

## **Rama P. Coomaraswamy (1929-2006)**

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Rama P. Coomaraswamy was born in New York, the son of Ananda and Doña Louisa Coomaraswamy. He received his early education in Canada, India, and England, before starting undergraduate studies firstly at Harvard University, and then in the medical school of New York University, where he graduated in 1959. His post-graduate studies led to his specialization in thoracic and cardiovascular surgery. Later in life, due to health problems, he gave up the strenuous life of a surgeon, and retrained in psychiatry, becoming assistant professor of psychiatry at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York.

Rama Coomaraswamy converted to Catholicism at the age of 22 and, in parallel to his medical career, he retained an interest in theological matters, as is attested by his books (see below) and his collaboration with distinguished journals such as *Sacred Web* and *Sophia*. He was also professor of ecclesiastical history at Saint Thomas Aquinas Seminary in Ridgefield, Connecticut for five years.

Rama's father, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, was the erstwhile Keeper of the Oriental Section of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and was also the renowned scholar who first introduced to the English-speaking world the ideas and insights of the "perennialist" school of thought, of which the founders were the French philosopher René Guénon and the German philosopher, poet and artist Frithjof Schuon. These ideas fascinated the young Rama, but in fact he was never able fully to understand and accept them and, in the end, he largely abandoned them in favor of a more or less exclusive attachment to Roman Catholicism in its traditional, pre-Vatican-II, form. As a result of these two influences — the one universal and supra-formal, stemming from his father, and the other particular and formal, stemming from his attachment to Catholicism — there was always a certain split or ambiguity in Rama Coomaraswamy's thought.

His views and attitudes emerge clearly from his three principal books. These are *The Destruction of the Christian Tradition* (1981; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2006), *The Problems with the New Mass* (1990), and *The Invocation of the Name of Jesus — as practiced in the Western Church* (1999).

The first two of these books constitute the most comprehensive and convincing description that there is of how authentic Catholicism was destroyed by the Vatican II revolution. The third book is a unique and precious exposition of the ancient practice of ejaculatory prayer — namely the methodic invocation of a revealed Holy Name.

With regard to the first two books, we unfortunately cannot avoid a note of criticism: there are so many attacks on Protestantism in them, that it sometimes seems that they are as much about Protestantism as they are about Catholicism! The views expressed in this connection are markedly at variance with those of Frithjof Schuon as expounded in his writings on this subject\*, and this calls for a brief discussion.

It could no doubt be said that it is the right of a Catholic exoterist to attack Protestantism and

the right of a Protestant exoterist to attack Catholicism. Yes, indeed; but in this year of grace one might hope that conservative and traditional believers in God would find other enemies. There are plenty of them: atheists, agnostics, humanists, skeptics, scoffers, “liberal” religionists, “fundamentalist” religionists, feminists, pornographers, drug advocates, etc., etc.

Rama Coomaraswamy did not understand that, whatever else the Protestantism of Luther might be, it was not modern. Luther loved Saint Paul and Saint Augustine and hated the secularizing and humanistic Renaissance, against which he rebelled. Indeed, because of this, he is regarded by some as a throwback to the Middle Ages. Admittedly, Luther also rejected scholasticism, of the misuse of which he had much experience.

Protestantism cannot be defined as merely a truncated and deviated Catholicism; truncated and artistically impoverished it may be, but it is above all a *different* angle of vision (on sacraments and salvation) from that of Catholicism. Schuon has called Luther’s form of Christianity “a secondary *upaya* (a Buddhist term meaning ‘a saving form’, or ‘a saving exoterism’) amongst other possible *upayas*” — and one *upaya* cannot be judged by the criteria of another.

Schuon called Luther a “fideist”, a “mystic”, and, in spite of a number of excessive and intemperate outbursts, “a man of virtue”. Luther had a conviction and a sincerity which bore witness to his “zeal for the house of the Lord”. He was the 16<sup>th</sup> century originator of a religious “adaptation” which took firm hold in the northern-western part of Europe and has persisted to the present day. It has been the means of salvation for countless souls. The essential features of this “adaptation” were simplification, inwardness, and a total faith in God’s power to save.

Be all that as it may, Rama Coomaraswamy’s unending and unnecessary gibes regarding Protestantism are no way helpful. They are mostly misleading, and occasionally, in one single sentence, there are so many of them that it would take several paragraphs of commentary to sort them out and refute them one by one! Above all, they are not pertinent to the matter in hand, because the important point to understand in this connection is that Protestantism had no causal role with regard to Vatican II. The precursors of Vatican II were the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and Teilhard de Chardin - and not the extremely conservative, anti-democratic, and entirely pre-modern Martin Luther; Luther was a reformer, but not a revolutionary — a significant *distinguo*.

It has rightly been said that the evil genius behind Vatican II was Teilhard de Chardin — and yet the author goes on and on about Protestantism, which (in spite of his repeated attempts to implicate it in the destructions wrought by Vatican II) had in fact nothing to do with it! Ironically, it was the irruption of Protestantism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that provoked the Council of Trent, in which the ailing Catholic Church put its own house in order, thus enabling it to effectively maintain its witness for a further four centuries.

It is true that pre-Vatican II Catholicism already had, and for a considerable time, something of an inferiority complex *vis-à-vis* both Protestantism and modern science, and it may well be that the promoters of Vatican II desired what they considered to be the “Protestantization” of the Catholic Mass. Nevertheless, the initiative for this did not come from the side of the Protestants themselves. To suggest that the presence of a few Protestant observers at the Vatican II Council proves that Protestantism was in some way causative of the latter, is absurd. Vatican II took

place in the early 1960s — another age from now! — and it can be said, without fear of contradiction, that the overwhelming majority of Protestants of all stripes were profoundly ignorant of and indifferent toward this council. Most of them still are. The majority of Eastern Orthodox and Protestant believers think that “Rome” is still “Rome”, and are against it anyway!

It is ironic to note that, for good or ill, the aggressive and combative style of Rama Coomaraswamy is rather similar to that of Luther!

It might be said that “exclusivism” is natural to human groups and is a “traditional” means of self-preservation; but this leaves out of account the unprecedented nature of our present predicament, in which all religions are being eroded by the same destructive forces. Whether we be aware of it or not, the “enemy” has changed: he is no longer to be found in the “competing” religions or denominations, but in the opponents, gross or subtle, of all religion. This is not merely the affair of esoterism; it is a fact of experience that many sensitive exoterists have an effective intuition of the new situation. Coomaraswamy’s two books do not support them; they undermine them; in this respect, they are not on the side of the angels.

On the positive side — and there is much that is positive! — these two books contain sufficient information about the willful destruction of the mass by Vatican II to make serious Catholics wake up and think. As has been recognized by canon law since the Middle Ages, it is not in the first instance to the “pope” (who may, through heresy, betray his office and forfeit his authority), but to the Holy Spirit, that obedience is due. Orthodoxy is not necessarily where the “pope” is; the true pope is where orthodoxy is!

These two books will be of decisive value to many Catholic souls; above all, they could impel them (1) to return to a valid catechism, and (2) to seek a valid mass celebrated by a valid priest. It is simply a matter for regret that they are beset with so much pointless anti-Protestant sniping.

Rama Coomaraswamy’s third book, *The Invocation of the Name of Jesus — as practiced in the Western Church* is an entirely different matter. It is a valuable presentation of the traditional spiritual method known as “quintessential prayer” or “prayer of the heart”. This spiritual way consists in the methodic repetition, or invocation, of a revealed Holy Name, a practice that stems from the earliest centuries of Christianity, and has persisted, through the Middle Ages, to the present day.

There is a rich treasury of books on this practice from the Eastern Orthodox Church, particularly from its monastic tradition, known as Hesychasm (see for instance *The Way of a Pilgrim* and the *Philokalia*). Here it takes the form of the “prayer of the publican”, or the “Jesus Prayer”, namely “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me a sinner”. This is usually abbreviated to the two Greek words *Christe eleison*.

Taking his cue from the teachings of Frithjof Schuon and the testimonies of saints and mystics across the centuries, Rama Coomaraswamy, in expounding this method of spiritual concentration, describes both its universality — he makes passing reference to Buddhist and Muslim practices — and its specifically Catholic form, as exemplified and taught by, amongst others, Saint Bernardino of Siena (15<sup>th</sup> century) and the Italian Capuchin nun Sister Consolata Betrone (1903-1946). In Catholicism, the invocation usually takes the form of *Jesu-Maria*.

Most importantly, Coomaraswamy points out the “intimate relationship between the invocation of the Divine Name and the Eucharistic Sacrifice.” (p. 20). He writes: “The Eucharistic character is further stressed within the traditional Roman liturgical rite. When the priest takes holy communion, he says: ‘I shall take the bread of life and call upon the Name of the Lord; I shall drink the cup of salvation and call upon the Name of the Lord.’ Thus it is that the ‘passive’ reception of the Sacred Species calls forth the ‘active’ response of the invocation.” (p. 24).

“So powerful is the Name”, he continues, “that it provides us with graces not unlike those of the Eucharist itself .... There is a rosary of 33 beads used with the Name of Jesus which, in the absence of the Mass, is said to provide one with all the graces that attending Mass would provide.” (p. 24).

Rama Coomaraswamy’s legacy thus resides in two things: his detailed and authoritative description of the destruction of the catechism and the mass carried out by Vatican II, and his description of the role and the importance, in these latter days, of the invocation of the Holy Name; in other words, implacable discernment with regard to outward forms, coupled with the importance of prayer of the heart. Mention of the latter practice evokes the words of the last traditional pope, Pius XII: “The day is coming soon when the faithful will only be able to celebrate the holy sacrifice of the mass on the secret altar of the heart.” At the time concerned, many thought that the saintly pope was referring to the threat of outward persecution, but it could equally well be maintained that his prophetic words applied to the impending arrival of a falsified church and a falsified liturgy.

These two things Rama Coomaraswamy vigorously and articulately expounded, and for this we owe him a profound debt of gratitude.

### **Notes**

\* Writings on Protestantism by Frithjof Schuon:

- (1) “The Question of Evangelicalism” in *Christianity/Islam* (World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, Indiana, 2008)
- (2) “Christian Divergences” in *In the Face of the Absolute* (World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, Indiana, 1989).