

## **The Appeals of Asian Religion in Modern America: Myths and Realities**

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Today, the Asian religions are more visible in the United States than at any time in previous history. The signs of American interest are to be found everywhere. Serious bookstores throughout the country now almost universally reserve a section for Eastern religious books, and in larger cities there are shops that specialize almost entirely in Eastern spirituality. General works on Buddhism and Hinduism dominate, but there are also shelves devoted to Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, Vedanta, Yoga, and Taoism. The volumes displayed include the usual classics--*Upanishads*, *Bhagavad-Gita*, *Dhammapada*, *Analects of Confucius*, and *Tao Teh Ching*--but also more popular Western expositions such as Alan Watts's *The Way of Zen*, Christmas Humphreys' *The Wisdom of Buddhism*, Dwight Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible*, Nancy Wilson Ross's *Three Ways of Asian Wisdom*, and Christopher Isherwood's *Vedanta for the Western World*. The frequency with which one encounters works by D.T. Suzuki, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Surendranath Dasgupta emphasizes the crucial role Asian-born intermediaries have played in awakening Americans to the richness of the East's religious heritage. There are, of course, also such works as *Zen Made Easy*, *The Yoge of Golf*, and *The Tao of Physics* (the latter a very serious work) that testify to the American proclivity for simplification and adaptation of Eastern concepts to Western concerns.<sup>1</sup>

Courses on the Asian religions offered at many American colleges and

universities provide a second indication of contemporary interest. While still far from adequate, the attention paid to Asia generally in modern institutions of higher learning has never been higher. Where a generation ago only a few elite universities attempted to offer courses, today perhaps most American colleges and universities offer regular classes on Asian history, Asian literature, and Asian philosophy, as well as the Asian religious traditions. Though varying widely in their emphasis, most Christian colleges and seminaries also now focus considerable attention on Eastern spirituality, recognizing that future priests and ministers will have to confront the challenge of the Asian religions. At the highest level, scholarly sessions on the Eastern religions have become a regular feature of religious studies and Asian studies conferences. Almost certainly, there are more American scholars who specialize on the Asian religions today than in the entire two hundred years preceding.

At a more mundane level the growing America awareness of the Asian religions may be detected in the daily language. References to Eastern religious terms that would have been unintelligible a few years ago--karma, satori, guru, yin/yang, mantram, koan, dharma, ashram, zazen--have become part of the working vocabulary of educated people. Evidence of Asian impact may be discerned in many areas of popular culture, running the gamut from courses in Japanese flower arrangement and Chinese cooking to demonstrations of T'ai Chi and other Asian martial arts. Yoga and meditation classes at YMCAs and exercise studios have become as normal as swimming lessons and racket ball.

Finally, one can hardly ignore the Eastern teachers and the many Asian religious movements that have sprouted across the country. Astonishingly, one

may find a wider range and more forms of Asian religion in the United States today than in any single Asian country.<sup>2</sup> In the case of Hinduism, the well-known groups include the Vedanta Societies, International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Divine Life Society, Transcendental Meditation, Integral Yoga Institute, Divine Light Mission, Self-Realization Fellowship, and Ananda Marga Yoga Society. Most varieties of Mahayana Buddhism are also present, including Chinese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, and various schools of Japanese Buddhism--Jodo Shinshu, Nichiren Shoshu, Soto and Rinzai Zen; similarly, one will find groups practicing the various forms of Theravada Buddhism. Some idea of just how numerous Buddhist and groups have become may be had by glancing over the lengthy list of Asian organizations in J. Gordon Melton's recent *Encyclopedia of American Religions*.<sup>3</sup> When one recalls that Asian spokesmen for the Eastern religions only appeared in the United States for the first time in 1893, in conjunction with the Chicago World Parliament of Religions, one can appreciate the spectacular growth over less than a century. Never before have so many Americans been so deeply interested in so many varieties of Asian religion.

### **Common Misconceptions about Impact of Asian Religions**

If the increasing American interest in Eastern spirituality is difficult to miss, the nature and significance of the appeal of Asian religions in the United States has been frequently misunderstood. I would like to examine five common misunderstandings, or "myths" as I shall call them, which, it seems to me, have obscured understanding of the modern American impact of the Asian religions.

**Myth Number One:** *“American interest in Eastern spirituality is a post-World War II phenomenon; before 1945 the Asian religions were almost unknown in the United States.”*

Perhaps because every generation inescapably judges events with a presentist bias, the general public is prone to view interest in Asian religions as a modern phenomenon that has suddenly emerged only since World War II. In fact, the beginnings of American awareness may be traced at least as far back as the later eighteenth century, when one finds the first references to religions of the East in periodicals and the accounts of travelers. Interest rapidly widened and deepened during the course of the nineteenth century. If Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau deserve special credit for their early recognition of the importance and profundity of the Eastern religious traditions, they were not alone. No movement did more to focus attention on the Asian religions during the century than the Unitarians, who actively participated in practically every movement that revealed interest in Eastern thought. Though now largely overlooked, other nineteenth-century movements such as Free Religion and Theosophy also did much to widen popular American awareness of the Asian religions. As early as 1842 the American Oriental Society was formed, which encouraged more scholarly translations of the Eastern religious classics. Scholars such as Edward Salisbury, William Dwight Whitney, Charles Rockwell Lanman, Edward Washburn Hopkins, Maurice Bloomfield, Henry Clarke Warren, and William Woodville Rockhill emerged in the latter half of the century to give American Oriental scholarship increasing stature.<sup>4</sup>

The rising American interest in Asian religion climaxed in the 1880s and

1890s. Where Hinduism attracted most attention in the century's first half, Buddhism dominated interest in the latter half. The publication of Sir Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* in 1879, a poetic version of Buddha's life which sold over one million copies in the United States and Great Britain and went through eighty American editions, made Buddhism a popular sensation. Several Christian ministers complained that members of their congregations seemed to favor Buddha more than Jesus. However, the most dramatic event in focusing public attention on the Eastern religions was the World Parliament of Religions, held in 1893 in Chicago. A remarkable and unprecedented event, for the first time authentic Asian representatives presented their religious teachings to Americans directly. Prominent Asian participants included Anagarika Dharmapala, a Singhalese Buddhist who championed Buddhism and subsequently organized the Maha-Bodhi Society; Swami Vivekanand, who spoke for Hinduism and founded the first Vedanta Societies in the West; Soyen Shaku, who represented Zen Buddhism and subsequently dispatched his disciple D.T. Suzuki to America; and Protap Chandra Majumdar (better known in the West as Protap Chunder Mozoomdar), who represented the Hindu reform society known as the Brahmo Samaj. Obviously, the original American discovery of Asian religion occurred in the nineteenth century, not in the post-World War II period.

**Myth Number Two:** *"American interest in the Asian religions has been primarily limited to Beatniks, Hippies, and other rebellious young people on the fringes of society."*

In fact, large numbers of young people *were* attracted to Eastern thought

during the 1960s--which may explain such a conception--but one must understand that they were not alone, nor has such a pattern been characteristic of earlier periods. There have been Beatniks and rebels, but most Americans who have indicated interest in the Asian religions have been main-stream figures from a wide range of backgrounds and vocations. (Not their youth, but the level of their education seems to have been a key variable in their attraction to Eastern thought.) The most prominent enthusiasts have been highly successful writers and intellectuals who enjoyed wide acceptance, including acclaimed scientists such as British rationalist Joseph Priestley, who spent his last years in the United States; famous writers such as Emerson and Thoreau; well-known Unitarian ministers such as James Freeman Clarke and Moncure Conway; representatives of eminent families such as William Sturgis Bigelow and Percival Lowell; defenders of conservative values such as Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, and T.S. Eliot; and even an occasional Catholic priest such as Thomas Merton. (Of course, there have also been prominent loners and rebels, from Lafcadio Hearn in the nineteenth century to Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg in the more recent past.) If one must generalize, it is best to state that all kinds of Americans have indicated interest in Eastern spirituality: middle-aged and old people as well as the young, respected professionals as well as students, the wealthy as well as the poor, and descendants of oldline families as well as recent immigrants. As acquaintance with the Asian religions widens and an individual's preference of Eastern religions becomes more acceptable, the social and economic backgrounds of those Americans drawn to Eastern spirituality will ever more closely approximate mainstream movements.

**Myth Number Three:** *“Unfortunately, many, if not most, of the Eastern teachers who have propagated the Asian religions in America have been opportunists and charlatans who have exploited American ignorance; typically, the religious teachings presented have been so diluted and distorted as to misrepresent the true message.”*

An old stereotype that emerged before World War I,<sup>5</sup> the negative image of Asian teachers has been recently confirmed for many Americans by the huge publicity surrounding Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. A one-time Indian philosophy professor who founded the Rajneesh Foundation International, Rajneesh became notorious after moving the headquarters of his movement to the United States in 1981. Stories soon followed concerning his apparent fondness for expensive cars, including a fleet of almost one hundred Rolls-Royces given him by adoring disciples, as well as reports of unrestrained sexual conduct among his followers. Looking for the story that grabs attention, the American mass media regularly pounce on such allegations in their reports on Asian religion. Whether the charges made against him are well-founded or not, the bad publicity surrounding his activities has reinforced the image of the fraudulent Asian teacher.<sup>6</sup> In fact, my investigations suggest that almost all the Asian teachers who have appeared in the United States since the 1890s have been well-educated, spiritual men who have made great personal sacrifices in bringing Eastern religion to Western people. The Tibetan Buddhist monks who have recently appeared in the West, most of them highly trained spiritual men who have fled their native land in order to preserve their spiritual tradition, are representative of the high caliber of teachers past and present. In such areas as education and religious commitment, the average level of Asian

teachers who have come West has in all probability been higher than the teachers who have remained in their Asian homelands.

All religious traditions, of course, must confront the problem of renegade teachers who misrepresent and bring public discredit on their particular religion. If there have been occasional Hindu or Buddhist teachers who have exploited the credulity of American believers, the same may be said of Western-born Christian teachers, who have concealed their true motives while taking up the cross. Presumably, if one equates Hinduism with the allegations brought against a Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, one may with equal justification equate Christianity with the allegations directed at Jim and Tammy Bakker, founders of the PTL (Praise the Lord) electronic ministry empire, whose extravagant lifestyles and unseemly quarrels with other TV evangelists have been widely reported in the American mass media during the past year. To be fair, one should distinguish in all religions between the many reputable and few disreputable teachers, and should also recognize that because a particular teacher distorts the true Buddhist or Christian message that action in no way discredits the religion itself.

The closely related charge in Myth Number Three that the Asian teachings presented in the West are inauthentic may frequently be translated that Eastern concepts are being adapted too much to Western tastes. Though there are limits beyond which accommodation can go without distorting the teachings, it seems clear that Asian religious concepts and practices will have to be adjusted to Western preconceptions to achieve acceptance. Americans who become Buddhists should no more be expected to cease being American in their cultural and personal attitudes than Japanese Buddhists are expected to

cease being Japanese. Everyone recognizes that there are differences between Japanese, Tibetan, and Chinese Buddhism; one should not, therefore, be shocked when Buddhism reveals special peculiarities as it develops in the United States.

**Myth Number Four:** *“The fundamental teaching of all Asian religions is profoundly pessimistic, based on the common belief that one must turn away from the world.”*

The statement, which articulates one of the most widespread Western assumptions, includes at least two misconceptions. The first misunderstanding is that all Asian religions are essentially the same. Such an assumption often pervades discussions of differences between “the East” and “the West,” a juxtaposition that blurs over major internal differences in both Western and Eastern societies. In the early nineteenth century when knowledge of the Asian religions was still very fragmentary, such a simplification was understandable; however, it is much less forgivable in the later twentieth century when much more information is available. No one who has studied Hinduism could possibly argue that its teachings and practices are identical with Confucianism, or, to take another example, that though both have flourished in Japan, Buddhism and Shintoism may be said to offer the same message. One of the first results of acquaintance with Asia is the recognition of very marked differences among the major Asian societies. Few literate people in the West today would accept the view that Westerners confront the world from one viewpoint; it is surely time that the same perspective be adopted toward the differing societies of the East.

The second misconception is the notion that the Asian religions universally preach a pessimistic doctrine. The idea seems to have first emerged in the West in the early nineteenth century, encouraged by a misinterpretation of the Buddhist concept of nirvana. Discussing the doctrine of *anatta*, early Western scholars concluded that Buddhism not only rejected the existence of an unchanging self (*atman*), but that it was atheistic and that it called upon its adherents to reject the world.<sup>7</sup> During the course of the century the conception seems somehow to have been generalized to Asian religions generally. In the 1930s Albert Schweitzer extended the charge of pessimism to Hinduism in his well-known *Indian Thought and its Development*.

Such a misconception might be compared to the assertion that because it emphasizes man's sinfulness, Christianity's message is pessimistic. If a Christian apologist would strongly deny such a claim, insisting that recognition of man's sinfulness is, in fact, a positive step toward achieving salvation, so a Buddhist might equally insist that acceptance of the doctrine of *anatta* and the Noble Truth of Suffering (*dukkha*) represent positive steps on the path to liberation. Particular doctrines may be pessimistic, while the larger message remains profoundly optimistic. The point is even more clear in the case of other Asian traditions such as Confucianism. If from an ultimate perspective, Hinduism and Buddhism do, indeed, emphasize the unreality of the temporal world, Confucianism clearly focuses on ethical growth and human action in the temporal world. Our conclusion is that the Asian religions differ from one another in fundamental ways and that their messages combine both pessimistic and optimistic elements

While dealing with the subject of differences between East and West, it is

well to consider a related “myth” widespread among Asian writers. (Obviously, the tendency to embrace myths is not restricted to the West.) I refer to the frequent contention that the West is materialistic, while the East is spiritual. No formulation of the differences between the Occidental and Oriental worlds has achieved wider currency, a juxtaposition one finds coming from the mouths of ordinary citizens as well as and in the writings of systematic philosophers. Swami Vivekananda, the powerful champion of Neo-Vedantism at the Parliament of Religions, did much to give such a conception currency.<sup>8</sup> Of the Western countries, the United States has particularly been identified as the supreme example and ultimate exhibit of Western materialism. (As Japan challenges Western societies for economic leadership, one may expect--and, indeed, already finds--that similar materialistic charges will be brought against an Eastern country. One wonders whether the conception of a spiritual East vs. material West can survive such a development.) Proponents of such a view argue that, by contrast to the West, the peoples of the East have always placed spiritual concerns, and above all the search for enlightenment, above material desires.

Even brief contact with the respective societies will indicate the serious distortion entailed by such a juxtaposition. It is certainly true that materialism has played a large role in the West, and that Western peoples have expended huge efforts acquiring, producing, and consuming material goods. However, the West has also produced its share of sages, saints, and scholars who have placed matters of the mind and spirit above things of the body. To come back to the United States, Americans have certainly been materialistic, but they have also been idealists. Outside commentators have repeatedly observed that,

compared to other Western societies, religion has been extremely important to most Americans. If the United States has been known throughout the world for its rich resources and wealth, it has also been notable for its philanthropy and generosity toward others. Spiritual movements have figured very prominently in the history of the United States from the time of the early Puritans.

If one quickly discovers that there is a spiritual West, even brief contact with Asian societies leaves little doubt that there is also a materialistic East. The desire for wealth, power, and pleasure pervade the histories of Asia, and great empires, warfare, and the search for material goods have figured as prominently in the history of the East as of the West. India has produced great spiritual masterpieces such as the *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad-Gita*, but also expressions of deep sexual preoccupation in the *Kama Sutra* and the erotic sculptures at Khajuraho. To be sure, there are real differences in attitude toward the spiritual and material realms among contemporary Eastern and Western peoples, but many of the differences may be better explained by the particular stage of modernization and industrialization achieved than by inherent spiritual differences. To a person of religious perspective, the practices and beliefs of pre-modern, traditional societies are likely to seem more spiritual than those of modern societies. Finally, it seems clear that the distinction between a Spiritual East and Material West is a stereotype that has done more to obscure than extend our understanding of differences between cultures.

**Myth Number Five:** *"The Eastern religions are exotic and un-American."*

It may be well to speak of Reverend Sun Myung Moon and the Unification

Church immediately, since controversies surrounding his American work have had much to do with creating such a misconception. As in the case of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, sensational media reports have created an almost hysterical American attitude toward the “Moonies” and their founder. Much of the public discussion has centered on charges that Reverend Moon had “brain-washed” his American followers. Frightened by his success, “deprogrammers” such as Ted Patrick organized movements to kidnap Moonie converts, in order to break the spell of Moon’s teachings.<sup>9</sup> The sweeping charges brought against Moon are relevant here because of the widespread tendency of American commentators to identify him as an Eastern religious teacher. Educated as a Presbyterian and a believer in messianism, one might make a better case that he and his movement represent a Korean expression of Christianity. Claiming to have experienced a vision at the age of sixteen in which Jesus informed him that he had been chosen to restore the kingdom, Moon is regarded by many of his followers as the Messiah. Indeed, the similarities between the Unification Church and, say, the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints seem far closer than to Hinduism or Buddhism. Though there are also basic differences, both Moonies and Mormons strongly emphasize the family, marriage, patriotism, and a strong missionary zeal.

The conception of the Asian religions as somehow un-American represents a strange notion in a nation made up of immigrant peoples from nearly every country in the world, who have transplanted nearly every variety of religion known. The question comes down to the relative unfamiliarity of Asian religions for most Americans. Considered objectively, one wonders why, for example, the teachings of Vedanta or Zen Buddhism are any more exotic

than those of Christianity? Considered from the outside, Christianity might be described as a religion that teaches its adherents that God took human form two thousand years ago as a Hebrew teacher named Jesus who claimed to be the son of God; that he was crucified on a cross but arose from the dead after three days; and finally, that the same God-man will return to earth in the future to rule for one thousand years. And what is an outsider to make of Holy Communion, a ceremony, many Christians hold, in which Jesus is literally present in body and blood as the worshipper eats the water and drinks the wine? Seen from a somewhat broader perspective, Hindu and Buddhist groups in contemporary America will seem no more exotic than Christians--only less familiar. As they become more familiar to more Americans, the Asian religions will appear neither exotic nor un-American.

### **Reasons for the Appeal of Asian Religion**

It is important to understand why the Asian religions are today achieving unprecedented attention in the West. A number of observers have suggested--it seems to with some correctness--that it not so much the attractions of the Eastern religions as declining appeals of the West's religions that explain the modern phenomenon. In my own research on the history of one important Hindu movement (to be published as *Vedanta for the West: The Ramakrishna Movement in America*, a volume in Indiana University Press's new "Religion in North America" series), Western converts repeatedly explained their attraction to Hinduism as the result of their disenchantment and alienation from conventional Christianity. Most seem to have been unchurched at the time of their original encounter with Asian religion. Interestingly, a sizeable number of

converts to Vedanta testified that their acquaintance with a non-Western religion had helped restore and increased their appreciation of Christianity. At the same time, one should not exaggerate the decline of Christianity in the United States, since losses in membership among older, mainstream churches have been balanced by the dramatic growth of new charismatic and fundamentalist churches.

If some converts have undoubtedly turned to Eastern spirituality on the rebound from disenchantment with Western religion, most Americans who have indicated appreciation of the Eastern traditions have emphasized the Asian religions' positive attractions. Four claims concerning the appeals of Eastern spirituality are frequently advanced:

(1) **Emphasis on direct experience.** One of the greatest attractions is the Eastern religions' strong emphasis on first-hand experience. The claim is advanced that where Western religions tend to emphasize doctrine, the Eastern traditions give first priority to religious experience. In the West confessions of faith and codifications of doctrine define true religious belief, while in Asia everything is subordinated to knowing God. Another way of putting the difference is that the Asian traditions give higher priority than the West to a mystical approach and the goal of reaching beyond intellectual abstractions and theology to know God directly. Obviously, such a claim should not be pushed too far, as one finds mystics and mystical groups in the West as well as in the East.

(2) **Methods of spiritual growth.** A second appeal frequently mentioned by Westerners attracted to Asian religion is that the Eastern traditions offer specific methods adapted to individual differences which one may follow to

know God. By contrast, it is claimed, Western churches rely excessively on more formal, standardized methods. In Asian religion one may choose among various forms of yoga, meditation, mantras, and other disciplines which best suit one's individual need. Even more important, the Eastern traditions insist upon the necessity of a personal teacher or guru to guide one's spiritual practice. Sizeable numbers of Westerners apparently perceive modern churches, particularly in the cities, as too impersonal. Hungry for personal contact and a more individualized religion, such restless souls are naturally drawn to the one-on-one relationship offered by the Eastern traditions.

(3) **Emphasis on toleration.** A third attraction almost universally emphasized by Western followers is the broad spirit of tolerance found in the Asian religions. Hinduism is most often mentioned in this respect, hailed for its affirmation that all religions provide valid paths to God, with one's particular preference depending upon personal background. Hindu apologists note that while Christianity claims to be the only true religion, followers of Hinduism accept Christianity's place among true religions. Jesus, Buddha, and other founders of the great religions are all honored as avatars who renewed the religious spirit of their age. (The attitude obviously varies a good deal from group to group. The Vedanta Societies, for example, have been much more sympathetic in their view of other religions than the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.) The attitude of tolerance has not been restricted to Hindus. For centuries before the 1949 Communist revolution, the Chinese followed not one, but three religions--Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. In the West most Asian religious groups emphasize that one need not abandon Christianity to benefit from Eastern methods. Thus, one may meditate, practice

yoga, and read the Asian religious classics and still remain a Christian.

Western critics have countered that, in fact, Asian societies also reveal a long record of intolerance--including bloody conflicts between Hindus and Moslems, drawn-out struggles between Buddhists and Confucians, and doctrinaire insistence on conformity of belief. It is difficult to deny that, sadly, all societies have, indeed, engaged in religious wars and persecution. Presumably, in the same way that the Christian apologist dismisses atrocities committed during the Crusades and the religious wars of the Reformation as inconsistent with the true spirit of Christianity, the defender of Asian religion would explain parallel events in the history of Hinduism or Buddhism as distortions of the tradition's true teaching.

(4) **Attitude toward nature.** Still again, the claim is advanced that the view of nature one finds in the Eastern religions is better suited to the world we live in than the dominant Western view. Some claim that the Asian perspective is much more "ecological" than the Western perspective. Proponents of such a view argue that, beginning with Bible, the Western tradition has emphasized human dominion over nature and all forms of lower life. Nature is approached in utilitarian terms. By contrast, the Eastern traditions emphasize man's oneness with nature. A frequently cited example is the Jainist who sweeps the path before him as he walks in order that he not accidentally step on an insect. At a more mundane level, the claim is sometimes linked to a defense of vegetarianism, which has become almost fashionable in certain Western circles. If the usual Western justification of a vegetarian diet is that it offers more healthful nourishment, the injunction against taking the life of animals is also advanced.

## The Future

The growing popularity of the Asian religions in the West has not gone unnoticed. In the century's first decades several alarmed writers darkly warned that Western civilization might even be undermined if significant numbers of Western people opted for Eastern spirituality. Adopting the language of war, a number spoke of an "Eastern invasion."<sup>10</sup> Attempting to project the long range significance of the Asian religions on Western societies, and particularly the United States, three possible scenarios may be considered:

(1) **Birth of a new religión.** The most far-reaching is the suggestion that a religious revolution is underway in which Christianity and other Western belief systems are being challenged and increasingly penetrated by Eastern conceptions, pointing toward the future emergence of a new religious outlook combining elements from East and West. The analogy is drawn to the Hellenistic era when new cults focusing on Egyptian and Middle Eastern gods--including Isis, Mithra, Cybele, and a strange Jewish prophet named Jesus--flooded the ancient Mediterranean world. Arnold Toynbee, who attempted to discover the underlying pattern of history in his massive ten-volume *A Study of History*, moved toward such a position in his latter years, arguing that the world's major religions--Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam particularly--were converging to create a new synthesis.<sup>11</sup> The result would be the emergence of a universal, syncretistic religion deeply indebted to Asian religion.

(2) **Rebirth of superstition.** Western critics of the vogue of Asian religions have countered with a very different view: namely, that the surge of

popular Western interest in Eastern spirituality in recent decades represents one manifestation of a surprising return to the irrational. No longer able to believe in traditional Christianity but unable to face the world without the emotional security of religious belief, twentieth-century people are turning for answers to the occult--to astrology, spiritualism, mysticism, witchcraft--and Oriental religions. To those who champion science and rationalism, an occult revival is horrifying, representing a rejection of the hard-won gains made during the eras of the scientific revolution and Enlightenment. Interestingly, those who see a return to superstition agree with the argument that a religious revolution is occurring, but they insist that the thrust is negative and backward-looking rather than positive and forward-looking.

(3) **A religious fad.** One other possibility must be considered. There are numerous Western observers who argue that the recent upsurge of interest in Asian religions is little more than a fad, which will soon pass away. Advocates of this view emphasize that whatever attention the Eastern religions have attracted may be explained by such factors as the novelty and exotic flavor of Eastern conceptions, the mystery surrounding swamis and yogis, and the mass media's insatiable need for new material to titillate its audiences. Fads come and go, and this Oriental infatuation will also soon dissipate--like such earlier nineteenth-century fads as hydropathy, phrenology, and table-rapping. In fact, it seems clear that American interest in Eastern spirituality has recently declined somewhat, after reaching a high point of intensity during the 1960s.

In conclusion, the growth of Western interest in the Asian religions suggests three future possibilities: the dawn of a new religious consciousness, the revival of occultism, or the appearance of a temporary fad. Which seems

most likely?<sup>12</sup> The last possibility is easiest to dismiss on the basis of the earlier historical record. I say this with some confidence, since I have spent a good part of my adult life tracing early American interest in Asian religions, discovering that the first stirrings of interest go back at least two centuries and awareness steadily expanded during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On the other hand, possibilities #1 and #2 deserve the most careful consideration. My personal opinion is that both explanations are critical in understanding the present and future appeals of the Asian religions. Hungering for belief, many twentieth-century Americans are searching for meaning, and good numbers are turning to occultism as well as Eastern spirituality. At the same time, as Americans become better acquainted with the profundities of the Asian religions, it seems likely that their religious outlook will be broadened and transmuted. If such a transformation occurs, the influence of the religions of the East will for the most part be judged as positive.

### Footnotes

1. Arthur E. Christy (ed.), *The Asian Legacy and American Life* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), originally published in 1942, first examined the broad impact of Asia upon American culture. More recent surveys of American interest in the Asian religions are Dale Riepe, *The Philosophy of India and its Impact on American Thought* (Springfield, III.: Charles C. Thomas, 1970) and Robert S. Ellwood, Jr., *Alternative Altars: Unconventional and Eastern Spirituality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

2. For Buddhist groups, see Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (Boulder, Colo.: Shambhala, 1981) and

Charles S. Prebish, *American Buddhism* (North Scituate, Mass.: Duxbury Press, 1979). Though flawed, Wendell Thomas' *Hinduism Invades America* (New York: Beacon Press, 1930) remains the only survey of American Hinduism.

3. J. Gordon Melton (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 2 vols. (Wilmington, North Carolina: McGrath Publishing Co., 1978), II, 355–86 and II, 393–437. A second edition has just appeared.

4. See the author's *The oriental Religions and American Thought: Nineteenth-Century Explorations* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981).

5. See Mabel Potter Daggett, "The Heathen Invasion," *Hampton-Columbian Magazin*, 27 (Oct.1911), 399–411, a key article which sparked a series of sensational attacks.

6. For a detailed, recent account of Rajneesh and his movement, see Frances Fitzgerald's excellent "A Reporter at Large: Rajneeshpuram," *The New Yorker*, 62 (Sept. 22& 29, 1986), 46–96 & 83–125.

7. See Guy R. Welbon, *Buddhist Nirvana and its Western Interpreters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

8. Ursula King, "Indian Spirituality, Western Materialism: An Image and its Function in the Reinterpretation of Modern Hinduism," *Social Action* (New Delhi), 28 (Jan.-Mar. 1978), 62–86.

9. David G. Bromley & Anson D. Shupe, Jr., "*Moonies*" in *America: Cult, Church, and Crusade* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1979).

10. Even scholarly works such as Wendell Thomas' *Hinduism Invades America* adopted such inflammatory language.

11. See particularly Arnold Toynbee, *An Historian's Approach to Religion* (New York: Oxford University, 1956).

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12. The reader may wish to compare two other quite different assessments: Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969) and Harvey Cox, *Turning East: The Promise and Peril of the New Orientalism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1977).

(This paper will appear in an American journal.)