Morris's public statement of 1879 that it was not possible to dissociate art from morality, politics and religion may be open to several interpretations, especially in light of his subsequent movement to socialism and relative neglect of the issue. The Ruskinian strain in the proposition is, of course, clear, and possible lines of argument may be derived from such associates and followers of Morris as Charles Ashbee, Arthur Mackmurdo, Walter Crane and Eric Gill. But perhaps the most comprehensive and complex body of opinion to develop principles of association between the related terms (though not politics, at least not in the same degree) along Morrisian lines was that of the Sinhalese Orientalist and art-historian, Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947). Indeed, it may be argued that among those who claimed intellectual allegiance to Morris, it was Coomaraswamy who most effectively deployed his critique against modernity and strengthened its philosophical foundations. In the process, Coomaraswamy extended Morris's principles of judgment to twentieth-century conditions and gave them a non-Eurocentric inflection. The parentage of a Sinhalese-Tamil father and an English mother would be symbolic of the cosmopolitan and multi-cultural aspect of much of Coomaraswamy's achievement such as, for example, his articulation of ideals drawn from Ruskin, Morris, and Medieval scholasticism with Oriental, and particularly Hindu and Buddhist, art and philosophy. But in Coomaraswamy's system, Morrisian critique, Neo-Thomism, and Oriental metaphysics made for a highly problematic combination, indicating at one and the same time certain philosophical insufficiencies in the original Ruskin-Morris heritage and its continuing relevance as one of the most promising and forceful analyses of the fate of art in the post-medieval era.

Coomaraswamy developed his deep sympathy to the ideals of Ruskin, Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement during what has been called his 'English manifestation', that is, the period of his formal education at Wycliff College in Gloucestershire and University College, London, and periodical residence until his appointment at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1917. At the time of Morris's death, Coomaraswamy was about to matriculate at University College, but he made the personal acquaintance of Ashbee, Crane, and Lethaby, as well of such other sympathetic figures as Roger Fry, William Rothenstein, Arthur J. Penty, Alfred R. Orage, and Eric Gill. The sympathy of outlook between Morris and Coomaraswamy is traceable not only to a partial similarity of temperaments and to deliberate study, but to a conscious emulation and sense of discipleship on the latter's part. In what is the most up-to-date and discerning study of Coomaraswamy, Roger Lipsey indeed claims that Morris was his "greatest mentor, the man from whom he learned the most and upon whose life he patterned his own throughout [his early] years". If the trace of Morris is less explicit in Coomaraswamy's later (and American) years, it was on account of a complex admixture of factors – the thoroughness of the assent on certain points, the
limited applicability to certain largely different conditions, and the perceived need for another kind of, and a more rigorous, philosophical basis.

Like Morris, Coomaraswamy rejected the modern development of a separate and autonomous ‘fine’ art to the extent of proposing, with an equal earnestness, that in order “to use or understand any works of art (with the possible exception of contemporary works, which may be ‘unintelligible’), we ought to abandon the term ‘aesthetic’ in its present application and return to ‘rhetoric’”. In a similar vein, he equated traditional art with vocation and modern art with mere avocation, dismissed the poet Paul Valéry’s defence of the uselessness of art as a “bourgeois fantasy”, and demanded that an “anthropological approach to art” should supersede “the aestheticians’s”. Coomaraswamy applied such standards of judgment equally sweepingly to poetry, with the amazing twist of having Plato indict all modern poets, with the singular exception of Morris himself, for their attachment to the merely personal affections to the neglect of the proper end of katharsis. (SP, 19).

A more concrete connection between Morris and Coomaraswamy came about in 1907 when the latter, upon returning to England after service in the Mineralogical Survey of Ceylon and settling in Broad Campden, purchased from Ashbee’s Essex House Press and put into service an original Kelmscott press, even taking along some of Morris’s own workers. Thus was printed his first major art-historical work, Mediaeval Sinhalese Art, in 1908. The inspiration drawn directly from Morris as regards the scope and intent of the work and the circumstances of its publication was suggested in the foreword, where Coomaraswamy wrote as follows:

It is of interest to record, in connection with the arts and crafts aspect of the questions just discussed, that this book has been printed by hand, upon the press used by William Morris for printing the Kelmscott Chaucer .... I cannot help seeing in these facts an endeavour to restore that true Art of Living which has for so long been neglected by humanity.

Other endeavours revealed the mark of Morris’s example. In 1902 Coomaraswamy joined the Viking Society, where he probably made the acquaintance of Morris’s friend, Eirikr Magnusson, whose collaboration he in turn was to use to publish a translation of the Voluspa, from the Icelandic Elder Edda (forty copies being printed in a first edition in Kandy, Sri Lanka, and one hundred and one copies in a second edition at the Essex House Press). Lipsey has noted how Coomaraswamy “adapted the ideas and even the language of Morris to a new setting” in his 1905 Open Letter to the Kandyan Chiefs calling for the preservation of Sri Lanka’s architectural heritage:

The ruinous state of ancient buildings and their scandalous neglect might also be written on. It is not restoration they need, but more preservation, a few tiles or a new beam, and protection from white ants. Instead of this, the most ancient buildings in the remoter districts are simply rotting away, and often used as cattlesheds; very occasionally they are unjudiciously and unwisely “restored” and thereby absolutely ruined as works of art and beauty.

The Morrisian inspiration of this concern for the artistic heritage and a related solicitude for the craftsman and worker also announced itself in the very first sentence of Mediaeval Sinhalese Art, which claimed to be “a record of the work and the life of the craftsman in a feudal society not unlike that of Early Mediaeval Europe”. (MSA,v). The undoing of the Medieval craft tradition which Morris attributed to industrialization and competitive commerce Coomaraswamy on his part saw in the
South Asian context as having accompanied British imperial rule.

Like Morris, Coomaraswamy traced the strength of the traditional arts and crafts to such conditions as their genuinely popular character, their function within ritual and communitarian structures, the relatively simple yet elegant aspect of the people’s lives, the continuity of craft skills, and the regulative power of the guilds, except that he was now describing an Oriental setting. Similarly, Morris’s view of the Medieval achievement as an instructive precedent was paralleled by Coomaraswamy’s exhortation that only in the effort to realise the ideals of the past lay “the possibility of a true regeneration and revivifying of the national life of the Sinhalese people”. (MSA, vi). The disintegration of national and cultural tradition was seen to have been brought about, among other factors, by the “growth of commercialism – that system of production under which the work of European machines and machine-like men has in the East driven the village weaver from his loom, the craftsman from his tools, the ploughman from his songs, and has divorced art from labour”. (MSA, vi).

Coomaraswamy seldom approached the spirit of Morris’s historical analysis and socialist conviction as closely as when, on a few occasions, he considered the unchecked expansion of capital which came with imperial rule. He took the terms of his schematic analysis directly from Ruskin and Morris: the disintegration of traditional craft organization, the division of labour and usurpation of the craftsman’s control of the work process by machinery, the continual excitation of consumer appetites, and the subordination of production to profit—in sum, he concluded, “commercial production absolutely forbids a union of art with labour”. (MSA, vii).

That Coomaraswamy retained this principle of analysis from the time of its early articulation in Mediaeval Sinhalese Art to the end of his career is clear from his view of 1946 that the only answer to the tendency of capitalist production to separate beauty from utility and accordingly to cater to the needs of the body divorced from the mind was “economic revolution”, to which he added the caustic remark that “it may be doubted whether our boasted love of art extends so far”. (SP, 28). On the whole, however, the logic of historical and economic analysis remained muted in Coomaraswamy’s work. Its place was largely taken over by religion and metaphysics, partly, it would seem, as a countervailing force to his despair over the prospect of revolutionary transformation, partly on account of the continuing role of traditional forms in South Asia, and partly to meet deep inner needs. Equalling the evil of commercialism, in his view, was the evil of modern irreligion in the west. (MSA, vi) Here then was a signal divergence from Morris, the explanatory force assigned by the two men to the socio-historical and religious principles seeming to be of inverse proportion. In Coomaraswamy’s adaptation, therefore, Morris’s critique might have lost historical specificity on one side, but it gained in philosophical depth and rigour on the other. Though they both idealised Medieval civilization, Morris, impatient of metaphysics, could not support his assumptions about the unity of its art from the rich store of classical and Christian philosophy. And though he recognized the destructive effect of imperial rule upon India and the colonies, he could not fathom the real magnitude of the loss nor the extent of its correspondence to the decline of the arts and crafts in Europe. It was Coomaraswamy’s signal and achievement to supply these deficiencies.

The most significant general area about which Coomaraswamy, from the position of basic agreement with Morris, went on to elaborate systematic philosophical principles, was that of the definition of art and its social function. Though they both
predicated that definition upon an implicit negative response to the development of modernity, Coomaraswamy was able both to widen the theoretical basis of the perceived artistic decline and to clarify the epistemological terms of the differences between traditional and modern art. One of Morris's most suggestive but characteristically schematic formulations, that every work of art can be seen as “a good thing in itself”, became the very foundation of Coomaraswamy’s philosophical analysis. But basing the proposition upon his own penetrating and comprehensive reading of oriental, classical, and scholastic texts, he gave it an absolute metaphysical centre in Nature itself: this was the core of the “traditional theory of art”, which, relatively unchanged through millennia, was succeeded by those modern defections which Coomaraswamy equated with history itself. Morris's rejection of modern ‘fine’ art, separate from general production, in favour of a definition according to which, in former times, “every thing that the hand of man touched was more or less beautiful: so that ... all people who made anything shared in art” (which principle was to be extended by other artists of the Arts and Crafts Movement as the proper making of all things needed) was thus translated by Coomaraswamy into a concept of the imitation of Nature in her manner of operation. The supreme and paradigmatic artist was the God of Genesis, ('Divine Artificer', in Sanskrit, Visvakarma) who, surveying all that He had made, deemed it to be good. It was from that founding divine example that Thomas Aquinas, upon whom Coomaraswamy relied heavily, deduced that art is “the right reason of things that can be made” and “the right way of making things”. (SP, 51). Coomaraswamy himself saw a modern equivalent in engineering, a term whose etymology he traced to the Latin ingenium, “innate skill”, and associated with a Sanskrit equivalent rendered as “inborn formative light”, the faculty in the skilled artisan which efficiently forms appropriate material into a necessary and useful object. Hence Coomaraswamy’s use of another canonical terms, artifex, the “maker of things by art”, for the traditional and medieval craftsman. The two terms denoted something quite other than the modern practitioner of the rarefied ‘fine’ arts. (SP, 48-49).

The terms according to which Morris and Coomaraswamy disparaged this secular successor to the traditional craftsman were close in overall intent, but different in detail, Coomaraswamy developing Morris's general position along traditional philosophical lines and with the benefit of experience of twentieth-century developments. Morris had continually employed the proposition, for which he acknowledged his debt to Ruskin, that real art is “the expression by man of his pleasure in labour”, the possibility of which is “a most kind gift of nature”. The rudimentary metaphysics of this was complemented, but not appreciably clarified, by the notions that all men have “their appointed work”, even that “the earth and the very elements rejoice in doing their appointed work”, and that this “universal gift” would only be betrayed in the modern commercial milieu. [CW, xxii: 42]. Both the hedonistic principle and the subjective character of this position were to be expanded by Coomaraswamy. The former, for example, from being given the more specific association of the Thomistic formula, that “beautiful things are those which please when seen”, was carried over into the concept of an “essential [and satisfying] knowledge” of the perfectibility of nature and humanity made possible by work (and works of art). [SP, 65]. And in that mode of apprehension, according to Coomaraswamy, we participate in the objective order of things (i.e., Nature), or, more pointedly, in the active process of the ordering of things to their proper and appointed
ends. Coomaraswamy accordingly repudiated the modern approach to art in exclusively aesthetic terms (i.e. concerning only feeling and sentiment) as an aberration from “the traditional conception of art as an intellectual virtue and of beauty as pertaining to knowledge”. [SP, 14]. Yet he continued to speak of the ‘delight’ and ‘gladness’ which we experience when artifacts evince the right order of nature and participate in the larger cosmic harmony; in such a moment of katharsis we transcend our contingent condition and the misleading of our wayward passions.

It was for its apparent achievement of that particular effect that Coomaraswamy, interestingly enough, praised Morris’s poetry above that of any other modern poet. For he alleged that the signal deficiencies of all modern art, determined as it was by the effects of competitive commerce and the abandonment of shared tradition and collective effort, were its cultivation of private experience (hence of mere feeling and sensation, even of a morbid sort), its claim to transcend utility (with its attendant disdain of ‘applied art’), and its pursuit of beauty divorced from knowledge. This recalls Morris’s similar denunciation of an art which had become a “handmaid to the luxury of rich and idle people” and pursued “beauty for beauty’s sake”, no longer concerned with its traditional services to “the glory of the City, the triumph of the Church, the exaltation of the citizens, [and] the quickening of the devotion of the faithful”. [AWS, ii: 166; CW, xxi: 337]. But perhaps the principle of Morris’s anti-modernist critique which Coomaraswamy developed to the strongest effect was that of the exhibitionist tendency of modern fine art. In his review of the 1884 Royal Academy Exhibition, Morris had decried the absence of that “collective skill, the skill of the schools, which nurses moderate talent, and sets genius free”, and the directing of creative effort instead to “thrusting itself forward and attracting attention to itself as something dashing, clever, and useless”. As examples, he cited Alma-Tadema’s deliberate attempt to render a flower ugly, Orchardson’s determination to attract attention at any cost, and Bouguereau’s pointless display of dexterity of execution [AWS, i: 228-38]. In the early twentieth century Coomaraswamy found this tendency to be even more pronounced, an inevitable outcome of the inflation of the artist’s ego and of the aesthetic element to the neglect of the cognitive and the symbolic. Since these latter principles were central to his definition of authentic art, Coomaraswamy found modern art to be well-nigh ‘unintelligible’. [SP, 14-15]. Indeed, he severely judged the pursuit of style as an end in itself as the recourse of the ‘paranoic’ and took modern abstract art to be, notwithstanding its claim to affinity with primitive abstraction, a “realistic picture of distegrated mentality.”

Though the medieval achievement figured prominently in their artistic analyses as a demonstration of the proper ordering of art and work and a token of what might have been had modernism developed differently, its treatment reveals a fundamental difference of historical understanding, and finally of political vision, between Morris and Coomaraswamy. Indeed, this issue most clearly distinguishes Morris’s revolutionary activism and radical utopian hope from his disciple’s general quiescence, his almost paralysed fixation upon the past, and his apparent despair over the prospect of improvement. The irony of this is compounded by the consideration that it was Coomaraswamy who more fully and systematically grounded traditional and medieval art in its institutional and philosophical conditions, who understood more clearly the deep connections between the pre-modern cultures of Europe and Asia, and who experienced more fully the lethal effects of indiscriminate progress and
modernization. It may be that the correlation of immemorial metaphysics and ritual with a global perspective magnified the historic loss in Coomaraswamy's mind, to the point indeed of a conviction of irreversibility. He might have railed with a Morrisian indignation at the sovereign disregard by profiteers of the quality of human life, the entrenchment of class division in matters of art and faith, imperial depredations in the colonies, and the folly of those who took the name of artist: he was even driven by these conditions to avow the desirability of 'economic revolution' [SP, 28], but on the whole Coomaraswamy's vision remained fixed upon the past and the superior 'world view' which had been irretrievably lost. To Morris, by contrast, study of medieval art revealed the magnitude and the deeper significance of the subsequent loss, but it also inspired a need to redress some of that loss and quickened a revolutionary impulse. To him, indeed, a rudimentary socialism, begun by the workers and craftsmen of the later middle ages and early Renaissance, had been catastrophically interrupted by the rule of capital, and therefore needed to be resumed if art and human affairs were to be put on a sound basis again. [CW, xxii: 387-89; xxiii: 25, 121].

What may be seen as Morris's advantage over Coomaraswamy in his practical experience of design and craftsmanship should illuminate the nature of their emphases upon matters of fundamental agreement, for example, the definition and history of ornament. An extensive treatment of this subject by Morris in his 1877 address 'The Lesser Arts' had laid out the major points of argument which he, and Coomaraswamy after him, would consistently maintain. The 'lesser arts' of the title is an ironical term denoting those applied or decorative effects which, as Morris pointed out, are taken in the modern era to be distinct from, and in some sense inferior to, the 'fine' arts, and conceived as a sort of adventitious entity, added to or subtracted from manufactures as a matter of caprice. Both men interpreted this as a corruption and a reversal of the traditional order in which decoration or ornament was accorded a supreme significance as the principle of artistic integrity. For that principle determined whether things made were beautiful, that is, "in accord with Nature, and helps her", or ugly, that is, "discordant with Nature, and thwarts her". [CW, xxii: 4]. Morris may have intended to clarify this cryptic formula by the observation that artisans themselves do not think of artifacts as finished unless they have been given a bit of decoration. That he was groping for some deeper explanation is suggested by his further suggestion that traditional ornaments bore "a serious meaning", were "mysterious symbols of worships and beliefs now little remembered or wholly forgotten." [CW, xxii: 7].

This "philosophy of the Decorative Arts" (Morris's term) was to be given a more systematic and intelligible formulation by Coomaraswamy in a tour-de-force of etymological explication, the essay on "Ornament" of 1939. Noting the parallelism in the divorce in modern art between beauty and utility on the one hand and cognition and pleasure on the other, Coomaraswamy proposed that the sundered terms had been inseparable in the traditional concept of ornament, which, recalling Morris's principle of 'finish', he defined as "a completion or fulfillment of the artifact", a necessary component of its efficacy, and the defining operation of art as such. [SP, 241-42]. What to the modern mind is the purposive symbolism of such 'decorative' effects as the judge's robe and wig and the sovereign's sceptre is, in the traditional outlook, of the very nature of art as the effective determination of things.
Coomaraswamy proposed in systematic terms what Morris had begun to realise in the art gallery, that the reduction of ornament to a merely cosmetic effect was possible only in a society geared to exhibitionism and spectacle: in Coomaraswamy’s words, it could only be under such “unreal conditions ... that mere appearance might become an end in itself”. [SP, 247]. Preferable as the traditional order of things was, however, Coomaraswamy could recommend no way out of the present impasse, could conceive no way of putting past wisdom at the service of current reform. The modern moment, impassably closed off from the past, yet necessarily condemned by it, was, therefore, a time of historical and intellectual deadlock.

The relative absence of a political element in Coomaraswamy’s vision meant that, unlike Morris, he did not give appreciable attention to, nor fully consider, the strategic importance of such institutional and practical factors as workshop organization, worker cooperation, the unity of the different crafts, and the consolidation and transmission of traditional craft-knowledge. Yet those considerations had been on his mind in his early period in south Asia, when he campaigned to protect the artistic heritage of Sri Lanka and participated in the nationalist movement of India. It may be that, removed from that native setting where the force of disintegrating artistic and social traditions pressed heavily upon everyday experience to the rarefied professional atmosphere of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Coomaraswamy’s early interest in the interaction of culture, politics, and society waned or gave way to more speculative interests. In that complex exchange, the Morrisian critique lost some of its political urgency, but gained a deeper historical and philosophical substance. For to the crucial, if circumscribed, evidence of medieval art and craft-consciousness which helped to summon Morris to revolutionary activity, Coomaraswamy added the authority of philosophical and religious tradition and the witness of multinational experience. More was at stake in the uneven contest of history than even Morris had surmised. But the “perennial philosophy” which Coomaraswamy sought to uphold seemed only capable, in his twentieth-century example, of an attenuated life, just as ineffectual and estranged as the self-indulgent high art which he so roundly condemned. There was accordingly an appropriate irony in Coomaraswamy’s devotion to the custodial responsibilities of the museum scholar: the authentic traditions of the past might not be susceptible of rejuvenation, but its tangible evidence could at least be conserved and transmitted both to edify and rebuke future generations. Morris too, had faced such a dim prospect, with history in danger of becoming an “inconsequent nonsense” and art seeming to be merely “a collection of curiosities of the past which ... have no serious relation to the life of the present”.[CW, xxiii:280]. But he saw in surviving art a token of the greatness of both what had been and what was yet possible, summoning desire to revolutionary hope and earnest engagement.

NOTES

4 Coomaraswamy, ‘A Figure of Speech or a Figure of Thought?’ in Selected Papers: Traditional Art and Symbolism, ed. R. Lipsey (Princeton, 1977), pp. 14-
15. [Cited hereafter in the text as SP.].
9 Coomaraswamy, in *Patron and Artist*, p. 18.