Chapter Six

THE CULTURAL RESPONSE OF THE EAST TO THE WESTERN INVASION: HINDU INDIA

THE world of Indian religion and culture is entirely different from the Islamic world. The Hindu Kush is not only a geographical frontier but a spiritual one. Alexander the Great, however much the Mediterranean world to which he belonged reveals many secret channels of similarity, had this feeling of entering a different and alien world when he crossed this small threshold of India. He was right and will remain so, notwithstanding all the present results of comparative and cultural philosophy.

India—and this is true also for Chinese and Japanese civilizations—has developed a pattern of life and a symphony of emphases and orientations that has its unique type of self-identity. It is therefore one of the three great representative patterns of civilization which have grown out of a definite fundamental option—to use a happy expression of Denis de Rougemont's; the other two being the Chinese and the Western. The Islamic and Japanese religio-cultural worlds are of course also crystallized round fundamental options, but not in an equal degree of pristine, inexplicable originality. This is not meant as an option for "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet"; but it means remaining aware, in our time in which East and West do and must necessarily meet, of the requirement that the endeavours rightly made to discover our common humanity behind each other's faces should never make us overlook the reality of deep difference, which this irreducible uniqueness of "fundamental option" implies. Historical, psychological, climatological mental explanations

can all make it more understandable, but cannot really explain it.[1]

THE MULTIFORM PATTERN OF HINDUISM

Hinduism in its entirety as a religion gives the impression of a huge, impenetrable jungle. Multiform in the extreme, it presents itself as the *sanatadharma*, the everlasting pattern of life, as well by this self-same multiformity as by unchangeable, ever identical essence hidden in all these forms. The famous French Indianist Auguste Barth, writing in 1879,[2] formulated its indefinable character inimitably in the words:

> Nowhere else can one observe, in conditions so favourable, the successive transformation and, as it were, the destiny of a polytheistic conception. Among all the similar conceptions, no other has shown itself so lively and flexible as this one, so gifted at reclothing the most diverse forms, so ingenious at reconciling all extremes from the most refined idealism to the lowest idolatry; none has known so well how to repair its losses; none has possessed to such a high degree the faculty of ceaselessly producing new sects, indeed great religions; and, by a perpetual self-renewal process, of resisting all the agencies of destruction, whether internal attrition or aggression from without.

And in order to show why Hinduism is by nature refractory to any reduction of all its manifestations to a systematic unity, he says:

> They constitute a floating mass of beliefs, opinions, customs, practices, religious and social ideas in which one does discover a certain common basis and a pronounced family likeness, but from which it would be very difficult to extract a real definition. It is in fact almost impossible to state exactly what Hinduism is, where it begins and where it ends.

[1] S. Lévi, *L'Inde et le Monde*, p. 90, is vexed by the enigma and leans to climate as a decisive factor: "The civilization of India, alone, has grown up between the Tropic and the Equator in reaction against a nature which exceeds normal limits."

[2] See *Oeuvres de Auguste Barth*, Vol. I, pp. 11, 140. The only point at which to-day, after nearly a century more of research into religions, Barth shows that he is inevitably situation- and time-conditioned is when he chooses the "polytheistic conception" as the matrix of this multiformity in Hinduism. In this case we are looking, to-day, in a different direction.

On this background it becomes understandable why in Hinduism there is no binding doctrinal unity. Westerners are usually baffled on hearing that in this *religion* one can be an ardent monotheist, a convinced polytheist, a simple idol-worshipper, an atheist, an absolute idealistic philosopher for whom only attribute-less, transcendent Being is the sole Real, and be all this at the same time, and nevertheless be a full-sized Hindu. The freedom in regard to religious notions is entirely unlimited. A more radical "tolerance" is unthinkable. The authority of customs and of social rules of conduct, within the caste group to which one belongs by birth, is however equally unlimited. "Tolerance" has here, in principle and in practice, no place. The polymorphous *sanatadharma* serves the needs of the primitive village religionists, of those who live in the sphere of popular polytheist religion, of the various groups of sectarians (Vishnu, Shiva, etc.); of those who see the many gods as one and who belong to the sincere, fervent Pietists (*bhaktas*); also of the philosophically-minded, whose standard philosophy is mostly (certainly not necessarily) the classic non-duality (*advaita*) monism. There is no real cleavage between the "intellectuals" and the "people" (hoi polloi). In short, it is really all-comprehensive.

Graf Keyserling, who was fascinated by this whole spectacle, has in his well-known *Reisetagebuch eines Philosophen* ("Travel Diary of a Philosopher") found not only striking formulations but also words of enthusiastic praise. He says, e.g. in regard to what, speaking in Hindu terms, is perfectly legitimate crude village-religion: "The simpler and rougher a man is, the coarser and less spiritual must be the pictures held up to attract his attention." "Only the gifted man attains to God through knowledge." Keyserling in a happy term defines Hinduism as a metaphysical pragmatism, on account of which the eventual form and substance (he uses the expression "*Da- und Sosein*") of one's religion is always good and, consequently, change of religion is always wrong. Every form of religion, he continues, and of devotion, is good in so far as it helps towards realizing oneself. His conclusion is:[1] "India and not Europe has produced the deepest metaphysics and most complete religious system to date."

[1] *Reisetagebuch*, I, p. 358.

This pronouncement certainly renders exactly the deep conviction of India about herself. It touches the all-pervading, elemental apprehension of life, man and the world, which characterizes India and is very important to keep in mind when trying to understand the manifold reaction and response to the Western Invasion in the 19th century. This is, as can be expected from a people so gifted as the Indians and a religious-cultural history of such complexity and longevity, a thrilling story.

INDIA MEETS THE WEST

India met the beginnings of the Western Invasion in the first quarter of the 19th century, at a time when she was in a stage of decadence and stagnation; a tradition-bound society, living in self-isolation and sterile introversion. A static "mediaeval" world, hiding its treasures and secrets. The last truly great religious personality, whose religious epic has become practically a Bible for the people and who exercised a vitalizing influence, especially in the North, was Tulsi Das, who lived and worked in the first half of the 17th century.

It is well to keep this in mind in order to understand the first reactions and responses from the Hindu side, as well as the reactions of prominent Westerners who lived and worked in India, mainly missionaries and gifted agents of the East India Company, which was practically the British Government in India. The Hindus had for centuries been accustomed to living under foreign rule. The British Era meant for them a change of masters, and, all things considered, not a bad change. For the Indian Muslims it had an entirely different meaning. From being the super-class in Indian society they became subject, and equal subjects with the Hindus. As we have seen in the preceding chapter, the reaction of the Muslim to British influence and rule was the sullenness of resentment. The Hindus, already by nature versatile and adaptable, had acquired a great aptitude for adjustment to changing conditions. With characteristic swiftness and subtlety they began, in spite of the wrong-headed conservatism of their social system, to react to the new possibilities, especially to openings in Government service, which involved a certain amount of contact and making acquaintance with Western knowledge,

ideas and habits, necessary to fill the posts that became open to them.

The contrasting attitude of the Muslim group strengthened this tendency. The self-willed isolation and exclusion of the Muslims, caused by their political melancholy and religious exclusivism and suspicion, opened the way still more for the Hindus. They did not have the inhibitions of the Muslims through remembrance of lost political glory or through that typically Muslim consciousness of well-defined principles and contrasts. Their innate Protean adaptability helped them, apart from the new economic opportunities in status, to respond eagerly to the educational policy of the British.[1] They showed, in the words of a writer of those days, a great avidity to drink "the wine of the new learning".

Dazzled and intoxicated as they were by this wine, suddenly offered after a period of national decline and stagnation, two things happened. First, new horizons were opened to which many Hindus with their great native intelligence responded warmly. Second, in the light of this "New Learning" and the explosive new ideas it contained, Hindu society looked ugly and there were many courageous men who recognized this with dismay. Christian Missions, with their merciless and often inconsiderate criticism of the degraded religious practices and the blighting power of many religiously sanctioned social customs and institutions, aroused the indignant protest of such great champions of Reform as Ram Mohan Roy, but seen in historical perspective they stimulated the awakening from a dismal cultural and spiritual coma and contributed by their work to the opening up of new horizons.

[1] It is very instructive to compare the attitude of Muslims and Hindus to this policy. In the heated debate between "Occidentalists" and "Orientalists", leading Hindus stood in the fore-front of the "Occidentalists" (the Western orientation of education). Ram Mohan Roy, the most brilliant and determined Hindu leader, maintained even in 1824 the uselessness of Sanskrit and affiliated branches of knowledge. Quite opposite was the Muslim attitude. When Lord Bentinck (1835) decreed the famous Educational Resolution in which the Western orientation in education was definitely adopted, 8,000 Muslim notables of Calcutta presented a petition for the rescinding of the Resolution. They not only felt this decision of the Government quite naturally as a degradation of Eastern learning, but—and this is the most characteristic feature in the petition—they suspected that the Government in choosing this way aimed at the Christianization of India. I have treated this whole story and the rise and growth of the Hindu-Muslim conflict in the 19th and 20th centuries in a study called: "De tegenstelling tusschen Hindoes en Mohammedanen in India", to be found in *Koloniale Studiën*, 18th volume, 1934.