

## Eastern Religions Capture the Minds of Westerners

In the Dutch newspaper *Trouw*, Mr. A. Schipper writes that while the established churches are crumbling - the one faster than the other - the interest in Eastern religions is rapidly increasing. We must not exaggerate, he says, but I estimate that the number of Dutchmen involved in these new religions is about 10,000. A few years ago, there were but a few hundred, so we must speak of a remarkable development.

The British actress, Olivia Hussey, married a Japanese singer in a ceremony presided over by the Indian Swami Muktananda Paramahansa, at a plush resort hotel in Miami Beach. Muktananda blessed the newlyweds with the hope that they would "live together in love as long as the sun and the moon shine, as long as the sacred river flows, as long as the holy mountain stands, surrounded by children and grandchildren." The 71-year-old guru, who makes his winter headquarters in Florida, has performed weddings for about 500 couples.

In a small theatre off Broadway, a densely packed crowd listened spellbound to an ochre-clad holy man from India. He said: "Lord has holy syllable OM in all languages and in all nations. The God Jehovah also said to the Jews, 'I OM that I OM.'" A Hindu, who was part of the crowd, commented: "I looked around, but nobody was laughing. When Americans turn to sacred Eastern things, they lose their sense of humour as fast as they lose their critical sense."

That happened in the mid-1960s when Oriental religions were gaining numerous adherents in the West and many American seekers felt that "the East must be mysterious else life has no more meaning."

Why are Asian religions drawing so many Westerners into their fold? Agehananda Bharati, Syracuse University professor of anthropology, a Roman Catholic who became a Hindu at the age of 15, states his lack of choice as his main reason for conversion. He says: "One must worship Jesus Christ, though the Virgin and the saints provide some variety." Bharati feels repelled by "Father figures like the Judeo-Christian God and martyred teachers." He says that within the Hindu bhakti (devotional) tradition there is a multiple choice: "a male god, a goddess, a lover god, a warrior god, and so on."

In the early 1970s the retired pastor Dr. T.D. Berghuis of Wolvega, Holland, Of the Reformed Church (HKN) became a Buddhist of the Tibetan Order of Arya Maitreya Mandala. This order was founded in 1933 with Lord Maitreya (Lord of Love) as its centre. Berghuis no longer felt at home in the church. He has studied Buddhism and other eastern religions for years. For a long time, he corresponded with Tagore, the great poet-philosopher in India. Berghuis says that "as a liberal" minister he always had great sympathy for other religions.

He had never accepted the uniqueness of the Christian faith. In Buddhism, he found tolerance towards other religions. Yet Maitreya is for Berghuis what Jesus is for Christianity. In Christianity, Berghuis missed the mysticism that he found in Buddhism.

He sees Buddhism as a psychological way to the inner happiness of man. Happiness can only be found within and not outside of yourself. Western man with his vast knowledge and technology is not happy.

Both Bharati and Berghuis cite that they could not accept Jesus Christ as the only way to God. And Berghuis, in particular, states the lack of mysticism and meditation within Christianity as reasons for turning to Buddhism.

The current appeal of Asian religions in the West has a message for the church of Jesus Christ. Aren't we sometimes so activist that we give little time to meditation? And haven't Christians neglected to present a holistic approach to life, separating the sacred from the secular? Haven't Western churches often robbed the Christian faith of its message, proclaimed doubts rather than the unsearchable riches of Jesus Christ or emphasized intellectualized doctrine at the expense of a quiet walk with the infinite personal God? The Bible offers a rich message of unity with God in Christ, eternal life, holiness, prayer, meditation, power, light, forgiveness of sins, grace, peace, instructions for living - a fountain of life and salvation.

As I think of Bharati I am reminded of Jesus' words: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6 N.I.V.) And Berghuis' mysticism calls to mind the impressive words of Psalm 46:10: "Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth."

The Western world is in a deep spiritual crisis; the only answer for it today is still the full counsel of God as found in the Scriptures.

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