

An Evaluation of the Impact of Oriental Philosophy on Western Culture

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Oriental philosophy, in the mind of Western man, belongs to the Orient — bounded and contained by oceans and towering Himalayan Mountains, with the less objectionable but still heretical Islamic world lying as a buffer zone between East and West.

A consideration of Oriental philosophy from such a viewpoint is like trying to reverse a giant river in its course. To Western man, the impact of Oriental philosophy on Western culture is not what matters — but rather the impact of the Western way on the Orient. The sojourns of the Saint Thomases, the Nestorians, the Jesuits, the colonists, the capitalists, the military expansionists, the Moghuls, the Moslems, the Protestants, the Roman Catholics, the adventurers, and the Adventists within the borders of the Orient have captivated the imagination of Western man. He has flourished and cultivated a psyche that designates Western man and his culture as superior, bearing the impress and divine sanction of Jehovah God or Allah. Possibly nothing demonstrates this more clearly than the strenuous efforts of the West through commerce, religion, and militarism to achieve and maintain superiority and dominance over Asia.

Suddenly, in this decade of the twentieth century after Christ, Western culture is increasingly aware of the presence in its midst of myriads of Oriental ideas, symbols, and paraphernalia — some of which existed in the Orient twenty centuries before the birth of Christ. Like a mythological sea serpent that crawls up out of its ocean home to terrorize the Earth creatures, Oriental philosophy and culture have traversed the watery barriers of the Earth and have gained in Western lands a heterogeneous complex of ad-

herents who cherish an abhorrence of the Christian way of life, on the one hand, and, on the other, a fascination for a "new" socioreligious frame of reference. "New" symbolism, "new" litanies, "new" values, and a "way of life" almost wholly incongruous with the Western Judeo-Christian ethic have materialized right in the midst of "civilized," Christianized, capitalistic society! For some observers, an invasion of the Western cultural stronghold has occurred. More seasoned observers sense, rather, the popularizing of certain Oriental cults and ideologies which have been present in isolated pockets of the American scene for decades.

Social intercourse between East and West has not been a one-way association at all. It may be true that the forthright efforts to convert the Orient to Christianity find little parallel in the efforts of the Oriental philosophies to "evangelize" the West for Hinduism and the other Oriental philosophies. But the reason stems from the very nature of the epistemology of the Oriental philosophies and their inherent restraints that safeguard their particular "knowledge" from the uninitiated. We have had a confrontation, in fact, of the secrecy and mysticism of the Oriental philosophies with the "go-ye-into-all-the-world" complex of Christianity — from the days of William Carey until the present.

The Orient has retained its stoic, indifferent silence for centuries — apparently heedless of Western presuppositions and imperatives. Western culture is the Johnny-come-lately on the Oriental scene. For thousands of years the Indian subcontinent has been the scene of invasion after invasion by hostile civilizations and cultures. Oriental philosophies have experienced Mongolian intrusions, Islamic penetration and enslavement, British raj, and other forceful efforts to subdue and obliterate them. All the while, they have continued their existence without central authority or direction, financial experts, or centrally administered priestcraft. That these philosophies continue in today's highly scientific and pragmatic era is an enigma.

Although there has been little effort by the Oriental philosophies to penetrate the West in any organized way that could parallel the expansion of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries or the expansion of Christianity westward throughout Europe, Western culture has not emerged altogether unscathed from its intrusion into Oriental society. Whether by design or not, for centuries the sophistries and wisdom of the East have gripped the imagination and intellect of some Western intellectuals. To seek to understand or evaluate the extent of infiltration is indeed an imperative to one who desires to find perspective in relation to the current rash of interest in Oriental phenomena in America and the rest of Western culture.

To evaluate the present impact of Oriental philosophy, one must view it against a historical backdrop of ancient origins of Indian thought and also of the subsequent evolvement of the various systems of Indian philosophy which, by this twentieth century, now form as complex a pattern as the most ornate brocade. At the same time, one must be aware that (a) orthodox Hindus are reticent to disclose the contents of their religious and philosophical systems, and that (b) the compromised teachings of neo-Hinduism of the last century have effected a hybrid strain of thought that is totally unacceptable to the orthodox but that tends to cater to the mentality of the West. Hence, the impact of Oriental philosophy on Western culture tends to pertain to certain historical trends or philosophical movements.

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Historically, many aspects of Oriental philosophy have enriched other civilizations. Students of ancient Mediterranean cultures know that unquestionably there was social and religious intercourse between those cultures and ancient India. Although present knowledge is sketchy, evidence of ancient Greek, Phoenician, Roman, Persian, and other foreign visitors has been unearthed in the Indian subcontinent. Coins, seals, pottery, paleolithic implements (demonstrating remarkable similarity to those found in south-east Europe, Turkey, and the land area west of the subcontinent of India), and other objects show the interrelationship of these nations.

Western society has been schooled to believe that philosophy began with the Greeks. This is an idea that many Indians fail to appreciate when they note the similarities between certain concepts of Grecian thought and those expressed earlier in ancient Sanskrit writings. The arguments are inconclusive, and the conclusions may still be held in suspension; but at least it is not unfair to state that Indian thought and other aspects of Indian life were exported Westward early.

Some Indians feel that there is a link between certain religious ideas that were developed and practiced in post-Christian times in the West and those that had their origins in the East. Monasticism (for both men and women) is frequently cited as having had its origin in the East. Similarities are cited in the sayings of Jesus compared with the sayings attributed to Gautama Buddha and with the still more ancient Sanskrit *sutras* (sayings). It may be impossible at this time to ascertain with any degree of accuracy just where a particular practice, saying, or religious discipline arose; but at least many evidences of interrelationship predate the Christian era.

Students of linguistics note an unmistakable relationship between ancient

Greek and Sanskrit as well as between other Indo-European languages. Some feel that Sanskrit is one of the earliest languages and has contributed largely to modern tongues. Certainly language has been the recipient of many words from that source — *bungalow*, *bandook*, *bund*, to cite a few of the literally hundreds of English words with their derivation in Sanskrit or Hindi.

Possibly even more effective in their influence have been such religious terms as *karma*, *maya*, *brahman*, and *samsara*, for which we have the Greek equivalent of metempsychosis, or rebirth. Whatever the relationship has been, Sanskrit is primarily a vehicle of religious thought and ritual. Hence, in any association with it, the other culture concerned was certain to be exposed to and probably impregnated with the religious concepts of which Sanskrit was the vehicle of expression. In fact, careful perusal may demonstrate that Sanskrit has contributed to many aspects of contemporary Western life. Although in literature, poetry, art, architecture, and other areas of achievement, a certain contribution has been made, still it is clear, when the evidence has been surveyed, that the signal contribution of Oriental philosophy to Western culture has been in religious and philosophical spheres. Thus it has always been.

In the empirical and scientific fields, especially, the East has failed to maintain pace with Western civilization. Oriental culture has always spurned emphasis on the physical pleasures or bodily comforts. The body is likened in Hindu scriptures to the skin of a snake, which is shed when the time has come, or to an overripe cucumber, which drops to the ground at the appointed time. Only in recent decades has much emphasis been given by a small portion of the Indian population to manufacturing and other aspects of industry. The impact of Oriental philosophy on Western culture, then, is in matters pertaining to the "unembodied self." This is the consideration of prime importance in all of the systems of Oriental thought.

These religious-philosophical concepts and the physical paraphernalia associated with them have captured the attention of Western youth in particular. Possibly this could be expressed as a fascination with anticulture prompted by disillusion with the pragmatism, commercialism, and militarism that have preoccupied the minds of so many.

In terms of American history, one may cite the visits of Swami Vivekananda and other Asian Orientalists a century ago. They popularized certain metaphysical concepts among the intellectuals at Harvard, New York, Chicago, and other centers of America. Scores of other Eastern visitors have followed, and many societies have been established to promulgate the ideals

and concepts of the Orient: the Theosophical Society, Divine Enlightenment Society, Self-realization Society, Christian Science, and Yoga centers are all across the nation. Zen and other Buddhist centers have gained a large and influential following in many quarters of America in recent times.

Apart from the visits to this country by Indian gurus, many other factors have contributed to the popularizing of Oriental philosophy in the West. One cannot minimize the effect of the overseas involvement of the armed forces during the first and second world wars and more particularly during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts. Literally hundreds of thousands of United States servicemen have had immediate access to the acquaintance with these philosophies and the way of life they represent. Dissatisfaction with their own culture and mores — a questioning of the whole Judeo-Christian ethic — has led many to search freely into the mysteries and mysticism of the East. Dissemination of Oriental literature by popular book publishers has increased greatly. Countless volumes of Oriental wisdom and philosophy have been widely distributed, and the universities have been quick to sense the popularity of these. There has been a marked increase in university course offerings related to Indological subjects and allied courses: extrasensory perception, parapsychology, mysticism, Yoga, and esoteric thought. (My personal observation is that many popular bookstores carry more works on these subjects than they do on biblical and Christian thought.)

Manner of dress, hair grooming, posture and breathing, diet, vegetarianism, exercise, meditation, burning of incense, wearing of amulets, beads, and other Eastern religious paraphernalia, reciting of mantrams or prayers, and use of prayer wheels have been adopted by countless Westerners. As a result, social practices, marriage, reading, and sexual concepts have been noticeably altered for many through exposure to and assimilation of Oriental thought.

Pornographic ideas borrowed directly from Indian sculpture, the *Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana*, and other ancient sex treatises, which in previous generations would have been barred from society, are freely distributed and read. The resulting breakdown of the traditional Protestant ethic of social behavior and its replacement with a new situation ethic and with permissiveness have been greatly influenced by the Oriental concept of life. One ought not to suppose that this is the only factor involved or even to suggest that situation ethics necessarily developed out of Oriental philosophy. But the casual, permissive Oriental social ethic seems to have been the very thing to satisfy the void created in the lives of many who have rejected the Judeo-Christian ethic.

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The impact of Oriental philosophy on Western culture seems to fall into two general categories. *First*, there are those more or less functional aspects that relate to the ritual or physical conduct of the Oriental way of life. These things have symbolic and mystical value arbitrarily assigned to them by those who were under the more binding claims of the philosophical and religious presuppositions of the culture concerned. *Second*, there is the thought content which undergirds the more physical manifestations of the systems of the culture. The present fad in which youth and others are obsessed with ritual and symbolic aspects (incense, chanting, meditating, prayer beads, mystical symbols) will doubtless be replaced by new fads stemming from Africa, Hawaii, or cowboyland! But the claim of the metaphysical and epistemological concepts of Oriental philosophy on hundreds of thousands of lives will not soon be displaced.

By its very nature, the current movement, the product of brilliant minds, both Oriental and Western, confronts Christian thought with Oriental philosophy. For some, this appears to be a conflict dating centuries back. For others, the confrontation is a subtle one in which both mentalities seek to find common ground, to effect a synthesis of the best of the two cultures. Hence, we have various degrees of orthodoxy on either side, with attempts at synthesis of thought in the middle. Unquestionably, the efforts of those individuals who seek to find common ground between the two systems have exerted a profound effect on Western culture.

As it is practiced in Oriental lands, Oriental orthodoxy is possibly too gross to find much sympathetic response in Western culture. But the efforts of the Theosophists, the Self-realization centers, the Yoga ashrams, the Indo-American Friendship centers, and most particularly the Western-oriented and Western-educated Oriental philosophers have succeeded in presenting Oriental thought in a way that has had an ever-widening appeal to a segment of Western culture, including a liberal sprinkling of intellectuals and sophisticates. Surendranath Dasgupta, Radhakrishnan, Vivekananda, and scores of others have successfully published their views to a receptive Western audience. Add to this the impact of the work of Western Indologists such as Lanman,¹ and Müller,² and scores of English, German, Russian, French, Dutch, American, and other philosophers — and the effort to familiarize the Western world with Oriental wisdom is impressive.

To state the extent of the impact of Oriental thought on Western culture in terms of statistical information would probably be impossible. It is sufficient to say here that the statistics would undoubtedly be far greater than

the casual observer might suspect, for the weaving of Oriental thought into the fabric of Western culture is now a fact that may not be ignored. Someone has said that three words may express the nature of at least a portion of this infiltration: *exotic*, *erotic*, and *esoteric*. One has only to note the keen interest, for instance, in *vegetarianism*, *respect for life*, *passive resistance*, and many other key expressions that have become common in Western culture to realize that indeed there has been more than a casual interest in these things. The interest in the esoteric may have had the most far-reaching consequences to Western culture.

Christian Orientalists cannot help noting the similarity between certain neosupernaturalist or existentialist ideas and those in Oriental teaching for centuries. It may be presumptive to attribute these ideas to Oriental origin; and yet, there is undeniable evidence that at least some of those concepts were borrowed directly from Oriental sources. In fact, to many students it is clear that certain of those who have given shape to mid-nineteenth-century and twentieth-century Protestant religious thought, and also to many political and social ideologies, derived inspiration from Oriental philosophy in varying degrees. Schopenhauer testified that he read the Upanishads for his morning devotions as others did the New Testament. Nietzsche, Marx, Beethoven, Hitler, Stalin, Einstein, J. Huxley, Menuhin, and numerous prominent world citizens drew from Oriental philosophy for some of their ideas. To some extent, it can be shown that certain leading theologians of the neosupernaturalist movement have derived their ideas from Oriental philosophy.

The burden of this discussion is not to cite the historical or other sources to demonstrate this historical involvement, but rather to cite briefly some of the theological and philosophical concepts that have emerged in Western society which seem incongruous with the teachings of Holy Scripture or historical Protestant theological positions. This change in the theological posture in the Protestant world, simultaneously with the popularizing of certain Oriental philosophical concepts in areas ordinarily thought of as being the Protestant stronghold, is more than coincidental.

One cannot help noting the decline of orthodox Protestant-evangelical theological positions in mid-nineteenth century and the rise of scientific, social, economic, and political ideologies. It is not suggested here that these necessarily grew from the seedbed of Oriental philosophy, but rather that some subsequent scientists, some subsequent social and economic reformers, and some subsequent politicians could fill the void left by the rejection of presuppositions of biblical theology by substituting concepts found in the

framework of Oriental philosophy: the idea of an impersonal force having control of the universe, the Atman-Brahman concept of Hinduism (an absolute monism more palatable to many than the monotheism of the Christian Bible, since the idea releases man from the basic ideas associated with the biblical concept of a personal God). Salvation, repentance for sin, individual accountability before God, judgment, and other biblical ideas are thus circumnavigated and ultimately rejected as pointless.

The imagination of man is still kindled by the immensity of space and the universe. The suggestion that there is a "supreme force," or "holy ground," or call it what you may, in direct but impersonal control of everything, is exciting. Add to this the natural conclusion that follows in an absolute monism — i.e., that the individual self is in fact to be identified with the Supreme or Ultimate Self — and many persons are captivated. There is no sin or evil or good or pleasure in such a concept. Everything is the One, and whatever happens is the manifestation of the One or its activity.

The idea that logically follows is that of determinism. For if everything is the one impersonal Supreme One, then everything which happens is its activity and is determined not by the individual's personal preference but simply by the occurrence of the manifest activity of the one Supreme Self. Where, then, if this Supreme Self is without characteristics or personality, is there room for individual identity or individual responsibility? How can the individual self have characteristics or attributes if the Supreme Self, with which the individual self is identified, has none? Thus there is a de-personalizing of deity and a dehumanizing of humanity.

What then is real? Where does it all lead? Here is where the literature of Oriental philosophy comes forth with its esoteric concepts. Karma, maya, and reincarnation seem the logical conclusions to reach in these instances. Immortality of the individual self is assured because of the identifying of the individual self with the Supreme Self, who, while lacking characteristics, IS — and is thus immortal. Because the Supreme Self is immortal, the individual self is immortal.

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Summarizing, then, I may say that monism, determinism, self-realization, immortality of the self, and reincarnation are basic components of ancient Oriental philosophy that seem to be pleasing and acceptable in contemporary Western ideas. Today Christianity finds itself, on its own preserve, enmeshed in these alien considerations and phenomena. Hence Christianity can no longer ignore their presence.

Tragically, it may be acknowledged that a part of the Christian community not only doesn't ignore the presence of these ideas but seems to seek a theological fraternization with them. Having abandoned the traditional Scripture-based concepts of man and God, millions of evangelical and Protestant Christians are fascinated with and enraptured by the Eastern ideas pertaining to human destiny. That old lie first told in Eden, "Ye shall not surely die," is still exciting. The Oriental concepts of impersonal determinism, karma, and reincarnation possibly contain the most highly developed expression of these yearnings of the human heart.

The supernatural manifestations which for centuries have been part of the Oriental way of life, while not common, seem just enough to reinforce these views, and millions are confronted with occurrences for which their experience and knowledge offer no satisfactory explanation. Seventh-day Adventists must sense in the confrontation of primitive Christianity with Oriental philosophy in this generation another episode in the controversy in which mankind has been embroiled since the fall of Adam. Any effort at synthesis of these two concepts, in fact, results in the demise of one or the other. Primitive Christianity — the teachings of the Holy Scriptures — remains as unique today when compared with certain basic tenets of Oriental philosophy as did the voice of God compared with the suggestions of the serpent in biblical Eden.

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