

THE
OPEN
COURT

*Publication of
The New Orient Society
of America*

APRIL

1934

Vol. 48

Number 929



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THE OPEN COURT

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science,
and the Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea.

FOUNDED BY EDWARD C. HEGELER

Volume 48

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Publication of the New Orient Society of America

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HADJE, PEDLAR OF BAGHDAD

Frontispiece to The Open Court

THE OPEN COURT

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WHERE EAST AND WEST MEET

BY AMEEN RIHANI

NATIONS, like individuals, reluctantly submit to a common measure, or to a single code of conduct. Rarely do we welcome the justice which is all inclusive; rarely do we accept the truth which we fashion for our neighbor; rarely, and never cheerfully, do we submit to the sword we sharpen for our opponent's head. We may be willing to look at both sides of a question, but often it is only to strengthen our own. Few are they, indeed, who face the facts always and accept the consequences.

We travel in parallel lines, though they may be in themselves very crooked. And instead of cutting through a curve or an angle—a custom or a tradition—to our goal, we find ourselves led by a dozen beckoning fingers in this or that direction, but often away from the point of intersection. We seem to have an atavistic dislike to meeting, through common measures, on common ground. If we conquer our pride, we trip through our prejudices; if we overcome our prejudices, we remain captives to our interests; and if in a moment of recklessness, we kick them all out of our way, the fear of ridicule continues and persists. And of all the evil dominations of the spirit, fear is the most potent. We are afraid, not so much of our enemy as of the possibility of his being in the right; we are afraid, if he is in the right, of according recognition; and if we do so, we are afraid of losing our little gains in the game. Thus, to the end of the fallacy of profit.

Man dislikes, I believe, equal and universal justice; democracy, too, may be one of his secret hates; and religion on the whole is a shameless expression of self-love. There seems to be no such course, single and direct, to a happiness innocent of booty. Success is often a butchery; fame is often a snare, and paradise has ever been a bribe.

Much depends in the three upon our pride, our prejudice and intolerance, as well as upon the denunciation we can master. East is East, for instance, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet. Which means that a common measure for both is impossible, is intolerable, is unspeakably wicked.

My subject, *Where East and West Meet*, implies, however, a denial of Rudyard Kipling's opinion, which was megaphoned to the world in a line of verse.

But the evidence, from a surface point of view, is in favor of Mr. Kipling. The East prays, the West dances; the East dreams, the West thinks; the East broods, the West plays. What is a mark of respect in the East is considered an offense in the West: the Oriental, when he enters a house, slips off his shoes at the door, the Occidental finds a hat-rack for his hat. The Oriental inquires about the health of your wife and children, before he "bleeds" you; the Occidental proceeds directly, at times even without a remark about the weather: the one is suave and insidious, the other is blunt and often crude. The Oriental is imaginative and metaphoric, the Occidental is literal and matter-of-fact; the one, when he is not naive, is subtle in his selfishness; the other, when he is not sophisticated, is a Gradgrind unashamed. But in sexual matters, the Oriental is downright lewd, the Occidental is prurient and suggestive: the one walks directly to his goal, the other meanders, through dances and dinners, to it. When gone wrong, the Oriental is a smiling villain, the Occidental is a slap-dash scoundrel. The Occidental, with billboard and headline, decoys the main chance in the open square; the Oriental waits for it in the alleys and by-ways of Circumstance: the one trusts in logic, the other in metaphysics. And from a point of view higher than our own—the point of view of the sun—the East is asleep, when the West is awake. The Kipling dictum is in this, at least, wholly to the point.

Like all generalities, however, these traits are not without exception. They are characteristic, but they are not exclusive. The mass gesture everywhere is dictated by a common need or a common fear; and nations, like individuals, are often the victims of the prevailing humor. Take, for instance, the fawning and florid Oriental, extravagant with the metaphor and the puff—he is not a type exclusive. He is a species produced by despotism and its pompous

court. The aristocracy kowtows to the emperor; the lower classes kowtow to the aristocracy and to each other; the whole nation kowtows, before the broken mirror of the soul, to herself.

When absolute monarchies were the rule in Europe, the Europeans, on the whole, were quite Oriental in the art of fawning and adulation; while the extravagant manner, as much in evidence in the nation as around the throne, was revealed, not only in the speech, but also in the dress of the period. Consider the ruffles and feathers of milord at court; the flounces and trains of milady in waiting: consider the dedications penned by impecunious scribes to their rich patrons, and consider, moreover, the lewdness and the ribaldry, which reached the height of fashion at the courts of Catherine of Russia, Queen Elizabeth, and Louis XV. The people ape their superiors, and the superiors follow their sovereign.

While I am still on the surface of the subject, let me give you an instance of how Oriental were the English writers of the past. Without mentioning Shakespeare, whose poetic imagery and figures of speech are in texture and volumes as rich as anything we have in the Arabic language, and without mentioning such masters of literary extravagance as Smollet and Stern, or such wholesale dealers in sentimentality as Dickens, I come to a more particular instance, which I find in the titles of some of the books of the seventeenth century.

That Arab authors delighted and to a certain extent still delight in extravagant titles, is true. Some of these titles are amusing in the metaphor and the rhyme, some are meaningless, and others are both telling and quaint. Here are a few examples: *The Cymbals of Pleasure About the Arabs' Literary Treasure*, *Wafts of Perfume Enow From Andalusia's Tender Bough*, *The Golden Strings of Advice to Kings*, *The Quaint and Strange in Every Art of the Age*, *The Magnificent Bride to Nature a Guide*.

But these flourishes of the mind were quite in vogue in England, particularly in the writings of the Puritans. A pamphlet published in 1626 was called by its author *A Most Delectable Nosegay for God's Saints to Smell At*. And here is a good example of the quaint and picturesque—*A Pair of Bellows to Blow Off the Dust Cast upon John Fry*.

But I can not find anything in Arabic to equal the title page of a book called *Hooks and Eyes for Believers' Breeches*. Not that the Arabs had neither hooks and eyes nor breeches: but the idea that

one's belief might only be a piece of frippery to hide one's shame does not seem to have occurred to them. Another aid to piety is a pamphlet entitled *High-Heeled Shoes for Dwarfs in Holiness*. This, too, is impossible in Arabic, except it be adapted to the modern affirmations of the feminine soul. But nothing, I dare say, can be found in any language to match this title:

A Sigh for the Sinners of Zion Breathed Out of a Hole in
the Wall of an Earthen Vessel, Known Among Men by the
Name of John Fish.

And this, which Mr. Kipling himself might admire:

A Shot Aimed at the Devil's Headquarters Through the Tube
of the Covenant.

Notice the alliteration, which takes place of the rhyme in Arabic, of the following:

Seven Sobs of a Sorrowful Soul of Sin.
A Handful of Honeysuckles.
Crumbs of Comfort for the Chickens of the Covenant.

And here is a title which the American editor will admire, for there is real pep in it.

The Spiritual Mustard Pot to Make the Soul Sneeze With
Devotion.

That snuff was one of the small vices of those days, is evident also from a book entitled *the Snuffers of Divine Wisdom*. This is eminently Oriental.

Even in this matter of sneezing I find a corresponding humor between the East and the West; for although the ancients had many superstitions about it, the Prophet of Arabia agrees with Don Quixote—or is it Sancho Panza?—on the subject. There is another passage in Montaigne's *Essays*, which accords sneezing the laurels, because it comes from the head. But the Prophet Muhammad goes beyond that. He is more practical than Cervantes and Montaigne. He awards prizes to those who sneeze. "They who sneeze," says he, "and praise Allah avert seventy diseases, the least of which is leprosy." Health, to be sure, is a prize; and when we strip the saying of its extravagance, the lesson will yet remain; and it is as sound as the scientific patter nowadays in advertising a soap or a chewing gum, a tooth brush or a rubber heel. Muhammad cherished high

ideals on the subject of hygiene and health. He is of all the Prophets the most hygienic: he was in himself a medical institute. Indeed, if his sayings on the subject of health and hygiene were translated into English, they would be featured and flamboyantly illustrated in our physical culture magazines. Muhammad upholds, not only spiritual ideals—spiritual according to the light of the desert, which is sometimes complicated by a mirage—but physical and political ideals as well.

This brings us to one of the most important aspects of the subject. Without ideals, no matter how insignificant, the business of life, whether in the Orient or in the Occident, would still have been a thing of the cave and jungle; and with ideals, no matter how material or crudely spiritual, nations rise to a point—to many points—of contact and recognition. But ideals must have exponents, noble and unselfish, and free; and the noblest and freest as well as the least selfish are the poets, the sages, and the artists, the representatives of a nation's culture. Indeed, a living and quickening culture, can not possibly be aloof, can not even maintain for a long time an attitude of aloofness. Its politicians may build a Chinese wall around it, but its poets, its artists and its sages, even its prophets will light their torches beyond that wall and carry them in the name of humanity to the ends of the world.

The Prophet Muhammad, I have said, lighted in the East a tricerion of truth—a triple torch of spiritual, physical, and political ideals. Aye, even political ideals. For is there anything more devoutly to be wished, anything more idealistic than to have a seer, a holy man, at the head of the state—a man of the people, heroic and self-denying and just—a man whose heart ever throbs with love and mercy—a man whose thoughts and words and deeds are the fruits of the holiness within him—a man like Abraham Lincoln, a man like Omar the Second Khalif? When such men lead their people, in the East or in the West, the nations, no matter how distant from each other, must meet; and they meet on the higher plane of mutual understanding and mutual esteem.

When I was in Baghdad, I was told by more than one Englishman that the young Arabs, particularly those in politics, have no ideals. They have one ideal, the ideal of freedom and independence. But this is not sufficient. It covers little or nothing of the ground of individual conduct. To be free to pursue your own selfish ends, to

be free to lord it over those under you, to be free to fasten on the neck of your neighbor the yoke that was once upon your own, to be free to gratify your passions, to be a tyrant, covetous and cruel and corrupt—this is not exactly the right conception of the idea of self-determination.

But we must not be hard upon the Orientals. Ideals in politics are rare today even in America, and they do not exist in Europe. There are idealists, to be sure, everywhere; but they do not join in Europe and America and they do not fit in the Orient of the present day. There, they lack a sense of the communal; here, they lack a sense of the practical.

Moreover, our young Arab idealists are inexperienced and often naive. They have not yet attained the knowledge that brings the ideal within the compass of the real; and one would wish that the young idealists of America and Great Britain and France—young but experienced—would extend to them a helping and sympathetic hand. To help without being selfish, and to guide without being domineering, this is one of the highest fraternal ideals. It is, moreover, one of those practical political ideals which the European nations, in their dealings with Orientals—the European Powers in Asia—will have to look upon as their only salvation. And here, too, the East and the West will meet.

I am not of those who look upon Europe as bankrupt: I do not believe that the post-war diseases of civilization are incurable. We are still forging ahead in science and discovery; and it little matters what happens for the present to literature and art. It may be well that the esthetic faculties should have a rest: it may be well that the esthetic passions should have their lententide.

A League of Nations may be only an intrigue of nations; but the idea—the ideal—that made the League possible is leavening the new life of Europe. Great Britain and France and Germany have a great deal yet to give to the world; and by entrusting their destinies to their young idealists—by ridding themselves of the old fogies of politics and the fossils of statesmanship—they can again regain their prestige and power. Sovietism is stirring the East and, in spite of Fascism, is leavening Europe. Which is good both for Europe and the East. The present tendency of the Orientals, therefore, to reject everything European is wrong, and we are doing our best to combat it.

The conservatives in Europe and the fanatics in the Orient are ever saying that they are not ready for this thing or for that. We are ready, I say, for everything, including the gallows—the gallows for everything old that has become useless, nay, poisonous, and everything new that is born sterile. It would be quite the right thing, moreover, to put Romain Rolland, for instance, in charge in London and H. G. Wells in Calcutta. New York and Cairo will profit no doubt by the example. And when the work of Rolland and Wells is done, the Churchills and the Ghandis can proceed with theirs and come without much delay to a happy conclusion. As it is, the backgrounds overshadow and confuse the contest. There is on both sides, especially in the Orient, much to overcome and much to discard.

I am willing to admit that everything came out of the East. But I must also admit that there is much in it, even in its spiritualities, of what Carlyle called “phosphorescent punk.” We want to save the West, the whole world, from the crass materialism of the present age; but we do not want to be crammed with all the spiritual cud of Mecca and Benares. What comes out of the wild soil is one thing, and what comes out of a cultivated garden is another. Luther Burbank, the American, has knocked the thorns out of the cactus fruit by sheer cultivation; Mary Baker Eddy, the American, has knocked the thorns out of religion by sheer cerebration: but we in the East would knock the thorns out of everything in life by resignation and divine grace.—Give us, O God, a constitution and a ballot box and a king, honest and just. And give us also, O thou most Generous, a few aeroplanes and some machine guns. Even if they are made in Europe, we will accept them and continue to curse that Siren of the West.

This is the ideal of political fanatics or fanatics by birth and training who are espoused to a one-eyed and close-hearted nationalism. But the high ideal of the poets and the higher ideal of the prophets themselves, is neither Oriental exclusively nor Occidental. It includes the ethical and spiritual, as well as the practical aspects of life. It is supremely human. Before it every mark of birth disappears, and customs and traditions are held in abeyance—before it nationality and language and culture cease to be a hindrance to understanding.

The soul seeking expression, the soul reaching out for truth, is one everywhere. Confucius might be American in his ideal, even

as he is Chinese; and Emerson might be Chinese, even as he is American. Gotama Buddha made manifest in Palestine might be mistaken for Jesus of Nazareth, and Jesus revisiting the glimpses of the moon in Japan might be welcomed as Gotama. Jalal ud-Din Rumi, were he born in Assisi, might have been a St. Francis; and St. Francis, had he seen the light in Shiraz, might have been a Jalal ud-Din.

Even Tagore, to come down to our own time, and Yoni Naguchi are as much at home in New York or London as Lafcadio Hearn was in Japan and as Kipling was in India. The highest ideal of the poet, I say again, is supremely human; and the poet's love for an alien land, an alien people, which is reflected in his work, in spite of the harshness, if any, of its criticism,—that love finds its way, whole and pure, to the hearts of his readers. We know India and Japan better because of Kipling and Lafcadio Hearn; and the people of Japan and India will know America and Europe better because of Naguchi and Tagore. This is one of the essentials of the message of genius—one of its great achievements.

And genius everywhere is one. In the Orient and in the Occident the deep thinkers are kin, the poets are cousins, the pioneers of the spirit are the messengers of peace and good will to the world. Their works are the open highways between nations, and they themselves are the ever living guardians and guides.

Thus, when we go deep enough or high enough we meet. It is only on the surface that we differ and sometimes clash. True, we do not always find our way to the depth or to the height, or we do not take the trouble to do so. Often, too, when there is a will, we are hindered by a prejudice inherited or acquired. We begin by misunderstanding; and sometimes we only think that we misunderstand. Impatient, we turn away, when another effort—a moment even of indulgence, of tolerance, of kindly sympathy—might have brought us together. The difference in the traits of nations are like tones in a picture: the central theme, the ego and the soul, is one.

The artist may vary the theme, however, without changing it. Thus the ego may be more assertive in the West, and the soul more dominant in the East. But that is no reason why an Oriental, whose ego is brought up at the expense of his soul, should ape the European; or an American, who has an accession of spirituality, should begin to rave about the Orient. This is worse than nonsense. It

is affectation. We can preserve our backgrounds and project our sympathies—uphold our heritage and widen our vision. We can be Europeans or Americans with understanding. We can be Orientals with level heads. Reason and common sense are the safeguards everywhere of the human mind.

Nationality is the flower of a race, and the individuality of a nation is its supreme expression; but we can not, without injury to ourselves, make our national shibboleths our highest ideals. Conformity is not the guage of friendship. Wisdom carries not the sceptre of dogma; and dogma, whatever is its middle name—Christian, Hindu, Muhammadan—has not yet attained the highest possible expression of truth.

Says Zoroaster: "Whenever thou art in doubt as to whether an action is good or bad, abstain from it." This is an improvement upon choosing the lesser evil.

Says Confucius: "For benefits return benefits; for injuries return justice without an admixture of revenge." This is more natural than turning the other cheek.

Says Carlyle: "In art, religion and philosophy nothing is completed, but is completing." This goes beyond the truth and the wisdom of the Prophets.

But wisdom has not the fructifying force of folly;—it has not the wings of extravagance and stupidity. Consider the present state of the world, and the extravagance in the Occident and in the Orient of credulity and suspicion. We have the Ku Klux Klan in America; the Charka-Swaraj magicians in India; a hat craze in the Turkish Republic; a Marxian panacea in Russia; a nation of black-shirt Fascists driven by the rod of a man who had the inspiration to kowtow both to the King and the Pope; a nation of Gallic genius obsessed with the idea that her island neighbor has alienated from her the love of the whole world;—and we have in China and in Arabia the fellow fanatics of the Ku Klux Klan. But that does not mean that there are no wise men in America, in Russia, in India, in Italy, in France, or in Arabia.

There are also poets, and there are pious men, and there are real sages. The world is still safe for idealists. And international common sense is more enduring than international stupidity. Even when it is not, there is a compensating humor.

There is a goal towards which all nations gravitate, and there

is a common ground, even if it has to be at times a superstition or a stupidity, upon which all nations meet. Says the Arabic poet:

“Not in vain the nation-strivings, nor by chance the current’s
flow;
Error-mazed, yet truth-directed, to their certain goal they go.”

Indeed, whether we wear hats or turbans, our instincts and our ideals are more or less the same. A barrister in Bombay may argue in Hindustani or Gujrati, but his code of conduct is that of his colleague in London. A merchant who sits cross-legged at the door of his shop in Benares, adopts the same code of profit as that of the merchant of Manchester, who sits on a revolving chair behind a desk of quartered oak. A poet is a poet, whether he rides a Ford or a donkey; a sage is a sage, whether he plays golf in New Jersey or bathes in the Ganges or prays in the desert; and a fool is a fool, whether he be a descendant of the Pilgrim Fathers or a descendant of the Prophet. The only real difference between them is in the point of view and the point of direction. A rich barrister in London, with a seat in Parliament in the back of his head, does not pursue the same tactics as his colleague in Bombay, whose chief concern is to have a homestead and to be able to travel first class on a P. and O. steamer.

Life is a gift, liberty is a right, and the pursuit of happiness is a goal. But the conduct of nations, as of individuals, differs in the pursuit in accordance with the measure of justice they uphold. A common measure, irrespective of class or creed or race or color, is the pivot of equality and justice; it ennobles the individual and the nation; it is the only safeguard of peace and progress: but a common measure is only possible when we begin to understand and learn to appreciate each other’s point of view and point of direction.

When I see a camel, my mind travels to Arabia; but a taxi-cab evokes pictures of an American or a European city. If the process were reversed, if my mind travelled to America whenever I saw a camel or to Arabia whenever I saw a taxi-cab, then something would be the matter either with my mind or with my objective. Now, to force this unreasonable point of view and point of direction upon me by legislation or by religion, is to make of me a slave, or a hypocrite, or an ass—that is, if I obey your law or accept your creed.

If I do not obey, however, and you resort to force, there will be trouble—a conflict, a revolution, a war.

Here is another example. The average Muslim looks upon dancing as immoral, and the European looks upon it as an art. That art may be immoral is not the question; but that immorality might be raised to an art, is the very thing the Muslim fears. His point of view, therefore, is one of fear, and his point of direction is a calamity. A dance, a glance, a romance! And he knows his women folk better than you or I. Not until their mentality is changed, therefore,—not until their intellectual faculties are awakened and developed to act as a check to their emotions or as a guide to them,—and not until the Muslim man's idea of possession changes, is he justified in changing his point of view. Nor is it altogether safe to force a change by legislation. I do not know what is happening in Turkey today besides dancing; but I am not certain that the dancing floors of the Republic are not too slippery for the unpractised feet of the daughters of the harim.

As for the European, whose idea about dancing is opposed to the Muslim's, his point of view and point of direction are neither more reasonable nor more assuring. They spring from a higher level of sex relation, I admit, than that of the average Oriental. But the European has no right to expect from a Muslim a ready acceptance of his view, and he has no right moreover to look down upon him, if he does not do so. Nor is a Muslim justified in denouncing the dance, because he does not see—he can not at present see—its wholesomeness, its practical as well as its esthetic virtues. The only way of behaving in a gentlemanly manner towards each other, therefore, is to understand and appreciate each other's point of view and point of direction.

Mutual tolerance is the stepping-stone to mutual respect. A hospitable mind is the key to a neighboring or an alien spirit which is locked by dogma and guarded by tradition. A sympathetic approach is the opensesame to a hidden treasure. The heart yields to spontaneity, the mind bends to understanding. But we can not understand each other, if our sympathies are always tucked away; we can not understand each other if our approaches are always academic or conventional; we can not understand each other, if we crawl back

into our shells every time we see a worm across our path; we can not understand each other, if every time we venture out of our parochialisms or nationalisms, we stick the feather of cocksureness in our caps; no: we can never wholly understand each other and rise to the level of mutual esteem, at least, if we do not invest in the fellow feeling that triumphs over class and creed and race and color—that one touch of nature that makes the whole world kin.