

The Wisdom of the East

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References to "the religions of Asia" usually mean Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, and secondarily, Shintoism, Taoism, and Confucianism, or even the Jainism of India. Frequently we speak simply of the "Wisdom of the East" or of "the" Asian religion, from which Islam is as a rule excluded. This is an important clue: Islam, which twice deeply alarmed Europe on the threshold of the modern age when it advanced militarily to the gates of Vienna, has not been able to fascinate occidental man in the same exotic way as the religions of the East and the Far East. Evidently Islam offered no enticement; Muslims in Europe are either relics of the age of Turkish imperialism (as in Bulgaria, Albania or Yugoslavia) or they immigrated in times of free trade and of open labor and skill markets. Merchants, diplomats, workers and students, they are temporary residents living either in social extraterritoriality or as members of a helot class retained for menial labor. It is a big enough task for them to save their religious traditions in their new environment, and under such conditions their religion has but small appeal to a society that still lives off its idealism, even though in some respects it would be "easier" to be a Muslim than a Christian.

Although Islam in the form of a simplified ritualistic religion has become a serious rival to Christianity in Africa among animistic peoples or those abandoning their tribal religion, it is of no interest to people who have more or less shaken off the conventional "restraint" of a formalistically experienced Christianity. There is an Islamic mission in Europe, to be sure, but it is maintained solely by a faction of Pakistani origin, the Ahmadiyya Movement, and the vitality with which it first appeared in the 1950's seems to have weakened; its successes have been small and without significance.

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So, in discussing the impact of Asiatic religiosity on the West we are dealing primarily with the dissemination of Indian, Chinese and Japanese religions. There are notable differences among these religions, but certain structures are common to the majority of Asian religious systems, and all Asian religiosity is subjected to essentially similar conditions in its diffusion in the West. Three conditions are paramount.

In the transition to the West Asiatic religiosity is distorted: (1) by the compulsion to conceptual rendering; (2) by the use of an occidental language; and (3) by the selective expectations of the Westerner. In addition, Asiatic religions are subject to the influence of certain sociocultural conditions; specifically, they meet with a process in the West that we call secularism which subjects all religious phenomena, including the entering Eastern religiosity, to a radical alteration. Finally, Eastern religiosity in the West meets with a distinct spiritual constituency to which it can appeal. It meets, to cite but one example, people with an ambiguous relationship to the technical-industrial, i.e., modern, world. These conditions define both the possibilities and the limits of Asiatic religion in the West.

Asiatic religiosity becomes estranged in the transition to the West. Initially the reason for this estrangement lies in the very structure of Asiatic religions themselves. Unlike Judaism, Christianity and Islam, they are not "book" religions, even when sacred and other canonical works are available. They have a different relationship to the "Word" than the religions of Near East origin. The "Word" in Asiatic religions is not a necessary way of giving witness to one's belief; on the contrary, to speak of one's own religion is already a certain distortion and estrangement. Countless anecdotes about monks or masters and their students seek to teach that, as long as one still asks, he is still far from the mystery. Religiosity is actually disseminated through not-answering and not-teaching. It is only fulfilled by becoming part of oneself.

Estrangement is also a semantic problem. The Hindu communicates with us in English. He says "God" but does not mean what we hear: the God of the Bible, the Father of Jesus Christ, Creator and Savior, the judging and merciful God whom I experience personally. He means a reality-of-being that is superior to all speech and that demands instead a certain spiritual attitude and life-style. When a Hindu and I each speak the word "God," we may technically understand each other, but not really.

Asian religions are not inclined to a "mission" in the biblical sense. They may, of course, expand in the form of a cultural force subject to alteration in different locales, but a missionary creed in the tradition of, for example, Christianity's definite, unchangeable belief in the person of Jesus Christ is hardly imaginable in Asian religions.

The prejudices of the Westerner who is taking up Asiatic religion also causes estrangement. Herder, for instance, extolled the Hindus for their "moderation and tranquility, a gentle spirit and quiet depths of soul."¹ This description of India was for Herder primarily a medium through which to come to a critical and pedagogical understanding with his own European spirituality. Nietzsche calls Buddhism "a hundred times more realistic than Christianity. . . . the only really positivistic religion"² because "in Buddha's teaching egoism becomes duty."³ Like Herder, Nietzsche saw in India only that which interested him. More remarkable is Nietzsche's forecast for the twentieth century. He identifies as "signs of the next century the cultural 'appearance' of Russia, the socialists, and religious energies strong enough for an atheistic religion à la Buddha to overcome the differences among denominations—a new ideal to which science would not be opposed."⁴

The story of the images of India held by German philosophers has been told by Helmuth von Glasenapp.⁵ It is a history of misunderstanding. Even Indologists are not excluded when they step outside their specialities to a comparative evaluation of Hindu and Christian ethics, as Glasenapp himself, in his polemic against Albert Schweitzer, demonstrates.⁶

More serious and influential is the misunderstanding of such people as Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical Society, and her apostate follower, Rudolf Steiner, the originator of the Anthroposophical Society. Unrestrained by textual-critical methods, they want to give the Western world a new gospel, and in the process they transmit elements of Asian religion as an integral part of a new system, reinterpreted by being incorporated into their teachings.

A good example is the New Thought movement which identifies as the three sources of "dynamic Psychology and the art of living according to the new spirit": (1) the "spiritual and intellectual heritage of

German idealism"; (2) "the evaluations of Christian and non-Christian mysticism"—which serves to establish pantheism (biblical thought is ineffective); and (3) "the purposiveness of Vedantism."⁷

German idealism provides the syncretic cement for this movement. It provides the direction for an optimistic interpretation of the Hindu tradition. New Thought counts among its spiritual ancestors Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, Goethe, Herder and Kant. There are good reasons for this: since the eighteenth century poets and philosophers have exemplified the preoccupation with Asia's spirituality, some as philanderers but others quite seriously. Added to this, especially in the nineteenth century, was the interest of artists and musicians, which explains why until today it is fashionable for many of the educated to concern themselves with the "deep wisdom of the East." The European is generally inclined to see only the good, the beautiful and the noble in the wisdom of the East, and overlooks or reinterprets everything else positively or idealistically. The teaching of *karma*, for example, is explained as a cheerful and optimistic belief in reincarnation and not in its double-edged "inhuman" causality linking future incarnation to the achievements of the present.

Can this, however, still be called Hinduism? Central Hindu teachings are so greatly reinterpreted that they may be considered transformed. Monism (as for instance in New Thought) *corresponds*, however, to Hinduism in its worldview and, as Wolfgang Philipp would say, in its mystery-of-being. The primarily individual character of the goal of salvation (and with it the ahistorical thought) is Hindu, as is the valuation of human thought and conduct as the source and way of salvation.

The ordering elements underlying Asian religions are theological. It is perhaps not fair to ask if the Asian religions are gaining followers in the West only on the level of a cult or of their specific religious teachings. It is already enough when the Asian's worldview or sensibility-of-being is taught. These may appear as mere educational or cultural values, as no more than techniques for living, thus constituting a seemingly secular and a religious spirituality. Experience shows, however, that these "values" attain a theological, and to that extent religious, status. Spiritual bonds that arise do not need to be made visible through an explicit act of profession. With the exception of a few entrances into Buddhist communities, there is no conversion. One enters the path of self-realization (as in New Thought and many others) or of inner self-renewal,⁸ a path that culminates in the vivid uniting of the one with the all and is the highest goal of the exercises that seek knowledge of life.

What entered into New Thought, for example, as the spirit of Vedanta, may to Hindus in India appear abstract, alienated, fragmentary and secular. Nevertheless, phenomenological structures that are native

to Hinduism and in part to other Asian religions, have maintained themselves. Examples are the readiness to syncretism and relativism and the consequent leveling of religions.

The estrangement of Asian religion in its transition to the West suggests that we should not expect what might be called a solid sweep of the West by an Asian religion. Asia's religious influence is unlikely to show up in religious statistics. Indirect influence may become stronger, although largely unnoticed. In any case, an open encounter between Asian religions and Christianity is, at least in the West, not very likely.

In 1917 Rudolf Otto had a fantastic vision: "It will be the supreme and most glorious moment in the history of mankind when it is no longer political systems nor economic groups nor social interests but the religions of humanity which rise against each other and when, after the scrimmages and mock battles over the dogmatic crusts and scraps and over the historical contingencies and mutual inaccessibilities, the struggle finally reaches the high style in which spirit confronts spirit, ideal confronts ideal, and experience confronts experience, where everyone must proclaim without deception whether he has anything that is authentic and sincere and what it is."⁹

If it were only a technical question of communication, Rudolf Otto's hope might be our own, for some of what Otto envisioned has long been taking place. Millions of Indians, Japanese and others read the Bible without becoming or wishing to become Christians. Similarly, Westerners study the sacred texts of the East. Which of each other's works do they read? Did not even great Rhadarkrishnan, who, after all, spent a long scholarly life with the religions of the world, splendidly misunderstand Christianity? Rudolf Otto, because he looked at religions simply as special forms of *the* religion, underestimated their estrangement from each other. Moreover, he failed to account for the indirect influences of religions. He focused on the messianic and professing "Great Religions," almost ignoring spiritual penetration. World religions do not enter the arena with a frontal assault on Christianity. As with other spiritual and intellectual forces, they are not anti-churches but rather affect consciousness in more subtle ways. Intellectual battles in the membership hall were the style of apologetics as late as the 1920's, but today intellectual debates are part of everyday life. They seldom result in a final decision, only in articulation and exchange. This is sometimes called dialogue.

When Asian religiosity enters the West it is deeply influenced, as are all religious phenomena, by the demands of secularism. The five most important influences are: first, large religious bodies suffer a growing loss of social function. A closed religious society no longer exists, and even the individual's fulfillment in life is hardly ordered by his belief. Second, the

secular world tempts religions to an external flexibility that occasionally interferes with their historical purpose. When the death of God is revealed through the profanity of the modern world, one may expect consequences for the nature and authority of the form of worship, for example. Third, the inner form of belief is changing. Belief becomes superficial; the willingness to offer one's life for belief decreases notoriously. Mere opinion—"opinion religion"—replaces strong conviction, and even the awareness of one's own belief declines. Syncretism is a consequence of such ignorance, and even conversions become subjectively easy. Fourth, religious thought and teaching become detached from the believers and churches. Offering themselves as general consumer items through the mass media, religious thought and experience are indeed consumed and, in the process, secularized. (This is not to suggest that the secularized material has no religious meaning for people.) Fifth, we must consider the sects with their fiction of a unified spiritual-religious-social world as a protest movement against secularism. The sects are thus both a contradiction to secularism and a product of the process of secularization. The formation of strongly differentiated sects is not typical of the present, but we are witnessing unrestricted sectarian grouping and even the trend toward sectarianism in the churches. This "tendency to sectarianism" is to be found almost everywhere in spiritual and religious life. It is probable that the diffusion of religious ideas and sectarianism are mutually necessary and complementary tendencies.

Asian religiosity in the West is affected by these conditions. Whereas the churches have lost the monopoly they had during the Middle Ages, Asian religions find themselves in an impotent minority in terms of measurable followers. But the freedom of indirect dissemination is unrestricted, and from this the alien religion can profit the most. To a great measure, Christianity has been relegated to the private and leisure world. Eastern religiosity is similarly limited to these sectors of life, a condition which underlines its consumer orientation.

Asian religions consciously seek to adapt themselves. One of the three tasks of the Arya Matreya Mandala order is "the working out of a method that is appropriate to occidental people."¹⁰ Yoga, which is native to Hinduism, sometimes presents itself as a purely secular technique for living. Numerous Yoga centers emphasize that they have nothing to do with religion. An accelerated Yoga course that can be learned in half an hour is offered Europeans and Americans. Many Westerners hardly realize that Yoga is a lifelong endeavor, and thus they never progress beyond breathing exercises or a simplified Hatha Yoga.

There is also a positive relation between diffusion and sectarianism. Living in tension amongst them-

selves and also with world Buddhism, the German Buddhist associations apparently have gained fewer than a thousand members. They complain that although their lectures meet with interest, they fail to attract new members.¹¹

About 1900 the Buddhists in Germany began, as it were, to become a church. They thus followed the trend of almost all the sects and communities with a *Weltanschauung* which arose during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Today, however, religious impulses institutionalize themselves in information centers (Vedanta centers, Yoga schools, publishing houses, pamphlet missions, counseling services, mail order houses for microbiotic foods, etc.). The Buddhist communities have also been changing their role to become centers for the dissemination of religious ideas. By this change, the weak "sectarian" institutionalization of Buddhism has become an effective instrument for the diffusion of Buddhist thought.

There are, of course, institutions such as retreat and meditation centers. But these serve primarily to nurture the monastic-like core membership of believers rather than purposes of expansion. On the other hand, the logic of estrangement is evident throughout. In the Yoga schools, for example, students "enroll," that is, they *buy* a limited course after which everyday life, unsteeped in religion, reclaims them.

Estranged and condemned to consumption though it may be, Asian religiosity exerts broad influence.

Why are Westerners so fascinated by the Eastern spirit? That it is exotic or presents itself as esoteric is part of the explanation. But the West itself contains elements that anticipate the Eastern spirit.

My third thesis was that Asian religions happen upon an ambiguous relationship between the modern world and many of its Western inhabitants. The propaganda of Asian religion has a pragmatic, even utilitarian, undertone, as it offers to help resolve the ambiguity. The fascination exercised by Asian religiosity lies essentially in its connection to the psychological situation of Western man in the modern world, to the aspirations of Western humanism as well as to the wishes implicit in the priorities of modern society. Asian religion also speaks to the hopes of what some Christians call the old Adam.

This may be briefly illustrated from the literature put out by Western information centers with Hindu, Buddhist and Tao orientations. The differences between the Asian religions are, for the purposes of this argument, not significant.

First, there is a connection with antiseular, anticivilization and antiscientific feelings. We learn that the ability of man to live happily and in peace has been lost "since the introduction of modern civilization, which is dualistic, materialistic, atomistic, and technical."¹² Further, "all of humanity trembles with

insecurity and lives in fear of an approaching war."¹³ The catchword "masses" describes man's situation, in contrast to which the literature defends the rights of the individual.¹⁴

A German Buddhist writes that "the singers have grown dumb, crushed in the shrill industrial plants, ghostlike traps of progress—civilization, as this scabby event is called."¹⁵

The impersonal forces of a technological world release a feeling of loneliness. Man experiences himself as minute and the earth as dust in the cosmos. Eastern religiosity promises him a new self-consciousness: "it restores man to the center of the cosmos."¹⁶ It shows a way to live in, and even to defy, this troubled world. The assumption (formulated purposefully in words whose Christian meaning has been altered) that "the kingdom of God is with us"¹⁷ makes the new life possible, as does the parallel assumption of man's potential godliness.¹⁸ "God's Self is in us" is the source of "all goodness and only goodness."¹⁹ The task is to nurture and unfold this godly self!

The anthropological credo declares: "It is man's nature to be concerned with ever advancing perfection and self-realization and with an incremental unfolding of all his latent godly powers and capacities."²⁰

References to the "whole" are constantly contrasted to modern fragmentation. The concepts that describe the "whole" are incompatible with the elements and conditions of the Western spirit. When Eastern religiosity offers its idea of what is whole or sound, it contradicts the Western conception and at the same time solicits the resentments of contemporary Western man against his own spirit. Civilization, for instance, is contrasted with "nature," hence ideas about child rearing that stress behavior, hence the cult of natural foods.

Synthetic thought is contrasted with analytic,²¹ "positive experience" with the "mere intellectual grasping of truth"²² and, more generally, "new thought" with rational thought. Evil can be thought away. The call goes out not to bear the burden but to transcend it through intense subjectivity.

Unity is evoked in contrast to differentiated thought, pluralism, denominationalism and religious differences. "The Babylonian confusion of the tongues of the Western spirit," as Mercel Granet depicts it, "has created such a disorientation that everything longs for the simple truth or at least for universal ideas that speak not only to the head but especially to the heart, that give a clear vision to the spirit and peace to the restless desires of the feelings."²³

Next to tranquility, the most important concepts are happiness and harmony. As God concurrently reveals himself in the universe²⁴ and unfolds himself through man, harmony, which brings about happiness, also has both a cosmic and an individual dimension. "Sin" is the "exclusion from the harmony

of the universe." Sin is also sorrow that originates in the "disharmony of body, soul, and mind."²⁵

Happiness is the positive opposite to sin or sorrow. Described as "a matter of the right attitude, the inner unison with life, the harmony of the self, with your neighbor, and with the infinite,"²⁶ it is the ultimate goal of existence. "We humans are created for happiness, destined to happiness."²⁷

It is clear that in the context of the offer of the Eastern spirit the secular value "happiness" takes on an unequivocally religious meaning. The occidental person who grasps at these teachings out of a simple longing, however, sees in them first of all only the promise that his life will become more pleasant and easier with very little effort. In the consumers' eyes the promise looks "worldly," not religious. In fact, however, the promise is religious in origin, in purpose and in goal. The vision of the future is paradisiacal: "What a marvelous time it will be when we will know that it is essentially always possible to find love, to live well, to enjoy happiness and success and everything we wish!"²⁸

Christian theological ideas are essential to understanding the Western fascination for Eastern religion. Asian religiosity conflicts with Christian concepts of sin, forgiveness and redemption, though the conflict is not necessarily expressed in an explicit polemic. For most of those who have associated themselves with Eastern religiosity for some time the question of the forgiveness of sin no longer exists. They do not stand in open conflict with Christian belief; they are not even aware of conflict, even if formally they belong to the church. They have long been filled by the faith that the human spirit harbors a theoretically unlimited power of self-realization and self-fulfillment. In other words, they are confident that they can master life in its fullest without dependence upon the help of others, whether of God or man. This is Nietzsche's vision of belief without God, belief in the potential godliness or God-likeness of man.

We may be inclined to think that this whole phenomenon is merely a sectarian, in any case not very important, hustle at the fringes of modern society. Two points caution against that judgment. First, there are good reasons for the sociological hypothesis that an extreme but highly publicized body of opinion corresponds to widespread, although vague and unpublicized, public feelings. Second, Christian theology maintains that every person possesses the tendency to self-justification, self-acquittal and self-redemption, and that this, theologically speaking, is human "nature." If this is true, Eastern religiosity is attractive because it cultivates our natural religious striving. That striving, moreover, finds a universal human expression in the highest values of the secular society: happiness, success, security and harmony. Any possible discontent with modernity may provide

additional force for people to seek fulfillment for their natural religious needs. It seems to me, then, that what we have described is no fringe phenomenon. The response to Eastern religiosity in the West is of enormous cultural significance. Certainly the communications media are able and willing to help "sell" it to the people.

Perhaps Eastern religiosity is only one among several offers of a "natural" religion. Yet it is, within the constraints set upon its effectiveness by estrangement and secularism, surely one of the most effective. It offers what has a high market value: that one can be religious without, if one prefers, seeming to be religious, the opportunity to be religious without having to surrender to the uncertain future and without having any doubt. It would be inhuman not to find that offer alluring.

(translated by Norbert Dall)

1. Helmuth von Glasenapp, *Das Indienbild deutscher Denker* (Stuttgart, 1960), p. 17.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Works*, Volume XI (Leipzig: Kroener, n.d.), p. 375.
5. Glasenapp, *op. cit.*, p. 108.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 149 ff.
7. ———, "Neugeist als Lebensmacht" (Pfuldingen: Baum-Verlag, 1966), p. 26 ff.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 20 and *passim*.
9. Rudolf Otto, appendix to *Vishnu-Narayana. Texte zur indischen Gottesmystik*, p. 155. Glasenapp, *op. cit.*, p. 170 ff.
10. *Der Kreis*, 62/1966, p. 5.
11. Compare, for instance, the *Bericht der Deutschen Buddhistischen Union*, October, 1966.
12. *Lebensglueck* (Duesseldorf: Ohsawa-Zentrale, 1967), No. 3, p. 8.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
14. *Die weisse Fahne*, No. 2, p. 118. (In this newspaper the New Thought movement, which perceives itself as a collective movement, allows several related movements publication space.)
15. "Maintripada" (pseud. W. A. Rink), "Pilgrim," *Der Kreis*, No. 62, 1966, p. 15.
16. After the text of Bernd Holger Bonsels, *Die Verwirklichung des Menschen* (Drei-Eichen-Verlag, n.d.).
17. *Die weisse Fahne*, No. 4, 1966, p. 209.
18. *Die weisse Fahne*, No. 2, 1966, p. 119.
19. *Die weisse Fahne*, No. 4, 1966, p. 237.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
21. Compare Merceel Granet, *Das chinesische Denken* (Munich, 1963), p. 14 ff.
22. *Yana*, No. 4, 1965, p. 123.
23. Granet, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
24. *Die weisse Fahne*, No. 2, 1966, p. 119.
25. Annemarie Leopold, "Wie ueberwinde ich das Leid?" in *Die weisse Fahne*, No. 7, 1966, p. 425.
26. *Die weisse Fahne*, No. 7, 1966, p. 432.
27. *Die weisse Fahne*, No. 7, "Einlage."
28. *Die weisse Fahne*, No. 7, 1966, p. 416.