

The Religions of the East

Presumably on the principle that we value what we have less than what we have not, the Indian religions are today exercising a fascination. Christianity, despite its sublime spirituality and programme, its massively solid philosophy, its completely documented history and its two thousand years of victorious battle with the ever-beating waves of new intellectualisms and religions, is virtually despised and multitudes are gaping towards the East in a respect for its religions about which they know little or nothing.

The popular press is of course responsible for this. It is full of gurus who apparently are superior creatures with wonderful treasures to impart. But when you analyse carefully what the gurus say and do, you realise that there is a screw loose somewhere. What is being depicted is not authentic religion as we conceive it. It is for the most part built up of pure sensationalism.

What is being thus presented to us seems to be everything else but true religion. It is a philosophy of self-annihilation. It is a complicated system of mind and body

control which does not appear to exist for the glory of God but for other objectives which are not sufficiently evident to us.

In my young days a gallant attempt was made to foist Hinduism off on the Western peoples. Mrs Annie Besant was a principal figure in that enterprise and well-known persons associated themselves with it, such as W.B. Yeats, George Russell and others in this country. It is pathetic to look back and see how unreceptive those clever minds were of Catholicism and how anxious they were to be deluded by an un-plausible fake. Mrs Besant found in an Indian village a young boy called Krishnamurti, whom she declared to be the seat of divine revelation. She sponsored him, gave him an advanced education, and then introduced him to the select circles in which his message would be appreciated. On the strength of her recommendation alone, aided of course by unlimited human folly, he took on like the proverbial hot cakes and a triumphant world progress was entered upon. Its nature can be gauged from the numerous but less spectacular imitations which are still a feature. The loss of its religious substance by Protestantism has left multitudes hungry for religious experience. Being unwilling to find it in Catholicism, they provide a market for adventurers of all kinds who in regular succession pass across the world's stage, each one making his little splash and then fading out.

Krishnamurti became a vogue among the religion-less English-speaking peoples. He moved as a prophet from one camp-fire gathering to another. His words were received as divine pronouncements. Their nature set the pattern for the kindred utterances which prevail in guru circles today. They were without meaning to the ordinary mind. Their purpose was not to be understood but to impress, and the

multitudes who listened were suitably awed. It did look as if a new world force had come into religion.

But in the midst of his popularity and success Krishnamurti threw off the mask and declared that he was no inspired teacher. He disclaimed any divine gifts. He insisted that he was just a young fellow who wanted an ordinary life and a good time. This act of candour created a profound disillusion. He disappeared from the public view like the meteor which traverses the sky. But quite recently I saw in the magazine *Time* that he is still doing a bit of lecturing in the United States.

I would say that the episode of Krishnamurti was a salutary lesson for the intelligentsia who were then involved. Nowadays it is a less erudite clientele which is being attracted by the gurus. Recently two English girls aged twenty were brought to me. They were in training with a guru and were being sent out to India to complete it. They were Catholics; they stated that they had abandoned its practice because it had no uplift for them. They were bored by the Mass; it contained no stimulation or excitement. I seized on this and gave them a little account of what the Mass really is. I endeavoured to explain how much out of place in it would variety items be. They declared their amazement at what I had told them and said they would think things over. A week later they returned and said they had decided to resume practice of their religion; and one had changed her mind about going to India. The other went, has returned, and we await her report.

Now what would they learn in India? That would depend on the guru who would be in charge of them. If they were capable of treading the loftier paths, they might be taught the full doctrine – something to this effect.

Listen. I give you its essence, taken from the recognised textbooks: Objects, thoughts, memory do not exist. The only thing that exists is consciousness; objects taking rise in consciousness are only an illusion. There is nothing outside us; all is within. Thoughts can never have any connection between them. A past thought has ceased to exist. There is no thought in an action and no action in a thought. And so forth in the same impossible strain.

I suppose I have no need to tell you that real life could not be lived on those lines. It *is* possible for individuals to get together and talk in a mumbo-jumbo language which they have concocted and to understand each other's clever use of the whole business. But it has no relation to ordinary life. For example, imagine a technician engaged in assembling one of those exceedingly complicated mechanisms of today. He has to realise that all those minute items are really there, and to remember precisely his instructions as to how to put them together. His thoughts and his actions must be carefully co-ordinated or else he is going to make a terrible mess of his work. For it depends on thought, memory, action and the connection between them. Those things are very real.

It is all very well for those gurus to lecture dazed audiences about non-existence and the like but even they have then to turn aside to common life where food, shelter and money are real objects, and where thought, action and memory are all-powerful and cannot be banished.

So we may be certain that those two simple young girls would not be treated to that jargon except for the purpose of overwhelming them and putting them in their place.

Nor would they, I expect, be introduced to the worship of the multiple Indian gods, such as Vishnu, Brahma, Siva, Krishna, each with his own female divinity attached. And

yet these would represent the real Indian religion which affects the mass of the people.

The statues, pictorial representations and popular literature on the subject of those divinities are of a forbidding character and show them as bloodthirsty, cruel, disreputable and generally un-godlike. There is nothing attributed to them which could be regarded as enlightening or elevating; there is not a trace of the paternal or anything calculated to attract love, let alone the sort of love that Jesus generates in his followers. The final impression given is that they are regarded as powerful spirits who have to be propitiated. Then favours can be charmed out of them.

It would be impossible to work out what all that really means to the people. It varies from place to place and appears to comprise every possible phase of thought and religious practice. It would run the gamut from abstruse philosophies to pure superstition and idolatries, linked to a peculiar extent to systematic immorality.

Even though the term Hinduism envelops all that, one could not correctly describe it as a single religion. Elsewhere I have expressed the opinion that it is impossible to imagine that comprehensive and indefinite conglomeration as being capable of standing up to modern alleged civilised thought with its shallow brilliance, its cynicism and materialism. Expose Hinduism to the direct effects of that atmosphere and it would collapse. With the rapid spread of education over India, it will only take another fifty years to bring that to pass. There will be a chaos if there is nothing to take its place. Most assuredly there is nothing capable of playing that role but Catholicism. And that is the very thing those two young girls were going to put away from them because they knew nothing about it.

I imagine that what those girls would be initiated into would be meditation and yoga.

Meditation is a word which is constantly used in connection with those Indian religions. Special reference must be made to it because its use is misleading. It is not meant to denote the sort of meditation which we would have in mind. We mean meditation to be the consideration of the doctrines of our Faith and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, deepening our knowledge of them – all this leading to the basic acts of prayer, adoration, thanksgiving, reparation and petition.

But one cannot find anything of that kind in the 'meditation' prescribed by that Indian mysticism. In fact what would there be to meditate on? It cannot be said that the persons and doctrines comprised would be edifying or constructive to dwell upon. What is in question is not meditation but something which appears to be the very opposite. It is in fact an emptying of the mind; an effort to reduce it to an inactivity, a quietism, a sort of non-existence.

It must be understood that the final end proposed by that form of religion is radically different from ours. Our idea is that we really only begin to live fully in the next world; that the present life is only a probation and a form of apprenticeship for that true life with God; that Heaven will be a supremely blissful experience, a state of intensely vivid living surpassing any possible imagining of it. But those among the Hindus, and there are many, who live holy and mortified lives do not have that sort of expectation. They are promised something which to our way of thinking is a disillusion; that is an immortal, sleep-like condition in which the faculties have no play, and in which it is not easy to

discern anything that can be called eternal happiness. The mortifications and pious exercises are a repudiation of the body, but only to prepare it for its final state of oblivion or virtual death. As a very brilliant investigator, Arthur Koestler, condenses it: There is no loving Father, no welcoming Saviour, no smiling Virgin, waiting for one in that Hindu heaven.

In all that there is to the Christian an inadequacy, a disproportion, a negativity which is too much to accept. It is in fact an anti-climax which would constitute its own denial. All that is held out to us as the reward for the most self-sacrificing, pure and devoted life is a mere escape. We are not blotted out but only reduced to a condition which is not too far removed from it. Their ideal seems to resemble the coma in which persons who have suffered from brain damage live out their lives – only that it lasts forever. For the Christian mind that would form a very terrible contemplation. As a sequel to our probation, or as a reward for a holy life, or as an ideal expectation, or as an explanation of the destiny of the soul, one turns from it in sheer mental revolt.

I repeat therefore that 'meditation' means among them approximately the opposite of what we understand by it. It is vital that we see this because it is their frequent use of that word which is the utterly misleading circumstance. It causes us to think that their form of religion has a likeness to ours which is *not* the case.

I pass on to yoga which is the system of practices and discipline supposed to lead on to the eliminating of self and the merging into that dreamland – but without the dreams. Yoga is very old but it has undergone many transitions and would depend greatly on the guru who would be administering it. It is aimed at giving the mind

mastery over the body. It prescribes a vast number of exercises which must be endlessly repeated and which certainly bring about amazing functions of the body, though what this has to do with pure religion is quite another matter.

The eight principal rules of orthodox yoga are:

1. Avoiding of human company, sex and violence.
2. Dietary observances.
3. Postures – eighty-four being specified.
4. Controlling breathing.
5. Withdrawal from self.
6. Concentration.
7. Meditation.
8. Samadhi, which is the ultimate withdrawal of the mind from activity.

Yoga begins with various cleansing processes. The stomach must be cleaned by drastic means, for example: The inducement of vomiting by artificial means, one of which is the swallowing of a cloth about four inches wide and twenty-two and a half feet long, then drawing it out. This is strongly recommended and it has to be practised for months to bring to perfection.

The particulars of some items of this disciplinary system are of such an appalling nature to our minds that I have to refer you to the official yoga presentations. I simply cannot bring myself to describe them. If I did, it would bring dissent from you. The book by Arthur Koestler, entitled the *Lotus and the Robot*, gives many pages to them and it does not conceal the revolting details, all of which could fairly be characterised as unnatural. Extraordinary proficiency is gained by incessant practice, and nature can be said to be turned back on itself.

To bring out the incongruity of it all, just imagine St Teresa of Avila or St Francis of Assisi or any saint engaged for hours every day on such beastly antics as an approach to God!

The stated purpose is the bringing of the mind under control. As a general objective that is praiseworthy and it is a principal aim of Catholicism. But the yoga methods are very different to ours. Yoga concentrates on the body for the alleged purpose of dominating the mind and then reducing it to the desired state of a mere consciousness without thought or activity.

On the other hand, Catholicism seeks to control the body in order to save it from excesses and sin, while at the same time employing the mind in ways that are advantageous, especially directing it towards true meditation. In one respect the logic of Catholicism and yoga coincide. Each has the purpose of conditioning the mind on earth for its eternal destiny. But that future as contemplated by yoga is the dreamless sleep. That looked to by Catholicism is the Christian Heaven.

It seems to me that the psychology of yoga is basically flawed. Surely such a total concentration of the mind on the body is not correct tactics. Its effect can be no other than to make the man one-sidedly natural, and this would amount to animalising him. That inferior condition is then hardened into permanence by deliberately aiming at the elimination of mental activity. By reason of the pre-eminence of the mind in the man, this is an offence. Its enormity becomes the greater when we recall the unnatural and debasing exercises which are utilised. It is impossible to believe that these latter would not tend towards coarsening and even degrading the person.

Yoga makes the claim that its system promotes health and imparts supernatural powers. One Western investigator who devoted much of his life to a sympathetic and intense study of yoga makes this final judgement on that claim:

- Miracles, none transpired.
- Supernatural, not revealed.

But even if there are supernatural manifestations I would find it hard to think that they would be good. The method seems to be wrong in its objective, wrong in theory and wrong in its practice. It leaves itself open to the intervention of malign spirits. I would believe that if anything outside nature evidences itself, it is from that quarter it comes.

In any case where does religion enter into the ritual of yoga? Many Westerners who have practised it see only in it an advanced system of physical culture. When I was young I was familiar with one such method which called itself 'muscle control' and operated in that very way of intense concentration on the particular muscle, but of course without any pretence that it had anything to do with religion. The same would appear to be the rational basis of yoga but covered over with the veneer of Eastern mysticism. Moreover, the unnatural features of yoga should not have the effect of producing bodily health but the very opposite. How can it be supposed that real health and strength would proceed from such a violation of the natural functions and of the common rules of the body?

I sum up: Firstly, people scorn Catholicism but run inanely after that Eastern mysticism. It is another exemplification of the law that if the true is rejected, one falls victim to the false.

Secondly, that alleged mysticism contains a big bundle of anomalies and contradictions. It is supposed to be an elaborate preparation for immortality, but the immortality turns out to be little better than a deep sleep.

Thirdly, that preparation does not exercise the soul but the body. Of course it is explained that the real objective is the mind, and then the soul through the mind. But the mind is deliberately perverted to a crippled state and the soul is promised the same fate in eternity.

Fourthly, to glorify that paralysis of the mind, the word 'meditation' is deceptively used but it is a contradiction in terms. Meditation is activity not self-annihilation.

Fifthly, I would contend that the entire system is un-psychological. The deities do not inspire love nor afford proper example. The goal is not worthwhile. You can practice the programme and not see any religion in it. The practice itself is wrongly oriented.

Sixthly, the methods are at best only a drill and at worst disgusting.

Seventhly, the whole thing is so full of handles for objection and ridicule that – to use the vulgar phrase – it has not the chance of a snowball in Hell when Modernism begins to exercise full play in India, which I believe will happen in fifty years. Only Catholicism can stand up to that corrosive influence, but will it be given the chance? At least a most determined effort should be launched at once towards the utilising of that fifty years for the conversion of India. I would feel certain that the higher government authorities there, who are enlightened persons, see only too plainly the writing on the wall and would not oppose such an effort to Christianise their country.