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# INTRODUCTION

One of the most remarkable figures of recent times was Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, born in Sri Lanka in 1877 of a Tamil father and an English mother. He was educated in England but returned often to Sri Lanka where he founded the Ceylon Reform Movement of which he was the inaugural President. The Society dedicated itself to the preservation of traditional arts and crafts and to resisting "the thoughtless imitation of unsuitable European habits and customs." In 1905, mindful of the destructive consequences of European imperialism, Coomaraswamy wrote these prophetic words:

> Why do we not meet the wave of European civilization on equal terms? . . . Our Eastern civilization was here 2000 years ago; shall its spirit be broken utterly before the new commercialism of the West? Sometimes I think the Eastern spirit is not dead, but sleeping, and may yet play a greater part in the world's spiritual life.[1]

Coomaraswamy went on to become a peerless authority on Asian art and, in his later years, one of the most influential exponents of the perennial philosophy which informs the world's great traditions. Given that he belonged by nativity and temperament to both the East and the West, it is appropriate that we introduce this volume with some considerations taken from his writings.

In one of his essays Coomaraswamy refers to the "impotence and arrogance" implicit in the well-known refrain, "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." This proposition, he writes, is one "to which only the most abysmal ignorance and the deepest discouragement could have given rise."[2] As an art historian, philosopher, linguist, and hermeneutist, Coomaraswamy himself undertook a massive labor to dispel the West's "most abysmal ignorance" about Eastern traditions. The present volume moves through a terrain charted by such trail-breakers as Coomaraswamy and René Guénon,

[1] Manifesto of the Ceylon Reform Society, quoted in Roger Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 22.

[2] "The Pertinence of Philosophy," in Ananda Coomaraswamy, *What is Civilisation?* (Cambridge, UK: Golgonooza, 1989), p. 19.

the French metaphysician who, early in the last century, gave us the first authoritative European exegesis of some of the pivotal doctrines and texts of both India and China. In the half-century since their passing, various clichés about the East have circulated in the West, perhaps the most pervasive of these turning on the well-worn contrast of a "materialistic" West and a "spiritual" East—but let us not forget that clichés, no matter how facile, usually have some foundation. The contemporary debate about East and West is swarming on one side with advocates for Western-style "Progress," and on the other with those prone to romanticize the "East" as the last bastion of an ill-defined "spirituality." In order to dispel some of the confusion and the rhetorical fog which has accumulated around this subject, we can do no better than turn to Coomaraswamy and Guénon.

The now familiar tropes about "East" and "West" sometimes imply a series of immutable differences between essentialized geo-cultural monoliths. It is not always understood that the contrasts to which attention is so often drawn arise, largely, from the preservation of tradition in the East, and its destruction in the West. As Coomaraswamy remarks,

> "East and West" imports a cultural rather than a geographical antithesis: an opposition of the traditional or ordinary way of life that survives in the East to the modern and irregular way of life that now prevails in the West. It is because such an opposition as this could not have been felt before the Renaissance that we say that the problem is one that presents itself only accidentally in terms of geography; it is one of times much more than of places.[3]

If it indeed be the case, as Coomaraswamy and Guénon insisted, that the spiritual malady of the modern world is to be explained by its indifference or hostility to the lessons of tradition, then it follows that the East may have a vital role to perform in any remedy. As is clear from "Oriental Metaphysics," one of the opening essays in this collection, Guénon believed that it was only in the East that various sapiential traditions remained more or less intact. It was to these, particularly Advaita Vedanta as the fullest possible expression of metaphysical

[3] "East and West," in Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy* (Bedfont: Perennial Books, 1979), p. 80. See also Letter to Sidney Gulick, July 1943, in *Selected Letters of Ananda Coomaraswamy*, ed. Alvin Moore, Jr. and Rama P. Coomaraswamy (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 69.

doctrine, that the West must turn to recover its sense of timeless truths which have been obscured in modern times. Guénon also stressed that any traditional society, such as still survived in the East, is oriented to spiritual ends whilst any anti-traditional society, found everywhere in the modern West, is necessarily governed by values inimical to our spiritual welfare. T.S. Eliot somewhere remarked that the health of any civilization can be gauged by the number of saints it nurtures. We should be in no doubt that, whatever contaminations modernity might have brought to Asia in the last two centuries, the East preserves something of the spiritual effulgence which has characterized it since primordial times—one need only mention Paramahamsa Ramakrishna and Ramana Maharshi, to restrict ourselves to India and to leave aside the Tibetan adepts, Chinese sages, and Zen masters of the Far East.

It is important not to confuse the Eastward-looking stance of figures like Guénon and Coomaraswamy with the sentimental exoticism nowadays so much in vogue. Coomaraswamy reminds us that

> If Guénon wants the West to turn to Eastern metaphysics, it is not because they are Eastern but because this is metaphysics. If "Eastern" metaphysics differed from a "Western" metaphysics, one or the other would not be metaphysics.[4]

One of Guénon's translators made the same point in suggesting that if Guénon turns so often to the East it is because the West is in the position of the

> foolish virgins who, through the wandering of their attention in other directions, had allowed their lamps to go out; in order to rekindle the sacred fire, which in its essence is always the same wherever it may be burning, they must have recourse to the lamps still kept alight.[5]

In other words, a turn to the spiritual heritage of the East need not signal an abandonment of the West but might, rather, prefigure the recuperation of those riches in our own traditions which have been neglected but which can never truly be destroyed. It is sometimes only with the aid of traditions much less ravaged by the onslaughts of modernity that we can appreciate what lies closer to hand. Furthermore,

[4] "Eastern Wisdom and Western Knowledge," in *The Bugbear of Literacy*, pp. 72-73.

[5] Quoted in Gai Eaton, *The Richest Vein* (London: Faber & Faber, 1949), p. 199.

such a rediscovery will help us to understand that metaphysical wisdom, the *sophia perennis*, is indeed always fundamentally the same, albeit that the vestments in which it is clothed will vary from religion to religion. Again, recall the prescient words of Coomaraswamy:

> The only possible ground upon which an effective entente of East and West can be accomplished is that of the purely intellectual wisdom that is one and the same for all times and for all men, and is independent of all environmental idiosyncrasy.[6]

Somewhat paradoxically, the diversity of religious doctrines and practices only goes to prove the point. Properly understood, this multiplicity will be seen as a function of the diversity of mankind and of those manifold Revelations in which all traditions originate, each being attuned to the receptivities and affinities of the human collectivity in question. From each Divine dispensation—the descent of the Koran or the revelation of the Vedas, to choose an example from each hemisphere—issues a doctrine and a method. The doctrine provides an adequate but not exhaustive account of the nature of Reality, and the method marks out a spiritual way whereby, through an alchemy of the soul, we may conform ourselves with the one Reality (by whatever name it might be called). The inter-relationships of the world's integral religious traditions, and the interplay of their esoteric and exoteric dimensions, was the principal concern of the third of the "great triumvirate" of twentieth century perennialists, Frithjof Schuon, another contributor to the volume at hand. Schuon's work ranges through the vast domain of religious forms from all parts of the globe, and he too has had a decisive role to play in bringing the spiritual heritage of the East within a Western purview.

The outlook espoused by Guénon, Coomaraswamy, and Schuon, and by many of the other contributors to this volume—an outlook still very much alive in parts of the East—stands at right angles to the prevailing ideologies of the modern West. One illustration must suffice. For the modern mind, shaped by a profane scientism, the words "matter" and "reality" are often more or less synonymous. Furthermore, in common parlance the word "reality" is generally without gradations; the notion that something might be "relatively

[6] "The Pertinence of Philosophy," p. 19.

real," and that this kind of "reality" is as nothing in the face of the Absolute, is more or less incomprehensible to the modern mind. In the East, and for anyone who understands the first thing about Tradition, nothing could be more absurd. To take as Real that ambiguous tissue of fugitive relativities which constitutes the spatio-temporal world is indeed to be ensnared in *maya*!

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The present volume is structured in four parts. In the first will be found commanding essays by the three figures already mentioned, each throwing into sharp relief the fundamental principles which must be kept in view in any consideration of the spiritual intercourse between East and West. Without such principles to guide us we are likely to succumb to foolishness of one kind or another. From a myriad of possibilities might be adduced two examples of the sort of thing one has here in mind. The corrosive lucubrations of "post-colonial" academics who argue that the entire East-West encounter is to be explained in terms of an "Orient" that is a fabric of ideological fictions to confirm the West's sense of identity and to legitimize Western cultural and political superiority, exhibit the foolishness of deracinated intellectuals for whom the appalling slogan "nothing outside politics" has become a totalitarian rubric. On the other hand, we find another variety of foolishness in the credulous enthusiasm of Western seekers for self-styled Eastern "gurus" whose teachings, as often as not, are a farrago of half-understood doctrines, bizarre syncretisms, and modernistic prejudices, all festooned in a way most likely to seduce those who are understandably disillusioned with both the profane ideologies of modern Western societies and with what is often served up to them in the guise of "religion." The Gospel adage about figs and thistles has lost none of its point! Whitall Perry's essay in this section anatomizes the phenomena of the counterfeit spirituality to be encountered on all sides in the modern world. Also to be found in this section is the transcript of a talk on religious harmony by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, one of those Eastern luminaries whose vocation has included the "spiritualizing of politics," if one may so put it. Gandhi and Thich Nhat Hanh come readily to mind as other exemplars. In the West, Thomas Merton fulfilled something of the same function and it is appropriate that later in the anthology we should come across the Trappist's reflections on the Mahatma.

The second part of the anthology encompasses articles and excerpts which focus more directly on particular traditions, including Jainism and Pure Land Buddhism, here representing those several Eastern traditions of which the modern West still remains largely ignorant.

The third section presents a small sample of writings on Eastern expressive forms which have themselves been vehicles for a Truth which is essentially formless. Needless to say, these fragments can do no more than offer a tantalizing glimpse into the boundless treasure-house of Eastern iconography and symbolism. (Since the death of Ananda Coomaraswamy, no one has been more eminently qualified to elucidate these subjects than the late Titus Burckhardt whose essay on Hindu art opens this section.)

The last segment finds our contributors exploring a range of salient issues in the modern encounter of East and West, pointing up some of the lessons of which we are in the most urgent need. Here we find several figures who, in various ways, have helped to bring the doctrines and practices of Eastern traditions to the attention of the West, and who have been concerned with fostering a global community which respects differences but which affirms the spiritual vocation which is the patrimony of all humankind. Names such as Aldous Huxley, Thomas Merton, Gary Snyder, and Diana Eck will be familiar to readers who have already ventured into this territory. They provide a variety of perspectives on some of our central themes.

World Wisdom recently published *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions;* that book traced the story of the momentous Western engagement with Eastern spirituality. The present work is intended as a companion volume, allowing some of the figures who played a prominent part in that narrative to speak here in their own voices. (By way of an aside it should be noted that neither *Journeys East* nor this volume brings the world of Islam within its orbit, though from certain points of view that branch of the Abrahamic tree belongs as much to the Orient as to the Occident. Nor are these books concerned with the Asian reception of European ideas and influences.)

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Collected in this anthology, then, are the experiences and insights of a variety of people—poets, philosophers, monks, scholars, teachers, pilgrims—who have turned Eastwards in search of spiritual nourish-

ment and intellectual illumination. Amidst the destructive pathologies and the spiritual sterility of modernity, cutting through the profane din and clutter of modern life, here are the voices of men and women who not only searched but who found in the ancient well-springs of the East a sense of the spiritual destiny which alone confers the dignity, freedom, and responsibility of that human condition "hard to obtain." It is my hope that their writings may help each of us in our journey, by whichever path, towards that Light which is of neither East nor West.

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"Introduction" to Light from the East

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