

THE FUTURE OF RELIGION IN ASIA

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ASIA today is the scene of remarkable changes. She is passing through a great period of transition and is undergoing a process of unique transformation. The currents of political, social, religious, economic, and intellectual upheavals are of such dynamic energy and titanic proportions that it would not be the least exaggeration to call them a new era in her history. There have been crises in history but none comparable to the present drama in the East. The stilled waters of Oriental life were stirred to their very depths by forces operating within and from without. Nine hundred million people are animated by new ideas and aspirations and are in the midst of stupendous changes. The doctrines of liberty and self-determination are permeating the minds of the educated classes and are fast taking possession of the masses. A tide of nationalism, a new phenomenon in the East, is sweeping over the whole continent and is becoming a sort of religious cult. Age-long traditions and beliefs are receding into the background, vanishing in the twinkling of an eye before the onrush of modern ideas. The East is moving so fast that in comparison Europe and America seem to be standing still. No such phrases as "the unchanging East" and "Better Fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay" can now justly be applied to her. Asia has fully awakened from the lethargy of centuries, and the twentieth century is destined to witness a colossal change in the sphere of world politics and a radical modification of the mentality of the East.

One of the most portentous convulsions in present day Asia is undoubtedly a religious one. For centuries the Orientals, like the Europeans of the Middle Ages, had drawn their moral ideas from the supposed revealed scriptures and had regulated their lives according to their teachings. Religion had provided them with a

cosmology—an explanation of historic evolution, an interpretation of the meaning of life and a rule of conduct—and had satisfied their ponderous longing for the supernatural by the promise of a prospective immortality. For centuries the Orientals had inscribed faith at the head of their table of values and in all the departments of their life and activity had willingly submitted to the will of God and tradition. Even the very structure of Eastern society is determined by dogma and religious authority. The savage caste system of India is the direct product of Brahmanism; the demoralizing conservatism of China is the outgrowth of Confucian ethics; the Japanese emperor worship has its roots in Shintoism; and the institution of Khilafat owes its origin to Islam. There is no department of Oriental life which directly and indirectly is not moulded and dominated by religion. Even the smallest details of every day life such as eating, drinking, sleeping, loving, and dressing have been regulated by religion, which has compelled men and women, like a child in leading strings, to walk always in the direction in which it would pull them.

But this has changed, and in a short space of time Eastern thought has undergone an intellectual revolution. The spread of scientific civilization, the introduction of Western secular education in the schools and colleges, the growth of industrialism, the rise of nationalism, and above all the importation of the discoveries and results of modern science in the East have combined to shake the foundation of religion and to undermine the hold of the old antiquated theological formulas on the minds of the younger generation. The sacred books, which are a mere collection of strange revelation, miracles, illogical statements, and allegorical dogmas, do not and cannot stand the test of the merciless logic of modern science, nor can they meet the requirements of the strict canons of historical criticism. They were composed in an age when the intellectual level of mankind was at its lowest; when man thought himself surrounded by an endless chaos of phenomena which he could not explain or understand; when every uncomprehended phenomenon was considered to be presided over by some mysterious power; when the ever active stream of mental reflexes was imagined to be the wanderings of a restless soul; and when experimental knowledge was wholly non-existent. It is no wonder that traditional religion as a whole has suffered at the hands of modern sci-

ence and is perishing before her inexorable and irresistible advance. The Oriental students who are learning the Darwinian theory of evolution cannot accept the fantastic theory of creation as expounded in their sacred books. Can any rational being subscribe to the theory of Brahmanical mythology which alleges that four castes have been issued from the mouth, arms, thighs, and feet of the great Brahma; or to the Mohammedan theory of creation, which asserts that mankind has been fashioned out of dust by a God magician. Such absurd notions were satisfactory when mankind was passing through the crudest forms of animistic beliefs and had not advanced beyond the stage of theological knowledge. They are becoming a laughing stock in the eyes of the cultured classes and are fated to vanish like the shadow of night before the radiance of dawn. The introduction of modern science in the East is bringing about tremendous changes in the mental outlook of the people and is striking a death blow at the old worn-out superstitions and untenable religious beliefs.

The two great Eastern countries which have definitely set themselves against old traditions and religious authority are China and Turkey. The religious revolution in Turkey is unquestionably one of the most significant events in the history of Islam in particular and in the religious history of mankind in general. Mohammedanism has justly been regarded as the most inflexible of all the great religions of the world and the most impervious to change. Since its beginnings it has never undergone any serious modification in its theology, creed or doctrines, and has never yielded to new ideas. But modern science and European rationalism have at last succeeded in making serious breeches in its steeled ramparts and have begun the disintegration of its whole inner structure. Turkey, led by one of the most impressive and dominating personalities of modern times, has practically broken away from Islamic traditions and has definitely turned her face for guidance in matters ethical, social, material, and intellectual, not towards Mecca, but towards Paris. She has separated Church and State and has secularized her political and social institutions in an immeasurably short time. She has abolished Khilafat, regarded by all believers as one of the cardinal institutions of the Islamic faith; has ignominiously banished Khalifa, the spiritual head of the Mohammedan world; has put an end to dervish orders, by a single stroke of the pen; and has con-

temptuously set aside the Koranic law in favor of the Swiss civil code. The old religious schools, in which Koran and the sayings of the Prophet formed the sole curriculum of education, have been converted into secular schools in which such useful subjects as modern science, economics, political science, modern history and philosophy and European languages, especially French, are taught. No longer will the Turkish student rack his brain over superstitious religious formulas and waste his mental energies by memorizing the primitive Arabian texts, but will study the doctrines of the eighteenth century scientific conceptions of man and the universe, the politics of Cavour and Bismarck, and the latest developments in international politics. The younger generations of Turkey which are now brought up in an atmosphere of secular education will have no use for theological subtleties and Koranic exegesis. The men who at present are controlling the destinies of the Turkish Republic and are moulding the thought and life of the Turkish youth are schooled in the doctrines of Diderot, La Mettrie, Helvetius, and Holbach and are imbued with the radical French thought. They may not set up Goddess of Reason as the state religion of the New Turkey like their French predecessors, but they are fully determined to extirpate the old religious beliefs from the popular mind. Their attitude towards religion is revealed clearly in *The Book of Mustapha Kemal*, by Abel Adam, published last year and now the best seller in the New Turkey. The main theme of the work is a comparison of Asian and European mentality and a strong plea for the adoption of a scientific view of life. It holds up religion to execration and brands the Koran, the Bible of the Mohammedans, with the stigma of black book. The author says that the Moslem mentality of Turkey must be utterly destroyed and the European mentality with its scientific and secular spirit must be adopted.

The crusade against religion in China is far more aggressive and destructive than in any other Oriental country, not excepting Turkey. The Chinese "Hsin Chao:" "The New Tide of Thought," is emphatically an anti-religious movement and is frankly committed to the destruction of religious beliefs. It allows no tradition—religious, ethical, social, or political—to pass unchallenged and demands that every accepted belief or idea must present a rational argument for its right to exist. It recognizes no tabus and no

inhibitions. Reason is its highest tribunal of appeal, and the methods of modern science are its sole criteria of truth. Religion which pleads miracles, revelations or mysteries as credentials for its continuance in human society is wholly inadequate to meet the requirements of its stern scientific logic. All the suppositions of religion it has found essentially at variance with the findings of modern investigations and wholly incompatible with the spirit of rational knowledge. It is no wonder that it has pronounced them a survival of a primitive state of society and an anachronism in this age of enlightenment and progress. The educated Chinese extremists say, "We are living today in the house of science. In that house there can be no altar to superstition. Religion is simply another name for superstition and ignorance. Therefore we can have no religion at all and cannot permit it to flourish in China." Nearly all the members of this new tide of thought are avowedly hostile to religion and are sparing no efforts to root out the popular beliefs from the minds of the people. Two great leaders of Chinese intellectual renaissance, Dr. Hu Shih and Chancellor Tsai, the most influential men in China today, are avowed atheists. The latter, following Comte, tells us that religion is the outgrowth of fear, superstition, or animism and fit for people who are in the lowest stage of intellectual development. In public meetings and in philosophical and anti-religious clubs, the young Chinese intellectuals fulminate against religion, and an energetic propaganda inimical to it is carried on in the press and on the platform all over the country. The works of European rationalists have been put into the Chinese language, and their teachings are now widely disseminated among the people. The French materialists, the German monists, the English agnostics, and the Russian radicals have all been translated and made accessible to the general public. The writings of these freethinkers are exerting tremendous influence on the younger generation and are stripping them of their old beliefs.

The irreligious or anti-religious movements are not confined to China and Turkey alone but are sweeping over other Oriental lands. The East has now opened its doors wide to outside forces good or bad and is fully exposed to all Occidental influences. Hand in hand with the technical scientific inventions of the West, such as the railway, telegraph, telephone, motion picture, printing press, have gone nationalism, industrialism, scientific materialism, philo-

sophical agnosticism or atheism, socialism and numerous other "isms," which are transforming the habits, customs, and beliefs of the Eastern people. Add to these Russian Soviet anti-religious propaganda with its popular Marxian slogan "Religion is the opium of the people" and its dogged determination to convert the Orient to its gospel of revolution. At home the Soviets have pulled down heavenly and earthly Czars and have supplanted God and Christ by Lenin and Marx. Russia is well qualified by her geographical situation, traditions, history, and philosophical inheritance to play a prominent part in the future destinies of the Orient. In her war against religion she is likely to meet with success. For the conditions prevailing in the religious world of the East are far worse than those which obtained in Europe before the Protestant Reformation. The abuses in the Church, the subtle craftiness of theologians, and their notorious aversion to reform and innovation, the moral and intellectual rottenness of the clergy are enough to turn the reformers against religion itself.

As to the future of religion in Asia, can there be any doubt? Whatever is resting on fiction and fraud will be overthrown. Religious institutions that consecrate superstitions and spread delusions will be compelled to show what right they have to exist. Faith will be obliged to render an account of itself to reason, and mysteries will give place to facts. Religion, in other words, with its absurd ideas of arbitrary deity, personal immortality of the soul, miracles, revelations, and indeed all the paraphernalia of theology will be supplanted by the religion of science. And this will result in the moral, material, and social regeneration of the East. Religion has been a notorious barrier in the path of progress and is responsible for the present procrastination of the nations of the Orient. Only the relaxation of the hold of religion on the people will lead Asia from the dark night of ignorance and superstition into the clear light of intelligence and enlightenment. The course of progress will not be different in the East from what it was in the West. Just as the dawn of a new era only arose in Europe when the age of faith was superseded by that of intellect, and the theological thralldom was shipwrecked on the destructive criticism of rational philosophy and modern science.