

William J. Brazill

NINEVEH AND NIRVANA: EUROPEAN INTELLECTUALS AND THE EAST IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

SHORTLY AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR ended in Europe, a leading Chinese intellectual, Liang Ch'i-ch'ao, began more insistently to urge the people of China to develop a native nationalism and not to imitate the West, since the West had shown its failure as a civilization: the West was sick from spiritual famine because of its exclusive devotion to materialism. Western learning, he argued, could not alleviate the spiritual famine because it was founded on devotion to matter. Only Eastern learning, founded on spirit, could meet the challenge of materialism.

Liang's view of the division between East and West as the dichotomy between spirit and matter was not new in Chinese thought — the mandarins had long argued that distinction. What was new was that an increasing number of European intellectuals after the World War came, independently, to the same conclusion, and to the belief that the only hope for the West was to accept the East, with the humility of a penitent, as a spiritual guide. Gone indeed was the inner confidence in Western Civilization, its values and its works, that prompted Tennyson's assured pronouncement in 1842, "Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay."

No one will deny that there has been among European intellectuals in our time a widespread loss of faith in the foundations and future of Western Civilization. The words "despair", "anxiety", "decline", and "decay" have punctuated the thought and expression of European writers almost as sombre symbols of the very malaise they dreaded. When future historians come to write the history of our part of the twentieth century, they will, doubtless, be impressed by the sense of the permanent apocalypse in which Western intellectuals have dwelt since the First World War, the sense of decline and defeat, the impending end of things. And a significant part of the apocalypse has been the intellectual opening to the East, the turn to the East as a source of spiritual replenishment for European man. The fascination that the East has had for European intellectuals in the past four decades is one of the more important features of Western history. And some explanation for that fas-

cination must be found if we are to hope to discover any meaning in our history.

The distinguished Indian historian, K. M. Panikkar, has suggested that the prodigious impact of the West on modern Asia has had the concomitant, though little-noticed, consequence of a significant influence of Asian thought in the West. Eastern literature, religious experience, and philosophy have become popular with the educated public. There has been "a penetration of European thought by Oriental influences", he submits, "which future historians may consider to be of some significance." Perhaps it is time that Western historians began to appraise that influence.

To appraise "the East" in twentieth-century European thought is, of course, a formidable task that would require a full discussion of the varieties of individual response, the nuances, the private visions. But it is possible to determine, within the scope of this brief essay, a striking pattern to the views taken of the East by European intellectuals, a pattern of general response within which to view the individual thinkers.

About halfway through the twentieth century there appeared a series of popular books that suggested a mood of despair: *1984*, *Mind at the End of its Tether*, *Our Age of Unreason*, *The Age of Longing*, *The Age of Anxiety*, *Brave New World*, *The Twenty-fifth Hour*, *The Eighth Day of the Week*, among others. The titles varied, but the theme was generally the same: Western Civilization has come to an end, having succumbed to the forces of materialism, technology, and mass society; having lost all spiritual values; having precipitated—through the self-violence of two suicidal civil wars—its own end; above all, lacking the inner resources to create its civilization anew. The death of Western Civilization came, in these works, from within, from the demise of Western man's spiritual values at the same time as the rapid advancement of his technical and material power. Thus, according to the argument of these books, we have been faced with the death of God—indeed, with the death of all the surrogate gods created for us in the nineteenth century in the form of progress, humanism, and philosophy—precisely at a time when our technical advances—measured in megatons, sub-atomic particles, and overkill—most need to be tempered with spiritual values. Thus, the future projected for us in these works is a future without belief, a future in which humanity will increasingly succumb to techniques, to mindless submission, to totalitarian systems, to life without spirit, without solitude, without contemplation.

The First World War was the first manifestation—though clearly not

the cause—of the suicide of Western Civilization for those intellectuals who have dwelt in the permanent apocalypse. Shortly before the end of the war, Oswald Spengler published his *Decline of the West*, proclaiming that every event in the present was simply “the prelude of a future . . . with which the history of West-European mankind will be definitely closed”. The popularity of his work persisted while many others arrived at similarly dolorous conclusions. In 1920 the Czech playwright, Karel Capek, staged in his *R.U.R.* an expressionist nightmare in which civilization was destroyed by its own machines in a frenzy of technological revolt. Hermann Hesse, the Nobel Prize-winning German author, was particularly concerned in the aftermath of the war with the decadence of the West and reflected that concern in many of his works, depicting a Europe that had, as he wrote, “fallen finally into a deep spiritual devastation”. And it was then, Arnold Toynbee tells us, that he began to ask, for the first time, what had gone wrong with Western Civilization in the new century with its “welter of war and wickedness”.

The sense of growing despair continued among the intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s as social problems, economic collapse, and military aggression only confounded the spiritual confusion. T. S. Eliot’s “wasteland” became the accepted image that portrayed for European intellectuals the barren visits of their civilization. The growing despair was sharpened by the insistence that unless material society were informed with spiritual values the decline would lead to death. The Second World War and its aftermath seemed proof enough. But by then the Cassandras had grown exhausted and were content to whimper on the grave of Western Civilization, telling us we had reached the twenty-fifth hour, the eighth day of the week when it was too late. For, as Albert Schweitzer put it in 1947, “we are living today under the sign of the collapse of civilization.”

But, paradoxically enough, for Europeans in the twentieth century, hope, as well as despair, has been the nemesis. The civilization might perish, but man himself might survive. And repeatedly that survival for intellectuals has been centred on the opening to the East. Some, of course, urged a return to traditional religion; but there could be for most no return to Christianity. The faith that the Cross required was no longer theirs to give after the philosophical, historic, and scientific critiques and discoveries in the nineteenth century. Christianity, moreover, ceased to provide spiritual value and motivation for Western intellectuals because of what they regarded as its two inherent failures. First, it lost the unity seemingly necessary to serve as the

guide for the works and goals of the civilization: its internal divisions and splits betrayed the true mission of a spiritual system and belied the validity of its values and ethics. The civilization required a spirituality that would guide and control its material development; what Christianity offered was the spectacle of a spiritual system divided over abstruse theological points, a dogmatic battle over peripheral and outmoded conceptions, a system whose inner divisions made it irrelevant to modern concerns. Secondly, and perhaps consequently, a gap developed between Christianity and the unique Western contribution of modern science, a gap that rendered Christianity even more negligible to intellectuals. Science seemed to find verifiable answers that were at odds with traditional religion, while Christianity failed consistently to come to grips with science and its offspring—technology, industrialization, and materialism. Perhaps even more, since Christianity was an intrinsic ingredient in Western Civilization and since it was the civilization that had failed, then Christianity too must be regarded as a failure, an empty and withered husk. Equally, those surrogate faiths created in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—reason, progress, humanism, nationalism, liberalism, socialism—must also be regarded as failures. They were the creations of a civilization that has in general failed and thus shared its failure; they too proved incapable of saving the West. No; spiritual replenishment had to come from outside, perhaps by means of an intellectual opening to the East. If the spiritual side of Western Civilization had succumbed, the new spiritual energies from the East must be introduced, energies that might fill the spiritual vacuum and infuse a material society with moral strength. Yet the East, perhaps unfortunately for the Western intellectual, has offered not one ideal, but two, and this divided offering has been reflected in the odyssey of many thoughtful men.

The first ideal is symbolized by the Soviet Union, a society avowedly materialistic, but with its material emphasis and social determinants directed toward the moral end of a good society in which each man finds a meaning and a purpose. The salvation from materialism in this ideal lay in infusing the material forms and products of society with the communist ethic, an ethic that would control and direct the materialism. The other ideal is symbolized by the mystical philosophies of the East, avowedly spiritual and disdainful of material society, offering to the individual a spiritual solace and the forgotten art of contemplation. Here the salvation from materialism lay in repudiating the value of material society in order to arrive at the higher spiritual place above it. The two ideals seem exclusive, yet each has offered great attraction

for European intellectuals since the First World War: Nineveh and Nirvana are as close in name as in reality for those who long for a faith.

Moscow has long had the special appeal of a spiritual city. For centuries it was the holy city of the orthodox religion, the citadel of the true faith. As such it earned the title of the Third Rome. Under the Bolshevik government Moscow has maintained its messianic character as the Third Rome, though the true faith is now Communism. Particularly for Western intellectuals in the decades after World War I, the missionary spirit of Russia has had a compelling attraction, for Russia became the concrete locus of the great moral experiment of Communism. "I went to communism," declared Pablo Picasso, "as one goes to a spring of fresh water." And Picasso's odyssey was shared by many, for the Soviet experiment seemed to come to grips with materialism, and it was precisely this problem that troubled Western intellectuals. The Communist experiment came to grips with materialism by embracing it, by infusing a distinctly material society with an ethic that gave materialism a purpose and meaning. No matter that Communism, as an ideology, was European in origin. It was in Russia that the ideology was translated into reality, that it became the way of life. And for those who had lost faith in Europe and its regenerative powers, Russia seemed to offer the example and the answer for what the West had lost. The East would instruct the West.

Sidney and Beatrice Webb, godparents of the British Labour Party and undaunted intellectuals, journeyed to Russia in the mood of pilgrimage in the early 1930s and returned in the mood of conversion, exhilarated with the sense that they had been granted a vision of the future wherein ethical purpose combines with social and material organization. They praised the "new ethical system" that informed the "transformed social life". They found, they believed, the accomplishment of the humanist ethic of service to the community and mankind and the fulfilment of a morality that could be measured in terms of this world, in terms of a better and juster society. For them, as for many intellectuals, Russian Communism seemed to be the model that the West, groping for a purpose, should imitate. The Soviet experiment could become a model for the spiritually impoverished West. The success of that experiment would show that materialism could be a liberating rather than a confining reality; that the confusion and emptiness of materialism would be ended when it was directed by an inherent ethic; that Communism could overcome the tragic dichotomy between spiritual purpose and material power.

It must be asserted, however, that the Communism that attracted West-

ern intellectuals was not the reality of the Soviet Union; what attracted them was the myth that they themselves created about Russia, a myth designed to meet the needs of their own civilization. The attraction and satisfaction of that myth was persuasively presented by the Polish poet, Czeslaw Milosz, in *The Captive Mind*. He portrayed the nearly insatiable longing felt by intellectuals for a system of faith that would unite their atomized and fragmented society, fill the spiritual void of their troubled world, and give a cosmic purpose to all individual human endeavour. Many Western intellectuals, like those described by Milosz, idealized Soviet Communism, distorting or ignoring its reality, as the solution for the serious problems that disturbed their civilization. Communism would, they believed, give their civilization the faith and the ethic that it needed to end its aimlessness, to give it inner purpose; it would solve the social and economic problems of society, particularly pressing because of the depression; it would, above all, infuse the material production of the West with a spiritual value that would justify its materialism. The myth of Russian Communism was, for Western intellectuals, not a true picture of Russia, but, rather a true picture of their own longing for a moral infusion for Western Civilization.

As Professor Michael Polanyi has convincingly argued, Soviet Communism provided an appealing myth for intellectuals in the twentieth century because it accommodated the two demands they required for a synthesis—it was moral and it was scientific. It provided the ethic for materialism; but it provided as well a justification in science—verifiable, predictable, and certain. Consequently it was a spiritual system, unlike Christianity, that was not at odds with science but was claimed to be founded on science itself and amenable to the scientific method. The myth of Communism as a moral and scientific synthesis thus proved compelling for those thinkers groping for a way out of the Western labyrinth. The exhilaration of such a myth was well described by one of the intellectuals who accepted Communism as a new faith, Arthur Koestler. "The whole universe", he wrote, "falls into a pattern. There is now an answer to every question, doubts and conflicts are a matter of the tortured past." The list of intellectuals who were attracted to the myth of communism—including Picasso, Ignazio Silone, Jean Paul Sartre, André Gide, J. B. S. Haldane, André Malraux, Stephen Spender, Koestler, among many others—is proof enough of the power of that myth.

But the myth and the reality of Soviet Communism were in the long run incompatible, except for the most adamant of devotees. Communism proved for most of the West's penitent intellectuals the god that failed, and, like a

primitive people, they began to beat the idol they once adored. They turned from the Russian experiment in Communism because the ideal was too consistently sacrificed to material gain and the private lusts of selfish men, because the denial of civil liberties, the demand for unquestioning discipline, and the internal purges of the party destroyed the freedom and liberation they sought. André Gide, rejecting the Communist experiment, seemed to speak the mind of so many disillusioned Western intellectuals when he charged that in the Soviet Union the mind and spirit were more terrorized and confined than anywhere else in time and place. And as the Soviet Union moved increasingly towards the use of Communism to exercise totalitarian control at home and to justify national expansion abroad, the disillusion became complete. The path of disillusionment was punctuated particularly by the purges and trials of 1934 and 1935, the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact in 1939, Russian expansion after 1945, the suppression of the Hungarian revolution in 1956. The ideal was destroyed by the reality. For most Western intellectuals the Russian Communist experiment failed to provide salvation from the horror of materialism: the Third Rome was not the New Jerusalem.

The other ideal of the East that has proved to be an attraction for European intellectuals in our part of the twentieth century is the mystical philosophy of the East. The evidence of this form of attraction to the East is daily present: the numbers who frequent Baha'i and Buddhist temples, the marginal popularity of Zen Buddhism, the number of public lectures by swamis in large Western cities, the desire within so many to find a private Shangri-La. In its non-vulgar forms, it is evidenced in such phenomena as Aldous Huxley's discovery of yoga as a salvation from the "brave new world", Hermann Hesse's "journey to the East" for the discovery of new spiritual values, Christopher Isherwood's adoption of Vedanta to save himself from despair in an environment of war and violence. The evidence indicates that the quest is more than the desire for the exotic: it is, in its more profound significance, an indication of the belief that the West, offering so much in material things, has nothing to offer in spiritual values, and that we must seek these values outside our own civilization.

Arthur Koestler, having dethroned his god of Communism, turned to the Orient, as he said, "in the mood of the pilgrim . . . I wondered whether the East had any answer to our perplexities and dead-locked problems." Many intellectuals, like Koestler, went to the Orient in the mood of intellectual pilgrimage to discover the inner spiritual strength of yoga, Buddhism, Taoism,

Confucianism, Vedanta, and Baha'i, and to apply this discovery to their own sick society. What they sought—perhaps what they found—was a great emphasis on spiritual life to the exclusion of material considerations, a spiritual emphasis, they hoped, that might be introduced into the West to fill the moral vacuum and temper the materialism. Arnold Toynbee asked that we project a future wherein our descendants will be heirs not just to our Western traditions, but equally heirs to Confucius, Lao-tse, Buddha, Shankara, Gandhi, and Sun Yat-sen. And Christopher Isherwood, to note another example among many, wrote in flushed excitement of the Eastern philosophy he has adopted, Vedanta, as a means of getting beyond the outer self, the material world, by contemplation, to the inner self, the real self that is immortal and infinite. One British intellectual composed a short primer of Eastern thought in 1928 that he intended as "marking the ancient wisdom of the Creative East for the enlightenment of the . . . West, enticed and bewildered in the maze of its too dominant materialism."

What has impressed the Western intellectuals who have turned to these Eastern philosophies for spiritual solace is that these systems offer a way of dealing with materialism, not, as in the case of Communism, by embracing it, but, rather, by offering a means of getting at the spiritual reality above the material world. They have especially been impressed by the art of contemplation, of communion with the inner self without reference to the material world, as a means of combatting the deadening effect of technology; they have especially been attracted to the preachments of non-violence and pacifism, the example of Gandhi; they have been particularly taken with the emphasis upon human betterment as a development from within rather than as an enforcement from without. And, Isherwood added, a special appeal of Vedanta to troubled Westerners—marking its superiority to Christianity—is that it is "a potential bridge between science and religion", thus capable of solving one of the West's most perplexing problems. To the intellectual representatives of a civilization that has been beset in the twentieth century by technology, war, and totalitarianism, this Eastern ideal seemed the grace of salvation.

The great psychologist, Jung, has used the traditional German term "Drang nach Osten"—the impulse to the East—to describe this widespread movement to absorb the spiritual wisdom of the East. Yet this movement too, like that towards the Russian experiment in Communism, has sought to construct a myth of the East rather than to capture the reality of the East. And as a myth it tells more of the civilization for which it was created than of the civilization about which it was created. For what the European intellectuals

wanted was some supposed "wisdom of the East" that could be introduced into the West to save their civilization; they did not pursue a dispassionate study of Eastern thought for its own sake. The myth of the East was to be intellectually utilitarian for them, but it has remained a myth nonetheless. Almost predictably the discrepancies between the reality of the East and the myth of the East would begin to disquiet thoughtful men.

And events in the past few years have indicated that this second myth of the East is indeed beginning to fail its Western celebrants. The study of history is perhaps the greatest solvent of myths. And the growing popularity and importance of the study of Asian history is an indication of the steady application of that solvent. More and more, Western thinkers are being made aware that the reality of the East has scant relationship to the myth that they have created.

Even more important, Western intellectuals have been impressed by the fact that China proved to have little resistance to the materialist ideology and practice of the Communism that they themselves had already rejected. Could the "wisdom of the East" have succumbed so readily to the dreaded materialism? Western intellectuals have also been impressed by the fact that the native values in other Asian societies have shown themselves incapable of coping with the technology and forms of government introduced from the West. Many occurrences have shaken Europe's intellectual image of the East: India's use of military force to acquire Goa, Japan's near-worship of technology, the corrosion of faith and values among masses of Asians, the easy degeneration of parliamentary government into dictatorship in societies that are beginning to be industrialized. If Eastern philosophies have failed to meet the challenge of materialism in Asia, would their introduction into the West to meet the challenge of materialism have any chance of success?

As early as 1951, André Siegfried cautioned Western thinkers against an easy and humble acquiescence in "the often direct accusations and reproaches that Eastern thinkers have levelled at our materialism." Awareness of the West's problems and its respect for Eastern philosophy, he argued, "should not prevent us from pointing out that social progress is a Western conception." The advances that the West has made should not be obscured or betrayed by an attitude of slavish devotion to the "myth of the East". "I do not believe", he concluded, "that the humble and apologetic attitude we have too often assumed is justified."

One of the most significant signs of the growing disillusionment with the possible use of Eastern philosophies in the West came in 1961 with the

publication of Arthur Koestler's *The Lotus and the Robot*. Koestler had gone to the Orient to discover those spiritual values that might save the West; he returned disillusioned, convinced that Asian societies are sicker than the West, that they have nothing to offer the West, and that the hope for the future lies with Europe and the intrinsic value of Western Civilization. "To look to Asia for mystic enlightenment and spiritual guidance", he wrote, "has become . . . an anachronism."

The validity of Koestler's conclusion is not to the point here. What is important is his insistence that the second myth of the East has failed and that Western Civilization must seek within itself its regeneration, that Europe, far from dead, has much to offer. Such a change to confidence in European civilization is significant, especially as it is a confidence that is now being widely shared by other intellectuals.

Equally significant, and certainly not coincidental, is the fact that the change comes at a time when Europe seems to be affirming a political confidence that it has not known for twenty years. The economic vitality of the Common Market, the foundation of Franco-German friendship, the independent leadership of President de Gaulle, the growing importance of such states as Rumania in the Communist bloc, are indications of the restored political confidence of Europe, signs that underscore the regrowth of European spiritual confidence.

Cultural confidence ultimately rests on faith in the history of one's own civilization. The assurance to act in the present and to move into the future with confidence depends upon trust in the values and achievements developed in the historical experience of one's culture; despair is founded on the belief that the history of one's culture is meaningless, its values and ideals moribund, its experiences irrelevant. Faith in the past is the premise for acting with certainty in the present. When the history of Western Civilization seemed to come to a dead-end, to have produced problems insoluble in terms of its own experience, when it seemed to offer only alternative forms of despair—when its very history became the object of scepticism—then its intellectuals treated its heritage with the abandon of Esau. In this sense, Siegfried's pronouncement of faith in the West's values of social action and Koestler's insistence on the unique and intrinsic qualities of Europe are significant re-affirmations. They are not symptoms of ethnocentrism but restatements of faith in the history of the West, and therein lies their consequence.

There is, to be sure, a cultural lag in which the old attitudes toward the East still persist. But the political sympathy for the Soviet Union, a residue

of the earlier attraction to the experiment of Communism, is fading rapidly among Europeans. And the attraction to Eastern philosophies, though stronger, is more and more falling into a fad for the young, the disaffected sons of the bourgeoisie, and others who fancy themselves uprooted or spiritually dispossessed. But among the leading and creative thinkers in Europe, the turn has been definitely toward greater confidence in the intrinsic values of Western Civilization.

The current discernible change to confidence in Western Civilization might be ephemeral or it might be lasting. If it proves to be ephemeral, the rejection of the opening to the East will seem to be only a further step towards total despair by Western intellectuals: having lost faith in their own civilization, they could find no other source of value. The future, then, could hold nothing more than an increasing awareness of the absurdity and pointlessness of existence. The twenty-fifth hour, the eighth day of the week, will surely have arrived.

But if the confidence proves to be lasting, then future historians will doubtless see the rejection of the myths of the East as a most significant step out of the permanent apocalypse: after a temporary faltering, a momentary questioning, an occasion of doubt, Western intellectuals began to appear once more assured of the intrinsic value of their heritage, perhaps purified by the very process of doubt. And the next task for the West's intellectuals would surely be to re-study their heritage, to ponder their history for those values, ideas, and developments of enduring value that will meet the challenges not only of Europe but of all the world. The next task would be to re-create the myth of Europe.

Yet the period of doubt, when Europe's intellectuals turned away from their own heritage for answers, when they turned to the Soviet Union and the mysticism of the East, cannot be erased from the Western experience. It stands now as part of the Western heritage, an experience that must be accommodated by any new myth. Indeed, its chief importance may well lie in revealing what needs the new myth must oblige—the quandaries of materialism and technology, the threats of war and social injustice, the perils of private loneliness wherein the individual is isolated from his social and cosmic environment. In dramatically revealing these needs, the turn to the East may, perhaps, have contributed most to the regeneration of the European psyche in the 1960s.