

Chapter Nine

THE WESTERN RESPONSE TO EASTERN CULTURES AND RELIGIONS

IT is not only in the East that there has been, and still is, an "Invasion" with its ensuing reactions and responses, full of disturbance and renewed vigour. There is also an Eastern Invasion in the West, more hidden and less spectacular than the Western Invasion, but truly significant. It requires a special investigation, because although the fact is often acknowledged, this acknowledgment remains too general and uncritical.

The attempt made in several of the preceding chapters to give a studied account of the Western Invasion in the East leaves as the dominant impression the unmistakable toughness these great civilizations evince. In the past, Easterners and Westerners have often expressed opinions voicing the impression of the tempestuousness of Western influence and the great fermentation and dislocation following in its wake; opinions such as Lord Cromer's: "Reformed Islam is Islam no longer." It can indeed be taken for granted that the Western Invasion is the most revolutionary experience the East has ever tasted in its long history and that it constitutes a definite break and irrevocable turning point in its spiritual and cultural continuity. But we are nowadays after longer experience and reflection more deeply convinced than evolutionary thinking of the 19th century was inclined to be, of the toughness which is, by the nature of the case, inherent in spiritual and cultural types with deep historical roots.

On the other hand, the participants in the opposing choir of those who sang the song of the "unchanging East" have been many, because they felt deeply (and certainly were right in doing so) the utter alienness of the Eastern world, so magnificently described for instance in Kipling's *Kim*, and the no less utter alienness of the Western world to the East. What we have

THE WESTERN RESPONSE

seen in the last 125 years or so through all the deep fermentation and dislocation, the convulsing and uprooting effects, the many fluctuations, is a stubborn determination to remain true to type, to assimilate without being dislodged or capitulating.

All four (the Islamic World, India, China, Japan) each in its particular way gives evidence of this fact. Of course, it should not be forgotten that the process of change as well as of re-assertion is far from closed. Nor have we so far entered specifically into the crisis in which these great civilizations are caught up under the impact of the world-wide phenomenon of secularization, just as Western civilization and Christianity are caught up in it. But at this moment at any rate it looks as if (to use an expression of the well-known Swedish writer R. Kjellèn) despite all Westernization, Western civilization is mainly used as a new "coat of armour" to preserve one's own spiritual type. Capitulation, especially in the field of religion (here in regard to Christianity), is out of the question, nor can it be read between the lines of the dominant tendencies.

THE EAST'S NEGATIVE EFFECT ON THE WEST

It is rather that a *subjective* mood of capitulation to the East is noticeable in the West. Not in the sense of capitulation to an Eastern Invasion, but in that of negativism to itself. This surprisingly subjective mood, in a civilization which from the objective point of view seems so victorious, is due to the highly different background on which the West experiences the Eastern Invasion.

The self-questioning which has been going on for a long time in the West, particularly in Europe, in many cases leading to the negativism alluded to, and the inner crisis which arises from this self-questioning (leaving aside many other big factors) is in the West a purely autochthonous matter. It is born from within, from the West's own specific spiritual type and its inherent dynamism; also from its own specific historical course of life, full of incisive new starts in exploring the mystery of Man and the Universe, and new experiments in political forms of collective life. Just as unbroken continuity in depth, despite sometimes great changes on the surface, is characteristic of the great Eastern civilizations, so for Western civilization, despite much persistent underground continuity, the characteristic

quality is revolution.¹ Not in the sense of feverish seeking for change (man, in all climes and times, fears change, even though beneath the threshold of his conscious life he may also long for it), but as a law built into the fibre of its nature.

The self-questioning and inner crisis in the great Eastern civilizations of to-day is not a self-born product. It is thrown upon them like a bomb from the outside. If they had been left to themselves, in spite of modifications occurring in the course of their history, essentially speaking they would have repeated themselves. This is the deepest reason why the undeniable Eastern Invasion in the West is quite a different thing from the Western Invasion in the East. It has a different physiognomy, a different significance. It fulfils a different function in the critical self-questioning West and in this self-questioning itself. It is as it were an aspect and instrument of the West's self-questioning. It helps to make the West's self-questioning more acute, above all because by its presence and operation it leads the self-questioning process outside the confines of a severe introvert inspection of the West's own resources in truth and values, opening up new horizons, new possibilities of choice. All this accounts for the striking fact that, properly speaking, to a great extent the Eastern Invasion is rather a Western contrivance than an Eastern initiative.

The negativism mentioned above was and is essentially a wistful dissatisfaction with the mood, the content and particularly the drift of Western culture (as one feels it). Above all it has been characterized by a dissatisfaction or even disgust with Christianity. Both, this cultural and religious dissatisfaction, in a rich gamut of tonality, have since the 18th century gone through various periods in which different motivations constituted the dominant note. We should have to write a cultural and spiritual history of the West from the 18th century to the present time to do justice to these motivations and their sources.² Revolt against the allegedly rationalist character of Western culture and the allegedly dogmatic narrowness of

¹ See the magnificent work *Europäische Revolutionen* by E. Rosenstock-Huessi.

² There is, of course, a vast literature on this wide subject. German writers are particularly conspicuous, for example R. Eucken, L. Ziegler, F. Nietzsche, R. von Hartmann, J. Burckhart, although writers such as Kierkegaard and Comte should not be forgotten. The few names mentioned in this footnote are intended less as representatives of this negativism than as analysers.

THE WESTERN RESPONSE

Christianity; spiritual cosmopolitanism; cultural and religious snobbery and a chase after the exotic, were some of the main aspects of this conspicuous self-negation *in the West towards the West* as a cultural and spiritual type.

The intensified contact with the Eastern world, as a result of Western oriental research or of the Western expansion over the globe, fulfilled a significant rôle in the formulation of this self-negation and of the discovery of more satisfying nourishment for suppressed longings. The great contrast of the dynamic but restless West with the seemingly serene and self-assured East offered new vistas and possibilities of interpreting the meaning of human life. The more so, because the Eastern world revealed modes and elaborations of mystical metaphysical or occult "knowledge" (gnosis) and avenues of psychological self-knowledge, which indeed never had occupied that preponderant place in Western culture. At best they had led only a marginal, never a central, existence in it. Moreover, this latter fact was particularly evident in the dominating trends in Western civilization of the 19th and 20th centuries, when science and technics made such enormous strides.

The Eastern Invasion began its career modestly by the way in which the more accurate (but still extremely inadequate) knowledge of Islam and of Chinese civilization (through the instrumentality of the eagerly read *Relations* of the Jesuit Fathers) fertilized discussions on political and religious principles, especially in France, contributing in this way unwittingly to the emergence of that world-historical event, the French Revolution (*la Grande Révolution*).¹ The methodical beginning of investigation of the Indian and the Persian-Muslim world, led by truly great English, French and German Orientalists and linguists, quickly won wide interest, and in the first decades of the 19th century had remarkable reverberations in the field of poetry and religious metaphysical thinking, especially in Germany. One of the most conspicuous examples is Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan*, which testifies to his cosmic sensitiveness and openness,² recruiting everything as grist to his mill.

¹ "The influence of China on the 'enlightened despotism' was in one aspect, we might even say in many, a Jesuit influence." H. de Lubac, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

² The famous lines: "Gottes ist der Orient! Gottes ist der Okzident! Nord und südliches Gelände, Ruht im Frieden seiner Hände", are eloquent testimony. ("The East is God's! The West is God's! Regions of north and south rest in the peace of His hands.")

THE EAST THROUGH WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP

For the sake of clarity we propose to follow two lines. First, the Eastern Invasion as happening to Western people, stirred by the voices from the East, which became audible to them mainly through Western scholarship or through their own exertions. Second, the Eastern Invasion as embodied in personalities or movements, which regarded and regard it as a kind of mission to represent and recommend Eastern culture and religion in the West.

In both cases it is preponderantly the Indian and the Islamic world which represent the Eastern Invasion, with special emphasis on *Buddhism* which, interestingly, has always been taken since the 19th century as Indian, though it had disappeared from India eight centuries before. Chinese civilization plays, comparatively speaking, a modest rôle in the Eastern Invasion, mostly confined to the great interest shown in higher, mystical Taoism. Similarly Japanese civilization has in both cases occupied a small place in the Eastern Invasion in the cultural and religious sense (in the political and economic sense Japan grew within fifty years from an "Iron Curtain" country into a world power). Only fairly recently has Japanese Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, become a real element of the Eastern Invasion.

The self-evoked Eastern Invasion and the hospitality to Eastern and Western advocates of Eastern culture or religion are therefore part of the crisis in which the West has found itself, since it began to undertake the adventure of discovering what man and the world would be like when God was virtually dethroned and Man took the centre—thereby aiming at the "Ausgang aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit" of Kant (emergence from an immaturity due to his own fault). H. de Lubac justly remarks¹ that the adventure of the modern West's reaction and response to Buddhism (as an outstanding example) "is one of the lines which mark the face of this Europe" (and let us add: America) "where we live; one of the components which, in explaining it, help to explain us to ourselves. *Far from being complete, it has we believe just entered upon its essential phase*".²

¹ *op. cit.*, cf. *Avant-Propos*.

² Italics mine.

When in the first quarter of the 19th century “Oriental” or “Asiatic” Societies and Chairs for Sanskrit had been founded in the main intellectual capitals of Continental Europe and England, and H. T. Colebrooke, making in India a magnificent collection of Sanskrit manuscripts, had published his painstaking *Essays on the Philosophy of the Hindus* (1827),¹ the plunge into Eastern, particularly Indian, philosophy and religion could be made. Despite the gratuitous and fantastic opinions of many writers, who knew more by hearsay and desultory, avid reading than by proper study, Schopenhauer, who has contributed so much by his utterances and sympathies to the rise of the “Indian vogue” in Europe, sensed the atmosphere when he prophesied that the influence of Sanskrit on our time would be no less profound than the Renaissance of classical languages in the 15th century. In these first decades of the 19th century many highly gifted men of various Western nationalities deployed a feverish activity and curiosity, gripped by the mysterious, fascinating nature of a still largely unknown country. The exhilarating breeze of thrilling adventure inspired their undertakings, often combined with great hardships. There was a real feeling of a new “springtime”, of crossing a threshold into a new and wider mansion of humanity. Among many other men of great stature, it is undoubtedly, in regard to the exploration of Buddhism, the towering figure of Eugène Burnouf (d. 1852) that must be mentioned as the greatest pioneer explorer, by his mastery of Sanskrit and Pali and by his achievement as a lone pathfinder through the “hopeless labyrinth” of Buddhist literature.

It lies, however, outside the scope of this chapter to give a survey of the scientific discovery of the Eastern cultures and religions from their own sources. Our purpose is to focus on the reaction and responses of the West to the new worlds of thought and feeling they met along the avenues opened up by the scholars or by some other means.²

¹ In these *Essays* was also included one on the “heretical sects” (Jainism, Buddhism) described by Colebrooke on the pattern of the refutations by Hindu philosophers.

² The literature on the influence and attraction Buddhism has exercised on the West is very vast. Except in some cases, expressly indicated, we refer as a rule to H. de Lubac’s book (1955); H. W. Schomerus’ short study, which is undeservedly forgotten, entitled: *Buddha und Christus*, 1931; and Christmas Humphreys’ *Pelican Book on Buddhism*, 1954. All three, rich in information, confine themselves mainly to the literature published in their own languages.