

## The Influence of the East on Religion by R. Herber Newton

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### Publisher's Note

This pamphlet is a reprint from the *Mind* and we thank Dr R Heber, D.D., Newton, of East Hampton, Long Island, New York, USA for his kind permission to do so. Dr. Newton is *not* a member of the Theosophical Society but his views are very sane and interesting and we would like to see this pamphlet widely circulated. Copies for free circulation are available.

THE "gate that looketh toward the East", of which Ezekiel wrote, has been to many others than the prophet the observatory whence is seen the oncoming glory of the Eternal. A very old and very widespread instinct is that which leads man, on entering his chamber for communion with God, to throw open the window whose prospect is toward the East. Orientation has a deeper meaning than our ecclesiastics fancy. The noblest form of Nature-worship was that of which we may find traces on many a hill of England, where our fathers gathered in the dawn of day to hail with sacred song the coming of the Sun. As needs must be in a cosmos - a beautiful order, the core and centre of whose physical system is a moral order - the cosmical truth enshrines an ethical truth, and the symbolism of Nature becomes a sacrament of Spirit. Of the Light which is "on-coming into the world", as S. John says, it is true that "His goings forth are as the morning" — the pathway of Divine progress in humanity, an ascension of the Sun of Righteousness toward the zenith. The history of man repeats the story of the natural order, and "Westward the star of Empire takes its way"; civilisation and religion arising in the East, and moving thence in successive effluences toward the West. Whither the Spirit of the Eternal led the soul of Ezekiel, thither the same Divine Spirit has led other human souls in different lands and at different critical epochs, to watch for signs of fresh light; and they who have come down to their fellows with the glow of a new day on their faces have, whether in Babylon, or Rome, or London, told the same story; "He brought me to the gate, even the gate that looketh toward the East; and behold the glory of the God of Israel came from the way in the East.

Once more, if men cry to the Watchers: "Watchmen, what of the night?" the answer floats down: "The morning cometh"; and the wise, in a profounder ritual than that of men, face toward the East.

That a new flood of spiritual life must be soon due, he feels sure who has marked well the movements of the tides of history and guessed the cycles of the stars. The ebbing of the tide of materialistic speculation is felt beneath the feet of them that reason well; and the sucking undertow of the social waters, in a new wave of ethical enthusiasm, a fresh force of justice and brotherliness, is heard by those whose ears are close to the sands of the shore. Whence is the new tide coming on whose floods we are to float across the shallows of the age? In every direction we see in society the evils of an excessive development of the tendencies which are peculiar to our Western civilisation. The elements which form our strength in the realms of thought, of feeling, and of action, have been pushed beyond the golden mean; and the result is, as in all disproportion, error and evil. If our human therapeutics at all shadow the divine dealings, we

might expect the correction of these disorders by the supply of the elements lacking in our own blood. The qualities which the Western world lacks, the Eastern world holds in excess. We might then look for the ordering by Providence of an infusion of the essence of the East; the balm of Gilead for the wounds of England, the cordial of India for the tire of America.

Singular, indeed, to him who believes in no Destiny that shapes our ends, is the re-discovery of the East by our century; the bringing of its mystic lands from out the darkness; the establishing of close connections between the two hemispheres; the unsealing of the sacred books of the East for the study of the West.

Some years ago, when, being younger, I thought in my folly that I held a private patent of expectation, I heard one of our wisest teachers of religion in this city give me back my own dream, saying to me: "I look for a new religious impulse from the East." And then it seemed that everyone who thought was saying with Tyndall: "Light will come again from the East." We find ourselves, as by common instinct, standing in "the gate that looketh toward the East," where rise, on our impatient eyes the streakings of a new and holy light, and we whisper: "Behold the glory of the God of Israel cometh from the way of the East."

Some over-hasty souls, like our famous American Theosophists, not content to stand with the seer in the gate, have gone out into the East, to find there the religion of the future. They are finding, I fancy, that which a friend told me he had found for himself; when, driven away from traditional Christianity, he had in the old world mastered the Pāli tongue, that he might search among the sources of Buddhism for the higher light, only to come home again with the conclusion that, at least, there was nothing there higher than the truth which is found in Christianity. What we may reasonably expect is not the coming of a new religion from the East to supersede Christianity, but the coming of the influences from the East to renew and restore Christianity. Our lamps burn low, but we need not cast them away; we should simply open them to the sacred oil from the East, which the High Priest of the Temple is even now pouring in upon the wicks — when, lo! a new flame in which we shall see and rejoice. Those who heard the dark-skinned Hindû Mozoomdar speak and pray in our churches, or who have more lately heard Swami Vivekananda or Swami Abhedananda lecture must feel, as in no other way they could have felt, that if our Western faith had aught to give them and their countrymen, as we all believe, they have somewhat to give us in return.

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The Eastern's thought of Nature may greatly help us of the West. Do we think, in our egotism, that we have for the first time in the history of man studied Nature? We may draw a just rebuke from our rapidly increasing knowledge of those wise men who, in Egypt, and Chaldea, and India, observed and pondered, and laid the foundations of the noblest of our physical knowledges. If we fancy that we alone of the children of earth have divined the secret order of creation, we may learn humility as we acquaint ourselves with the wonderful divination by which they anticipated the greatest of our later guesses. And so coming to appreciate the patient brooding thought over the problem of the cosmic, the slow, sure following of the trail of Nature on the part of these dark-skinned sages, we shall be prepared to allow, more modestly, that there may be something in their view of Nature which we may need, as we know that there is much in our view of Nature which they need. Our Western mind is analytic, logical; breaks up Nature into bits; conquers in the sign of the test-tube and the crucible; deals with phenomena; pursues

the sequences of physical processes; familiarises itself with the action of forces and the methods of laws; and, in so doing, does wisely and wins our wonderfully widening knowledge. But our very development of power is, as always, in the parsimony of Mother Nature, at the cost of other powers. Contrast our study of Nature with that of the son of the East. His mind is sympathetic, constructive, intuitive; he sees the unity under all diversity; the whole in every part. He is fascinated by the conception of the substance, the reality, lying under all phenomena. He passes without interest through the surface-fields of law and force, and faces this eternal mystery of being, on which all phenomena of existence play, as the bubbles thrown up for a moment upon the surface of the everlasting stream. We call him an idealist, a dreamer. He calls us sense-blinded materialists. His limitations are plain to us, and our limitations are as plain to him. Each sees through one eye. Man needs both eyes focusing on Nature to get the true light. We may learn to credit his vision as revealing an essential part of truth, as we find his vision to be that of the profoundest thinkers of our Western world, from Plato down to Hegel. We will never probably turn away from our scientific vision. That is true, as far as it goes. But we may open the other eye and correct its one-sidedness, and see that which it alone failed to reveal. Then all our present miserable notion of a conflict of science and religion will vanish like a ghost of the night. It will be seen to be a spectre of the twilight. The East knew of our theory of Evolution centuries before Spencer established it scientifically, or Darwin applied it to man's story, or Huxley bore down with it so aggressively on faith. It was the cardinal doctrine of the sages of India. But those calm minds, sitting beneath the palm trees by the sacred rivers, thought through the problem in the outer meshes of which our hastier minds are too easily detained. Their vision of Evolution only deepened the mystery of the universe. The fact of an orderly and gradual development of life, through the stages of creation, held nothing of the secret of life itself. Such a process could be only the manner of the unfolding of the 'somewhat' charged with all these marvelous potencies. That 'somewhat' — the substance or reality standing under all phenomena — was the Infinite Mystery, to know which was to know the secret of being. No investigation of the materialist could discover the secret of being which gave substance to our mental forms in their subtle phantasmagoria. Mind alone, which pondered over this mystery, could image its being. It was mind, intelligence.

Out of thought's interior sphere

These wonders rose in upper air.

Confirmed idealist as was the Hindû philosopher (I speak of the dominant school of philosophy, that which permanently characterised India), he could speak of the material world only in terms of mind. Evolution became the doctrine of the progressive unfolding of life through the action of an Infinite and Eternal Spirit. It was, it is, the history of the Divine Being. It was, it is, a religion. And this Eastern wisdom our Western world cannot reject as an alien conception when not alone idealist philosophers like Berkeley hold it, but *savants* like Huxley confess that, as between the two conceptions of idealism and materialism, they would have to take the first theory. True, they talk of a possible third conception, the conciliation of both; of which it will be time to speak when the shadow of any such thought looms above the horizon.

Our Western world, gone daft over the fascinating theory of evolution, and fancying that in it is solved the problem of being, in terms of matter, may turn to the sages who had divined our pet theory centuries ago, and to whom it had become a translucent symbol of the Divine Presence and action. Our own poets who drink of the Castalian springs of Western philosophy are those who, like Emerson, are interpreting for us the real significance of our scientific theories and showing us how to worship where we only thought to study. Standing in the gate that looketh to the East, these seers behold the glory of the Lord coming upon

our wisdom of Nature by the way of the East gate.

— II —

This insistent idealism in philosophy, which the East may have again to teach the world, lays the basis for religion, deep, and broad, and firm. Resting upon this basis, the Eastern mind, through its peculiar spiritual sense, opens the world in which the soul of man communes with God. The Oriental seems to have developed a sense which is lacking in most of us children of the West. One sees about him in our society hosts of men, excellent, admirable, noble, upright and conscientious, faithful in every relation of life, who appear to have no sense by which to apprehend God. He is an abstraction to them — a reality in which they themselves believe, but of whom they have no personal consciousness; with whom they feel themselves to stand in no actual relation. The story of spiritual experiences comes to them in an unknown tongue. Their conclusion concerning such matters is fairly expressed in the common account they give of those who speak of such experiences — “You are peculiarly constituted; you are spiritually organised.” Now, the Eastern, whatever else he possesses, has the sense of God. Religion’s home is in the East. Its power there is almost tyrannous. That power never fails. It ebbs, but rises again, fresh and inexhaustible. The Eastern walks amid the forms of force of which we talk so glibly, and feels God. In the sun and the wind, in the river’s ceaseless flow and the waving of the forest’s tops, he is sensible of an awful yet gracious Presence. He hears whispers, and catches the light of glorious garments trailing by. As in Macdonald’s charming story, he is ever surprising the gods at play. Those who have listened to Babu Mozoomdar must have felt a singularly sweet devoutness breathing through the rich eloquence of the speaker. Without pre-arrangement, as though it were to him the natural conclusion of his talk with man, he is wont to finish his address with a simple, child-like prayer to “Our Father who art in heaven”. At family prayer, in my house one morning, sitting after the custom of his people, in his chair, he talked to God in such a way as hushed our hearts into a new feeling of the Presence of Him in whom we live and move and have our being. There were no petitions, but an exhalation, so to speak, of his consciousness of the All-Father, an aroma in the spiritual atmosphere, as when the morning sun draws from the flowers of the field the fresh fragrance in which their life streams up toward its source. I realised then what I had been told of him: “He lives in God.” The words of Chunder Sen concerning the Hindû gift of Yoga, the faculty of apprehending and communing with the Divine Presence came to my mind; and I perceived how truly there was active in this race a spiritual sense which seems numbed and dormant in our Western peoples. That evening I turned, as he had asked me to do, to the Upanishats, “where,” said he, “breathes the early and deep Hindû consciousness of God” — and I knew afresh what a revelation there may be to us, who have so much religion and so little living sense of God. As the Hindû spirit breathes in our spirits, we, too, shall find quickening in us this blessed sense of God. So was I brought to “the gate that looketh toward the East,” and I beheld “the glory of the God of Israel coming from the way of the East.”

— III —

The East will help us, through its insistent idealism and its deep abiding sense of God, to a freshened feeling of the true nature of man. As with Nature so with man, our Western thought tends to play upon the surface of the problem. We are intensely busy with our studies of man’s nature, and are learning wonderful things about his organisation, truths full of value to the race, for the lack of which the world has lain so long in sickness of body and in superstition of mind. We are coming to know the elements out of which we are composed, the laws of their combination, and the methods of the working of the mysterious forces which fashion us. The human anatomy is laid bare to our eyes, and the wonders of physiology are

coming out into the light. The puzzle of the convolutions of gray tissue which make the brain of man is fascinating our wise men, and they cherish swelling hopes of yet guessing the secret of the relations of mind to matter. We have traced so far the broken links of the story of the coming into being of the human race that we have already titled the future history of man, one day to be written, and announced duly to the world the forthcoming book of Genesis. We have analysed the moral nature of man and resolved it into its several elements. We have shown how our ideals of goodness have slowly formed through man's social necessities and clothed themselves with impressive sanctions, until at length they stand so awfully sacred in the inner shrine of the soul, that we bow before them in worship. And having done all this invaluable work, we think that we have solved the problem of man; so that he can be expressed in a chemical formula and labeled in the Museum of Natural History. Having done all which, the East smiles in acquiescence, her eye, as in a vision, fixed upon a 'somewhat' within this chemical compound, and whispers: "And God [the Eternal] formed man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." That which we miss in the focus of our microscopes, which casts no weight in our balances and slips away in the fires of our crucibles, the Eastern discerns, even as he sees through Nature to its substance, and he knows that man is, in essence — spirit, mind. He will quite humbly receive our Western knowledge concerning the physical constitution and the historic development of man, but then he will return to us that deeper wisdom which reveals the inner and essential being of man. Our crude fancies about an automaton-man will disappear, in the acute sense quickened within us of that spiritual being which is free to will and responsible for its action, as becometh the child made in the image of the Eternal Spirit, the Father of our human spirits. There will come to us the true significance and the deep reality of that ancient belief that in the human spirit speaketh the Divine Spirit; that, as our Hindû-American seer tells us, we are "always spoken to from behind"; that truth is, as the ancient Hebrew said, the voice of God. Inspiration will then be no theory of the scholar, but the consciousness of the faithful soul. So again we find that "the glory of the Lord" cometh by the way of the gate whose prospect is toward the East.

— IV —

The East will help us to a better view of Christ. Whatever the object of the vision, the image of it on the human retina will be largely determined by the nature and condition of the retina itself. Christianity has seen Christ, not as he really was, but as he had appeared to its eyes. Our Western eyes have seen him westernised, distorted in the lenses of Grecian speculation, of Roman institutionalism, of Medieval scholasticism. To German and Scotchman, and Englishman and American, he necessarily shapes himself as best as possible upon their natures.

How grievously the image of Jesus has suffered in this transference, scholars know right well. The image of Jesus which the Christian Church has framed in its theologies is far from a counterpart of the original and real Jesus, so far, that, were most Christians carried back into the age when He was upon earth, and set down in His own Galilee, He might pass them, never known or recognised. How can we ever get back to that far-off age and see Him as He was? Simply by getting over into the position of those who today reproduce the life and spirit of His day. In the East, time is not. Today is as yesterday, and our century as eighteen centuries earlier. As the East now reads Him, coming to Him in a free and natural manner — that we may be sure is the nearest approach which we can get to a true image of Him. For Jesus was an Oriental, and only by the Orientals can He be interpreted. A foretaste of what is before us in this recovered view of Jesus we have already, in that touching book of our Hindû preacher, *The Oriental Christ*. At every touch of the Eastern hand the familiar incidents take on fresh lights, and the

story stands forth in a new and vivid realism. Renan told us, years ago, that in Judea the story of Jesus became strangely real, and, writing in the East, his book became, with all its faults a revelation of the actual man who walked the land of Galilee eighteen centuries ago. We shall gain a new sense of the veritable actuality of the Man of Nazareth, and we shall never doubt that He was an historic personality. We shall form, as by a new sense opened in us, a perception of what was really the meaning of the words of Him who spake as never man spake. Luther, disputing with Zwingli, his finger on the text — “This is my body” — closing thus every appeal of the reason against the dogma of transubstantiation, will no longer be possible, when the East reads for us those words. The poetic utterance of the consciousness of the man who felt Himself so completely one with the Father that His own consciousness was, as it were, the consciousness of God, will cease to be hard prosaic proposition for the metaphysic of the schoolmen, and will become the plastic, palpitating words of the Eastern Mystic whose thoughts are feelings, and whose words must therefore needs be poems. When the Oriental comes to them he knows what was meant by them, and we must learn of him. We may thus lose the form which we thought was our Christ — though without the Eastern touch that is fading fast enough from our eyes — but we shall gain a figure which we shall know to be the true Christ. And that will be an image sweet and gracious, holy and, in the deepest sense, divine, before which, in new passion of reasonable reverence, we shall bow most worshipfully, and from whose touch our lives shall flame anew in sacred passion of most loyal love.

One cannot read that *Oriental Christ* without a fresh sense of Jesus and of His good-spell upon the soul.

Thus I believe, Jesus will come again to us of the Western World, and we shall all follow Him with new abandonment of love. Let us each ask, as this Hindû asked: “Not that I might speculate about Jesus but that I might learn to do as He bids me.” Thus as we stand in “the gate that looketh forward the East” the “glory of the Lord” cometh “from the way of the East”.

— V —

The East will help us in many ways to better general conditions for the religious life. Our occupation amid external activities keeps us aloof from the deep inner life of the spirit. The multiplicity of outward affairs distracts our minds and exhausts our energies. We are too hurried to “wait upon the Lord”. God may be in the wayside bush speaking to us, but what can we hear as we thunder past in the ‘Lightning Express’? How shall we catch the low whispers of the still, small voice, amid the babel of tongues of the Exchange? How, in our chronic tire, shall we climb the heights of contemplation, where our tryst is appointed with the Eternal? We need somewhat of the peace and quiet of those calm Easterns, who have time to pray and leisure to think, and who know the way within the innermost recesses of the soul, where is the Holy Place of God.

We are oppressed with the multitudinous miseries of earth, the wretchedness and woe of this weary world, and we turn the forces of our religious life out upon the work of bettering society. We cannot do otherwise in our Western world, to which Providence has given the powers for the righting of these disorders. The establishment of the divine order in human society, the creation of the proper social conditions for the kingdom of God, is of co-equal importance with the inspiration of the inner personal life. But our ideals suffer in this constraint of work that is upon us. Philanthropy and piety would together form a heavenly pattern for our aspirations. But philanthropy without piety, philanthropy as a substitute for

inward experience, for the life hid in God — this can but fashion a maimed and mutilated image. We measure men by their charities, not by their holiness, and find the notes of the true church in the number of their benevolent societies, rather than in the saintly beauty of the lives which they nourish. We condone the faults of him who subscribes freely to our schemes of reform. We gauge the river of life proceeding from beneath the throne of God by the power which it supplies to our mills of reform, and value it because of the wheels it turns. Thus doing comes to dispense with being. We think Christ came to found a society for the organisation of soup-houses and hospitals. Ah! we greatly need the spirit of those child-like peoples, who stand confused amid the whirl of our vast social mechanism, valuing somewhat lightly our great charities and our brilliant reforms, and dreaming that the kingdom of God is to come without observation; that outward institutions and laws are to crystallise upon a society breathing the spirit of brotherliness and love; that the world is to be lifted into righteousness under the spell of lives all luminously good, and saved from sin by the touch of men in whom is felt the living God. Our Western races are called to the development of earth's resources, and, under the ancient command, to master the earth and "have dominion over it". Thus, as we see, is the wealth produced in the division of which all may ultimately share, and the store-houses filled from which the poorest may draw in the time of need. Only thus is society so far advanced already beyond the civilisation of the East that the famines, which there sweep off human beings like flies at the touch of frost, are impossible in Christendom. But in thus being "not slothful in business" we find it hard to be "serving the Lord"; and before we are aware of it we find our devotedness to business has become a real devotion, a worship of the Power once known as Mammon, whose altars are in our homes and our exchanges, and on which we offer — ourselves. As every careful, honest student of society sees and tells us, our real religion is a worship of wealth; from which fearful apostasy our wise men see not well how to rescue us; but from which infidelity we would soon be delivered if the higher Eastern spirit breathed upon us its simplicity, its indifference to material possessions, its disregard of riches and the goods that they can buy, its respect for poverty, its sublime upliftedness above the hunger that eats the heart out of our life, its ideals which seem to us as those of some other world, where the question "What is he worth?" cannot be answered by inspecting a man's bank-book, or opening his coupon-box in the Safe Deposit. The political economy which expresses our ideals of civilisation finds it hard to fit into its order that Son of Man who had "not where to lay His head". His ideals it finds unreasonable; His aspirations wild, quixotic dreams. We are told that it is impossible to live a Christian life, that to pattern our lives upon the Master's story would be to undo Society. And thus, our finest impulses and our most generous aspirations, we are taught to smother; and our received theories rally to the aid of our native selfishness, until the language of our Communion Consecration becomes a bitter mockery, which I am sure the disciples of Christ often shrink from repeating — "And here we offer and present unto Thee O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto Thee." An Order of 'The Consecrated' as been formed in the Brahmô Samâj; an order whose members, continuing in their daily vocations, consecrate most of their gains to God. As we Christians hear of Hindûs doing this, we may well look around us in the Christian Church, to see where are 'the consecrated' among us who follow the Christ.

Oh! for one generation of the climate of the soul in which were born all the great enthusiasms of self-consecration; the contempt of the world which filled the desert with anchorites and the monasteries with men vowed to poverty; the hunger for sacrifice which inspired a buddha, and the greater than a Buddha — Jesus Christ, our Lord. We could safely trust our Western world to set bounds of moderation to this passion of devotion, to keep the altar on which these heavenly fires were lighted from burning up. But oh! for the flame coming down from heaven upon our altars!