

## THE IMPACT OF EASTERN WISDOM ON THE WEST<sup>1</sup>

VICTOR WHITE, O.P.

**O**F the impact of Western science and technology on the East little needs to be said. But there is a reverse process which is less manifest, more subtle, but which may perhaps prove hardly less effective in shaping the future of mankind. 'Let us look towards the East', the Swiss psychologist C. G. Jung has bidden us. 'Let us look towards the East. . . . European cannons have burst open the gates of Asia; European science and technique, European worldly-mindedness and cupidity. . . . We have conquered the East politically. . . . But do you know what happened when Rome overthrew the Near East politically? The Spirit of the East entered Rome . . . and out of the most unlikely corners of Asia Minor came a new, spiritual Rome. Would it be unthinkable that the same thing might happen today? . . . I know that our [Western] unconscious is full of Eastern symbolism. . . . The spirit of the East penetrates through all our pores, and reaches the most vulnerable places of Europe.'

Perhaps that sounds extravagant. But I am not so sure. It was just about the time when the French revolutionaries were enthroning the goddess of Reason in the cathedral of Notre Dame that some Upanishads were first translated into a European language. It was a rather dubious translation into French by way of the Persian, and, for some time after that, European renderings of the great spiritual classics of the East were rare enough. But we know how the discovery of Buddhist thought influenced Schopenhauer; and however much he may have misinterpreted it, European thinkers have never since been unaware of the challenge to their own ways of thinking of an immense power of age-old wisdom in the Far East. The publication of Max Müller's great enterprise, *The Sacred Books of the East*, and that of the Pali Texts, were a milestone in the history of European

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culture, comparable to the 'discovery' of Aristotle in the thirteenth century, and of the Platonists and the humanist classics in the European Renaissance. Since then there has been a flood of translations into our Western languages of Eastern 'classics'; of Vedas and Upanishads, of the Pali canon and the standard works of the Mahayana in all its varieties; of the *Analects*, the *Tao te Ching*, the *I Ching* from China; of the *Bardo Thödol* from Tibet; the *Yoga Aphorisms*, the *Vedantasara*; of Tantric texts from India. Of the Bhagavadgita there must be more than half-a-dozen translations into English alone, many of which have gone into several editions.

These original texts do not probably reach a very wide public. But, to judge from the enormous output, there is a very big demand among us for expositions and popularisations of Eastern wisdom. Some of these are perhaps not very reputable or reliable, achieving little more than clothing Western ideas, or a dubious occultism, in exotic oriental costume. But there are many others of far greater merit, and directed to readers of many levels of culture and education. Of these, some are frankly propagandist—I think especially of those who write or lecture for the Ramakrishna Mission, and of most of the contributors to the volume, *Vedanta and the West*. No less sympathetic, but perhaps more apt to make the subject intelligible to the Western reader without distorting it by facile adaptation, are such straightforward expositions as those of the late Heinrich Zimmer. His posthumous *Philosophies of India*, recently published, is singularly successful. But there are also exponents—I think of René Guénon and Floyd H. Ross—who, for all their other excellencies, I can only call escapist in their method of approach. Their work is marred (for me, at least) by their incessant sneers at everything Western, their repeated comparisons of what is wisest and deepest in the East with what is most foolish and shallow in the West. They are not the only ones who forget that (as the *Tao te Ching* puts it):

The Sage is square, but does not cut others . . .

He is straight, but does not stretch others;

He is bright, but does not dazzle others.

But these sometimes violently anti-Western writers do at

least make us aware of what is too often amiss in much Western interest in oriental beliefs and practices: an unconscious attempt to evade our own *karma* by taking refuge in phantasy in a culture which is not our own, seeking from it compensation rather than integration. To quote Jung again: 'The spiritual beggars of our time are all too inclined to accept the alms of the East in specie, that is, to appropriate unthinkingly the spiritual possessions of the East and to imitate its ways blindly. That is the danger about which it is impossible to give too many warnings. . . . Spiritual Europe is not helped by what is merely a new sensation or a new titillation to the nerves. . . . What the East has to give us should be merely a help in a work which we ourselves have to do. Of what use to us is the wisdom of the Upanishads or the insight of the Chinese yoga, if we desert the foundations of our own culture as though they were outlived errors, and, like homeless pirates, settle with thievish intent on foreign shores?'

Yes; but much may come of this widespread interest in Eastern wisdom if it does indeed help us in the work we ourselves in the West have to do, and to rediscover the foundations of our own culture. That is why I find that, of all exponents of East to West, there are few so stimulating and constructive as the late Ananda Coomaraswamy. Coomaraswamy wrote some comparatively popular books on Hinduism and Buddhism, but his really constructive and pioneer work is to be found in his meticulously scholarly monographs, such as his *Time and Eternity* and *The Eternal Transmigrant*. The latter goes a very long way towards overcoming what for the Western mind is the stumbling-block of metempsychosis; he claims, in fact, to restore its original meaning. But Coomaraswamy had an extraordinary insight, not only into Eastern tradition, but into Western too; an insight which, alas, few Westerners today possess. On almost every page of his writing he shows how the one illuminates the other. He cannot expound a Sanskrit term without examples of the same root in our own Indo-Germanic languages, and without showing parallels to what it would express from Plato or Aristotle, from Plotinus or Augustine, Boethius or Aquinas. Coomaraswamy showed us,

in precise detail, what others have only boldly asserted: that beneath all the differences of East and West, there is indeed such a thing as a perennial and universal metaphysic.

Coomaraswamy ended his days as curator of the superb collection of Oriental Art in the Boston Museum. And that reminds me that the widespread diffusion and popularity of Eastern art among us is probably a much more powerful instrument of the impact of East on West than any amount of books. I am not thinking mainly of the undoubted influence which, since the Impressionists, Eastern art has exercised on Western painting and sculpture, but rather of the powerful unconscious influence which reproductions of Eastern art (and they are to be found not only in our museums, but in countless numbers of our homes) must exercise on our own way of looking at things. However little one may know of the meaning of its symbols and gestures, one cannot look at an image of the Buddha for very long without beginning to view the world with different eyes.

Yet it cannot be denied that, although there is something that fascinates our modern European consciousness in the spiritual teachings and techniques of the East, there is something that terrifies us too. How shall it be described?—a horror of emptiness, of dissolution, of infinity? E. M. Forster in his *Passage to India*, put his finger on it when he told of the strange experience of poor Miss Quested in the booming, echoing cave of Marabar. ‘Suddenly, at the edge of her mind, Religion appeared, poor little talkative Christianity, and she knew that all its divine words from ‘Let there be light’ to ‘It is finished’ only amounted to ‘boom’. Then she was terrified over an area larger than usual, the universe offered no repose to her soul. . . . For a time she thought, ‘I am going to be ill’, to comfort herself; then she surrendered to the vision.’ In fact, she went mad. The trouble comes, I suspect, because we have forgotten many of the highest achievements of our own European spirit, dismissed them as ‘outlived errors’, and so are unequipped to meet the claims of Infinity when we meet its imperious claims in the East. Still less does it occur to us that the very ‘talkativeness’ of our Christianity might have something to offer to the East; that the strange, forgotten talk of our own Fathers

and Councils on (for instance) the processions and relations and hypostases of the Godhead might have something important to say to the mystic 'bom' of the *Mandukya Upanishad*—and that it, in turn, might make sense again of the talk of our own Fathers. But this field—the field of dogmatic theology—is the one field in which, so far as I can discover, East and West have as yet hardly met at all; the one field in which both parties, though for different reasons, have assumed that it was impossible to meet. And yet it is the one which, I suspect, might prove the most fruitful and beneficial of all. I wish I had time to develop this point which may, I am afraid, strike you as quite preposterous. As it is, I can only record the fact that at least one Western theologian has learned from the wisdom of the East—its discussion of Tao, of the Sacred Syllable, of the One without a Second, of Non-Duality and Duality—much of what was at issue in the high utterance of his own saints and theologians when they wrote about the Trinity and Incarnation. And is it idle to suppose that their thoughts in turn might have something to offer to the East? Those of us who believe that the religious unity of mankind can alone heal human egotism and division, with all the miseries they entail, and who know that religious unity can never be achieved either by proselytism or indifferentism, should at least not rule out in advance any meeting of East and West in this field also.