> (Part I)	Smithsonian Institute Miscellaneous Collections 80:6 Washington, D.C.
1930	<i>Mogul Painting</i> (Catalogue Part V)	Boston Museum of Fine Arts
1931	<i>Yakshas</i> (Part II)	Smithsonian Institute Publication 3059 Washington, D.C.
1933	<i>A New Approach to the Vedas</i>	Luzac & Co., London
1935	<i>The Rig Veda as Land-Nama-Bok</i>	Luzac & Co., London
1935	<i>Elements of Buddhist Iconography</i>	Harvard University Press
1935	<i>The Transformation of Art in Nature</i>	Harvard University Press
1943	<i>Hinduism and Buddhism</i>	Philosophical Library, New York
1943	<i>Why Exhibit Works of Art?</i> (1956 Reprint: <i>Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art</i>)	Luzac & Co., London
1944	<i>Recollection, Indian and Platonic</i> <i>And on the One and the Only Transmigrant</i>	Dover, New York Journal of American Oriental Society, Baltimore, 64, Supplement No. 3
1946	<i>Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought</i>	Luzac & Co., London
1947	<i>Am I My Brother's Keeper?</i> (Essays)	John Day, New York
1947	<i>Time and Eternity</i>	Atribus Asiae, Switzerland

(Contd.)

HISTORICAL NOTE

Table 1. (Contd.)

Year	Title	Publisher
Posthumous books		
1948	<i>The Living Thoughts of Gotama the Buddha</i> (with I.B. Horner)	Cassell & Co, London
1948	<i>The Bugbear of Literacy</i> (ed. Lipsey, R.)	Dennis Dobson, London
1972	<i>The Origin of the Buddha Image</i>	Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi
1975	<i>Early Indian Architecture: Palaces</i>	Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi
1977	<i>Coomaraswamy: Selected Papers</i> (Vol. 1: <i>Traditional Art and Symbolism</i> Vol. 2: <i>Metaphysics</i>) (ed. Lipsey, R.)	Princeton University Press
1978	<i>Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government</i>	Manohar, New Delhi
1983	<i>Symbolism of Indian Architecture</i>	Historical Research Documentation Programme, Jaipur
1985	<i>Fundamentals of Indian Art</i> Vol. 1. <i>Themes and Concepts</i>	Historical Research Documentation Programme, Jaipur
1985	<i>The Wall Paintings of India, Central Asia and Ceylon</i> (2 vols)	Manohar, New Delhi
1988	<i>Selected Letters of Ananda Coomaraswamy</i> (eds Alvin Moore Jr and Coomaraswamy, R. P.)	*IGNCA and Oxford University Press, Delhi
1989	<i>What is Civilization? And Other Essays</i>	Lindisfarne Press, USA
1993	<i>Yakshas: Essays in the Water Cosmology</i> (ed. Schroeder, P.)	IGNCA and Oxford University Press, Delhi
1993	<i>Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government</i> (ed. Iyengar, K. N.)	IGNCA and Oxford University Press, Delhi
1995	<i>Essays in Architectural Theory</i> (ed. Meister, M.)	IGNCA and Oxford University Press, Delhi
1997	<i>The Door in the Sky: Coomaraswamy on Myth and Meaning</i> (ed. Coomaraswamy, R. P.)	Princeton University Press
1999	<i>The Eight Nayikas</i>	Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi
2000	<i>Perception of the Vedas</i> (ed. Misra Vidya Niwas)	IGCNA & Manohar, New Delhi
2003	<i>Essays on Jaina Art</i> (p. 109) (ed. Cohen, R. J.)	IGCNA and Manohar, New Delhi
2003	<i>The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy</i> (ed. Coomaraswamy, R. P.)	World Wisdom, New York
2006	<i>Essays on Music</i> (ed. Sharma Prem Lata)	IGCNA and Manohar, New Delhi

*IGNCA, Indra Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi.

Camorin). Muthu was well versed in Western classic literature, and was also interested in the Indian philosophy, especially Buddhism (he translated two Buddhist works from Pali into English). All these traits were passed onto his son, Ananda (so named after the Buddha's chief disciple Ananda, literally meaning 'joy'). Ananda's rather unusual middle name, Kentish, refers to his mother's home place of Kent in England. Elizabeth Clay Beeby had married Muthu two years before Ananda's birth and had decided to settle in Ceylon. When Ananda was two years old, his mother took him to England, and Muthu was sup-

posed to follow them a month later. But on the day of his departure, Muthu died at an untimely age of forty-six. Elizabeth Beeby (widowed at thirty and never remarried) got fascinated with her husband's cultural land (although she lived in England) and thus persuaded their son Ananda to acquire and transmit a deeper knowledge of Indian philosophy and religious tradition. (Years later, Elizabeth Beeby used to read all of Ananda's writings, and when she died in 1939, AKC remarked, 'I hope that by my efforts and work, I have done something to help in the realization of her desire'³.)

In 1889, AKC (aged twelve) was admitted to Wycliff School in Springfield, England, and studied there for eight years, excelling in Western literature and also developing a strong interest in geology and biology. (AKC prepared articles on the geology of Gloucestershire, where his school was located, and published them in the school journal. 'The geology of Doverow Hill' printed in 1895, was perhaps his first geologic paper.). In 1897, AKC entered University College, London and graduated in 1900 with a B Sc (First Class Honors) in geology and botany. For the following six years, he was intensely engaged in research on the

Table 2. Ananda Coomaraswamy's geologic works

Year	Publication
1900	On Ceylon rocks and graphite. <i>Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society, London</i> , 56 , 590–615.
1901	Note on the occurrence of corundum as a contact mineral of Pont Paul near Morlain (Finistere). <i>Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society, London</i> , 57 , 185–188.
1902	Silification of crystalline limestone. <i>Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society, London</i> , 58 , 16–19.
1902	The Balangoda Group. <i>Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society, London</i> , 58 , 418–422.
1902	Note on the scenery of Ceylon. <i>British Association for the Advancement of Science Transactions, Section C</i> , pp. 613–614.
1902	Origin of the crystalline limestones of Ceylon. <i>Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society, London</i> , 58 , 375–378.
1902	The crystalline limestones of Ceylon. <i>Geological Magazine, Fourth Series</i> , 9 , 399–424.
1902	The crystalline limestones of Ceylon. <i>Geological Society of London, Reports and Proceedings</i> , 190–192.
1902	The Point-de-Galle Group (Ceylon): Wollastonite–scapolite gneisses. <i>Geological Magazine, Fourth Series</i> , 9 , 680–689.
1902	Occurrence of radiolarian in Gondwana beds near Madras. <i>Geological Magazine, London, Fourth Series</i> , 9 , 305.
1903	Serendibite: A new borosilicate of Ceylon. (G. T. Prior and AKC) <i>Mineralogical Magazine, London</i> , 13 , 224–227.
1903	Observations on the Tíree marble, with notes on others from Iona. <i>Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society, London</i> , 59 , 91–104.
1904	The crystalline rocks of Ceylon. <i>Spolia Zeylancia, Colombo</i> , 105–111.
1904	Mineralogical Notes. <i>Spolia Zeylancia, Colombo</i> , 57–64.
1904	Mineral Resources. Official Handbook of the Ceylon Court, Colombo.
1904	Recent marine clays at Kuchaveli, Ceylon. <i>Spolia Zeylancia, Colombo</i> , 199–200.
1904	Report on thorianite and thorite. Government Printing Office, Colombo, pp. 1–4.
1904	Administrative Report for 1903, Mineralogical Survey, Ceylon, pp. L1–L12.
1905	Intrusive pyroxenites, mica-pyroxenites and mica-rocks in the charnokite series or granulites in Ceylon. <i>Geological Magazine, London</i> , 460 , 363–369.
1905	Report on the occurrence of cassiterite (oxide of tin). Government Printing Office, Colombo.
1905	Administrative Report for 1904, Mineralogical Survey, Ceylon, 1905, E1–E21.
1906	Administrative Report for 1905, Mineralogical Survey, Ceylon, 1906, E1–E18.
1906	<i>Geological Map of Kandy District</i> .
1906	<i>Bibliography of Ceylon Geology</i> .
1906	<i>Glossary of Sinhalese Mining Terms</i> .
1906	<i>Glossary of Sinhalese Terms Used for Gems and Gemming</i> .
1907	Administrative Report for 1906, Mineralogical Survey, Ceylon, 1907, E1–E11.

geology of Sri Lanka; from 1903 to 1906 he was appointed the first Director of the Mineralogical Survey of Ceylon. In 1906, he obtained a D Sc degree in geology from London University; his thesis, 'Contributions to the geology of Ceylon', was a collection of his published papers. (He was the first Lankan to obtain a doctorate degree from a British university, and his D Sc is recorded in the *London University Gazette*, 7 February 1906.)

While living in Ceylon and travelling to villages on field trips (especially in the environs of Kandy), AKC became interested in Sri Lankan folk arts and traditional culture, and (with the support of his cousins Sir Ramanathan Ponnambalam and Sir Arunachalam Ponnambalam)

founded the Ceylon Social Reform Society in 1905, and its journal *Ceylon National Review* in 1906.

The year 1906 marks a drastic transformation in AKC's career from that of a professional geologist to an amateur art historian, religious philosopher, and essayist – a career path which he ultimately excelled to a high degree of reputation and scholarly contribution. For reasons we do not exactly know, AKC decided to quit geology and leave Sri Lanka – never to return again. (His link with geology was symbolically preserved in a gold ring, set with a star sapphire he usually wore, and his hobby of gardening). His 1905 paper on paddy cultivation ceremonies in Ceylon⁷ marks an

important transition from geology to cultural studies.

After a three-month stay in India, AKC left for England in 1907. For the following ten years, he plunged into a study of Indian arts and philosophy. He purchased an old, large rural house at Broad Capmden and set up a printing workshop called the Essex House. Most of his early books were printed and published by himself and his wife. From 1909 to 1913, AKC divided his life between England and India, drawn especially to Rabindranath Tagore's circle, India's liberation movement under Mahatma Gandhi (whom he met in 1914 in London), the Indian Society of Oriental Art in Calcutta (run by Tagore's

nephew), and the Indian Society which AKC founded in London in 1910.

By 1916, AKC had collected a large number of valuable classical Indian arts, especially a series of miniature paintings with motifs of Hindu myths, which were then mistakenly thought to be Mogul paintings, but AKC named (characterized) them as Rajput paintings. Despite his hopes and attempts to find an academic job in the field of Indian arts in India itself and his offer to donate his art collection towards establishing a National Museum in Varanasi (Banaras), the British Indian government refused his suggestions. In 1917, AKC accepted an offer from Denman W. Ross of Harvard University to start and head the Indian Art Department at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. In this way, AKC and his arts collection moved to Boston – never to return to India. In 1922, AKC added Mohammedan Art also to his department, and in 1933, his title changed from the Keeper of Indian and Mohammedan Arts to Fellow for Research in Indian, Persian and Mohammedan Art – a position he maintained for the rest of his life.

AKC married four times. In 1903, he married Ethel Mary Partridge, an English photographer, who lived with him in Sri Lanka, England and India; they divorced in 1910. His second wife, Alice Richardson, was also an Englishwoman but changed her name to Ratan Dev and became an Indian musician. They had a son and a daughter. The couple divorced a few years after they had moved from England to America. Stella Bloch was an American painter and dancer, and twenty-two years younger to AKC. They first met in 1917 (the year AKC went to America) and finally married in 1922, but with AKC in Boston and Bloch in New York, they practically did not live together. The couple divorced in 1930. In the same year, AKC married, Dona Luisa Runstein⁸, an Argentine-born Jewish photographer in Boston and twenty-eight years younger than him (she died in 1971). They had one son, Rama Ronnambalam⁹.

On 15 August 1947, India officially obtained her Britain independence and the joyful AKC gave a speech on this occasion at Harvard, praising Mahatma Gandhi and adding that 'I am proud of a nation whose flag is not nationalistic but pointing to man's relation with the cosmos'³. A week later, on his seventieth birthday and at a farewell dinner at the Harvard Club in Boston, AKC talked of

his future plans: 'This is our plan, mine and my wife's – to return to India next year, thinking of this as an *astam gamana*, 'going home'. There we expect to rejoin our son, Rama, who after travelling with Marco Pallis [author of *Peaks and Lamas*] in Sikkim and speaking Tibetan there, is now at the Gurukul Kangri [at Haridwar] learning Sanskrit and Hindi with the very man, Pandit Vagishvarji, with whom my wife was studying there twelve years ago. We will remain in India, now a free country, for the rest of our lives'⁴. These words eloquently show that even though AKC lived and worked in the US for three decades, his spiritual link to India had intensified over time. However, his dream did not come true. On 9 September 1947, AKC died of a heart attack in the garden of his home at Needham, Massachusetts. (That day he was finishing a revision of *The Dance of Shiva*.) Eight years later, AKC's ashes were immersed in the Ganges at Allahabad.

AKC's contributions to human thought are many-sided¹⁰. A bibliography of his works lists 95 volumes and over 900 articles¹¹. Roger Lipsey, who has edited a three-volume book on AKC's life and work, devotes the first volume to 'Traditional Arts and Symbolism'¹², and the second volume to 'Metaphysics'¹³. (The third volume is a biography of AKC⁴.) While these categories broadly capture AKC's contributions to the humanities, his geologic contributions should not be ignored, and this indeed is my point of departure in this essay.

Geologic contributions

Table 2 lists the geologic publications of AKC. Most of these papers have been recently collected in a handsome volume¹⁴ (Figure 2) containing 23 articles: 19 of which are research papers published in the *Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society* (London), *Geological Magazine* (London), *Spolia Zeylancia* (Colombo), etc. and four administrative reports from the Mineralogical Survey of Ceylon (spanning 1903–1906).

Judging from his publications, AKC's main field of expertise was mineralogy and petrology, with case studies from Sri Lanka. His first research paper, 'On Ceylon rocks and graphite' (1900) describes 16 different types of crystalline rocks from this 'continental island' with 'wide-

spread and characteristic pyroxene-granulites'. He then discusses the mode of occurrence and origin of graphite – 'Ceylon's most important mineral product; its export began before 1830, and now amounts to about 18,000 tonnes yearly'. AKC notes that graphite chiefly occurs as veins in the Ceylon rocks, 'not in beds or lenticular streaks', and suggests that it probably formed from liquid hydrocarbons passing through the rock and were chemically reduced (loosing hydrogen) later, leaving carbon in place.

AKC also studied 'Crystalline limestone' rocks from Sri Lanka, and in a series of papers (Table 2) he argued that these rocks were interbedded and contemporaneous with charnokite rocks. (Charnokite is a coarse granular rock of Precambrian age and igneous origin, first discovered in southern India and named after Job Charnok of the East India Company in Calcutta, whose tombstone is made of this rock.) AKC observed that the crystalline limestone beds had structural foliation (mineral banding) parallel to that of the neighbouring rocks, and that there was a contact mineralization zone (characterized by the mineral diopside) between the two.

'Last year, while staying at Madras I paid a short visit to Sripermatu [a town 38 kilometres southwest of Madras], accompanied by Mr Ranga Chari, M A, of the Madras University. I did not obtain many plant remains, but was struck by the very porcellanic character of the shales containing them. A few specimens were collected ... In the thin slices cut from these specimens Radiolaria are to be seen.' This is how AKC reported his discovery of radiolaria in the Upper Gondwana beds (the Rajmahal Series)

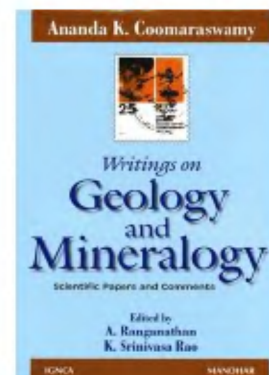


Figure 2. Collection of Coomaraswamy's geologic papers, published in 2001.

near Madras, and published in the *Geological Magazine* (Table 2).

Along with G. T. Prior, AKC discovered a new mineral with the composition of $\text{Ca}_2(\text{Mg, Al})_6\text{O}_2[(\text{Si, Al, B})_6\text{O}_{18}]$ at Gangapitiya near Ambakotte (about 18 km east of Kandy) in 1902. In a paper published in the *Mineralogical Magazine* (London), the new mineral was named 'Serendibite' (after Serendib, an old Arab name for Ceylon). This mineral is listed in the authoritative book, *Rock Forming Minerals* (by W. A. Deer, R. A. Howie and J. Zussman, 1978) acknowledging its discovery by Prior and AKC.

Perhaps AKC's greatest geologic discovery was thorianite, a mineral with the composition $(\text{ThU})\text{O}_2$ (He, Ce, La, Pb, Fe), found in granitic rocks, which he reported from the Bambarabotuwa District, Ceylon in 1904 (Table 2). AKC sent samples of this economic mineral deposit to Wyndham Dunstan, Sir William Crookes, Sir William Ramsay, and Marie Curie for further examination. Ranganathan¹⁵, who has examined these correspondences (given to him by the late D. N. Wadia, who was the Mineral Advisor to the Government of Ceylon in 1938), writes that Madame Curie suggested the new mineral be named 'coomarite' after AKC; however, this unselfish scientist did not promote this name. In 1904, Dunstan published a paper in *Nature*, reporting his discovery of the new mineral (collected by AKC) and named it thorianite. AKC then retracted his paper on this mineral which he had submitted to *Spolia Zeylancia* (in Colombo). We thus only have his four-page 'Report on thorianite and thorite' in the Government Printing Office, Colombo (Table 2). Ranganathan adds that a different mineral discovered by D. B. Pattiartchi has been named 'Anandite', after AKC¹⁴.

From geology to the humanities

A geologist studying rock samples from a particular area accurately records the location, mineralogical constituents, and structural setting of the rock, and then reports his findings and interpretations in a regional context in order to elucidate the evolution and processes that have shaped the rock and the region. AKC's scientific background and his training in geology exerted considerable influence on his works in the history of arts and the philosophy of religion in India. These in-

fluences are remarkably evident in the following:

(1) Systematic description: In his essays and books, AKC gives a systematic description of his study subject, including background information, analysis of the elements and constituents of the study subject, and its relations with other subjects. His attention to the terminology of Indian arts and religions was like that of a petrologist. With his knowledge of several Eastern and Western languages (including Sanskrit and Greek), he decomposed words into their origin, history and fabric, and came up with new interpretations.

(2) Broad context: AKC placed his study subject in a larger context with far-reaching implications, thus amplifying the significance of his research works. In his best known essay 'The dance of Shiva'¹⁶, AKC derives a metaphysical cosmology from a statue of Shiva Natraj (Lord of Dancer) and concludes: 'No artist of today, however great, could more exactly or more wisely create an image of that Energy which science must postulate behind all phenomena'. Commenting on AKC's *Buddhist Iconography*, one scholar noted, 'His explanation of motifs transfers them from the category of the ornamental to the category of the significant' (Norman Brown in a tribute quoted in Duraj Raja Singam⁵).

The perennial philosophy

The Hindu and Buddhist arts were the portal of entry for AKC into philosophy; therefore, it is important to consider first his views on art discussed in his many books (Table 1), but eloquently so in *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* and *The Transformation of Nature in Art*. AKC criticized the modern Western concepts of 'aesthetics' (literally meaning 'feeling' which AKC characterized as 'sentimental' work) and 'art for the sake of art'. In modern art (at least in the first half of the twentieth century), the artist is an individualistic person who has no other purpose than to express himself (or herself), and the art lover is a hedonistic person who merely seeks pleasure. In this way, the modern society is divided into artists, who supposedly create culture, and non-artists who work and perform the daily operation of society. AKC argued that this view of modern (and

academic) art appeared only after the European Renaissance and later spread elsewhere, and that it is in sharp contrast with the place and function of art in traditional societies – whether Eastern or Western. In such societies, everybody is an artist and art is not something impractical or marginal, but actually vocational making. In other words, art is 'making well of whatever needs making, just as ethics is the right way of doing things'¹⁷. In traditional societies, there is no distinction between fine arts and other arts (decorative arts, useful arts, handicrafts, etc.). All is art, fine and useful for people. Moreover, there is no distinction between religious versus secular arts or between sacred versus profane arts. All art is sacred and religious because the artist is not an egoistic person who wants to promote his own sentiments (and supposedly novel, original visions) but rather a selfless person who wants to create idealistic forms which are not only beautiful and entertaining but also meaningful and educational – pointing to some divine aspect and metaphysical notion good and useful for the human mind and social life. That is why pre-modern artists did not put their own names on their artworks because they were neither egoistic nor claiming to be original, but that they knew that they were simply revealing what was already existent 'in the divine intellect' or to quote Shankara, 'painted by the spirit on the canvas of the spirit'¹⁸. In this sense, 'Asiatic art is ideal in the mathematical sense: Like nature (*natura naturans*) not in appearance (viz. that of *ens naturata*), but in operation'¹⁹.

'The doctrine of art is intrinsic to the *philosophia perennis* and can be recognized wherever it has not been forgotten that "culture" originates in work and not in play'²⁰. The term 'perennial philosophy' was popularized by Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) as the title of his 1944 book, but the word and the concept are much older, and were advocated as a twentieth-century thought by Rene Guenon (1886–1951), AKC (who was impressed by Guenon in the 1930s) and Frithjof Schuon (1907–98). It can be described as the 'transcendental' religious thought (or metaphysical doctrine as AKC called) which is inherent in all spiritual traditions of the humanity, or in the words of AKC: 'There is a universal language, verbal and visual, of the fundamental ideas on which the different civilizations are founded. In this com-

monly accepted axiology or body of first principles there is a common universe of discourse¹⁹. Thus *philosophia perennis* is also *Philosophia universalis*. AKC's exposition of the perennial philosophy is quite relevant to today's debates about whether humanity should have a single global civilization or that there is a need for dialogue and respect among different civilizations. In AKC's perspective, diversity of cultures and religions in the world is both good and necessary, and the perennial philosophy helps us to see the unity and common ground for such diversity and thus avoid fanaticism and conflicts. To live in a harmonious world, we do not need a dominant global civilization (for example, a modern Western type); what we need is to realize the unity of ideals and needs in all humanity and to enjoy the diversity of cultures.

According to AKC, the perennial philosophy is not an Eastern monopoly, but that the modern Western civilization has forgotten it: 'The contrast is not between East and West as such but between those paths which the rest of the mankind follows as a matter of course and those post-renaissance paths that have brought us to our present impasse'¹⁹.

While AKC's views may be subjected to debates and discussions, what is more relevant for the purpose of this essay is whether his intellectual path to the perennial philosophy was influenced somehow by his background in geology. I believe that it was. We have already noted AKC's view that art is like a natural process, an egoless flow in operation and creation. In geology, the scientist describes myriad phenomena in order to reveal their constituents, patterns and underlying principles. In other words, the scientist tries to reveal unity in the diversity of nature. Indeed, one of the best essays that AKC wrote to explain the perennial philosophy borrows an example from nature. This essay is entitled, 'Paths that lead to the same summit', and in it AKC writes: 'The lower down we are, the more different these paths appear. They vanish at the peak. Each climber will take the one that starts from the point at which he finds himself. He who goes round the mountain looking for another path is not climbing'¹⁹.

Creation and evolution

AKC's conceptualization of natural evolution in relation to divine creation ex-

emplifies how he was at ease with both geology and religious philosophy. I single out this case because it is so relevant to our time as millions of people around the world (not necessarily in the traditional Third World countries, but especially in the US) still view evolution and creation as two opposite views and are yet to come to an appreciation of this subject as AKC had attained.

In his two essays entitled 'Gradation and evolution'²⁰, AKC writes that evolution and creation can be incompatible 'if the mythical account is to be interpreted historically. The serious mythologist, however, is well aware that to interpret myth as factual history is to mistake the genre; and that a myth can only be called "true" when time and place are abstracted'. On the other hand, a natural scientist interpreting the universe and life as 'meaningless' merely based on science, is also stepping out of his genre. AKC argues that in interpreting the origin of the natural world, we should not confuse two causes: (1) the First Cause (the direct cause of the being of things which may be called God, Being, Life, or Nature) which is philosophically 'absolute' and mythically 'personified'; and (2) the Mediate Causes, known or unknown, which result in the production of species or individual at a given time or place, and upon which the evolutionist relies as explanations of the observed series. AKC further elaborates that these two categories are not separate but that via 'involution', the First Cause is involved in evolution. Creation is, therefore, a continuous process of involution and evolution, and that the ancient religious philosophy and modern science are both true, each in its own genre. This line of thought has been followed by several other eminent scientists and thinkers²¹.

1. Duraj Rana Singam, S. a Malaysian scholar, once approached Ananda Coomaraswamy for help to prepare his biography. In a letter dated May 1946, AKC wrote: 'I am not at all interested in biographical matter, relating to myself and I consider the modern practice of publishing details about the lives and personalities of well-known men is nothing but a vulgar catering of illegitimate curiosity. So I could not think of spending my time, which is very much occupied with more important tasks, in hunting up such matter, most of which I have long forgotten; and shall be grateful if you

will publish nothing but the barest about myself. What you should deal with is the nature and tendency of my work. I wish to remain in the background, and shall not be grateful or flattered by any details about myself or my life; all that is *anicca*, and as the wisdom of India should have taught you, 'portiture of human beings is *asvargya*'. (Quoted in Sastri²).

2. Sastri, P. S., Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Arnold-Heinemann Publishers, New Delhi, 1974.
3. Naravane, V. S., Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1977.
4. Lipsey, R., Coomaraswamy 3. *His Life and Work*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1977.
5. Duraj Raja Singam, S. has edited the following volumes on AKC and has self-published them in Kula Lumpur, Malaysia: *Homage to Kalayogi Ananda Coomaraswamy* (A 70th Birthday Volume), 1947; *Homage to Ananda K. Coomaraswamy: A Garland of Tributes*, 1948; *Homage to Ananda K. Coomaraswamy: A Memorial Volume*, 1952, 2nd edn; *Remembering and Remembering Again and Again: A Tribute to Kalayogi Ananda Coomaraswamy in Words and Pictures*, 1974, 3rd edn; *Ananda Coomaraswamy, The Bridge Builder: A Study of a Scholar-Colosus*, 1977; *Who is This Coomaraswamy*, 1981; *The Wisdom of Ananda Coomaraswamy: Great Thoughts* (Selected from His Writings, Letters and Speeches), reprinted in 2001 by Indica Books, Varanasi.
6. Ranganathan, A., *A Coomaraswamy Spectrum*, The Christian Literature Society, Madras, 1981 (collection of seven lectures given by the author on the All India Radio).
7. Coomaraswamy, A. K., *R. Asiat. Soc. J., Ceylon Branch*, 1905, **18**, 413-428.
8. Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy has published 'Some recollections and references to Dr Ananda Coomaraswamy' in *Kalamanjari, Colombo*, 1950-51, **1**, 20.
9. Like father like son: Rama P. Coomaraswamy, born in 1929, received his early education in an orthodox Hindu school in India. He then lived in England (where he obtained his Oxford Matriculation) and in the USA (where he graduated in geology from Harvard University). Then he studied medicine, graduating in 1959, and spent eight years in medical training, and then thirty years as a heart surgeon and assistant professor at the Yeshiva University's Albert Einstein College of Medicine, New York. Because of his own heart ailment, he retired from surgery but retained his position as assistant professor in psychiatry in the same college. Although raised as a Hindu, after his father's death, Rama converted to

- Roman Catholicism – his wife's religion. Although he moved away from the Vatican in the 1960s (because of his opposition to the Church reforms), he studied to become a theologian, was ordained as a monk, and served as a professor of Church history at the St Thomas Aquinas (Lefebvrist) Seminary, Connecticut. He published several works on medicine and Christian theology, and also edited two collections of AKC's articles, *The Door in the Sky: Coomaraswamy on Myth and Meaning* (1997) and *The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy* (2003). Rama died in July 2006 (aged 76) in his home in Greenwich, Connecticut. Like his father, Rama was a religious traditionalist.
10. AKC's many-sided contributions are discussed in several scholarly volumes published in his honour: *Art and Thought: A Volume in Honor of the Late Dr Ananda K. Coomaraswamy* (ed. Iyer, K. B., Luzac & Co, London, 1947); *In Memoriam: Ananda Coomaraswamy* (Fowlder, M., in *Artibus Asiae*, X, Switzerland); *The Sacred and the Secular in India's Performing Arts: Ananda K. Coomaraswamy Centenary Essays* (ed. Subramaniam, V., 1980), *Paroksa: Coomaraswamy Centenary Seminar Papers* (eds Gulam Mohammad, Subramanayan, K. G. and Vatsyayan Kapila, 1984); see also volumes by Duraj Raja Singam⁵.
 11. Crouch, J. S. (ed.), *A Bibliography of Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy*, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi and Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 2002. This is the fourteenth volume in the series of the Collected Works of A. K. Coomaraswamy brought out by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi. Another bibliography is: *Ananda K. Coomaraswamy: Bibliography/Index* (ed. Coomaraswamy, R. P.), Prologos Books, Berwick on Tweed, 1988.
 12. Lipsey, R., *Coomaraswamy 1. Traditional Arts and Symbolism*, Princeton University Press, 1977.
 13. Lipsey, R., *Coomaraswamy 2. Metaphysics*, Princeton University Press, 1977.
 14. Ranganathan, A. and Srinivasa Rao, K. (eds), *Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Writings on Geology and Mineralogy*, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi and Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 2001, p. 319.
 15. Airvatham Ranganathan, who passed away in 1997, was a journalist and edited AKC's *Writings on Geology and Mineralogy*¹⁴ and also wrote his biography⁶. At his request, the Indian Government issued a stamp in 1977 in honour of AKC's birth centenary.
 16. Coomaraswamy, A. K., *The Dance of Shiva: Fourteen Indian Essays*, The Noonday Press, New York, 1957, pp. 66–78.
 17. Coomaraswamy, A. K., *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, Dover, New York, 1956, p. 91.
 18. Coomaraswamy, A. K., *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, Dover, New York, 1956, p. 34.
 19. Coomaraswamy, A. K., *Transformation of Nature in Art*, Harvard University Press, 1935, p. 11.
 20. Coomaraswamy, A. K., *Bugbear of Literacy: Collected Essays*, with an introduction by Robert Parker, Dennis Dobson Ltd, London, 1949.
 21. Coomaraswamy, A. K., *What is Civilization? And Other Essays* (with an introduction by Seyyed Hossein Nasr), Lindisfarne Press, Massachusetts, 1989, pp. 70–85.
 22. The American paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould (1941–2002) in his book *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (1999) argues that science and religion are not necessarily opposite to each other, but that they are two Non-Overlapping Magisteria. This is similar to Coomaraswamy's view of science and religion as separate genres. The idea of involution was also advocated by Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) in his book *The Life Divine* (1955). The idea of progressive or directional evolution (from simpler life forms to humans) was accepted by the French paleontologist and priest Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), author of *The Phenomenon of Man* (1955), with religious humanist connotations, and by the British zoologist Julian Huxley (1887–1975) with non-religious (secular humanist) connotations (see his works, *Religion Without Revelation and Evolution: The Modern Synthesis*).

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