

Chapter Five

The Aquarian Revolution

Sunlight filtered softly through rustling bamboo and the boughs of graceful poinsettia trees, as saffron-clothed monks padded silently along stone corridors. Hundreds of golden statues of Siddhartha Gautama rose in ascending rows, with a baleful sixty-foot figure at the top which would have overlooked the rest, were his eyes not closed in the bliss of nirvana. The main temple of Light of Buddha Mountain featured thousands more Buddhas contributed by believers, including an enormous seated Buddha facing the entrance. The crowds who came to gawk and worship and the bright lights and gentle music gave the complex something of the atmosphere of a theme park for fairies, a Magic Kingdom where tourists came to meet Maitreya rather than Mickey.

My visit as a young missionary to this center of the Buddhist faith in southern Taiwan revealed a curious blend of the familiar and the exotic, the commanded and the forbidden. A nun ushered me into a reception room where a list of ten rules hung on the wall. "Do not lie. . . do not steal. . . do not commit adultery. . ." Translate it into English and add a call to worship the Supreme God and a proscription on idols, and you could have called it the Ten Commandments and hung it in my church at home. But there was no such call or proscription.

I was introduced to an American graduate student from Berkeley who handed out incense in the main temple and taught students English in the sect's high school. I wondered how an American, indoctrinated from childhood against idolatry, had adjusted to the company of so many "graven images." She found them too few, I learned, as we entered her room, and she knelt in front of a stone figure at the foot of her bed and prayed silently. She'd studied Buddhism in California with other Americans. Some had been reluctant to bow to an idol, not because it was *un-Christian*, but *too* Christian. "They thought it was like worshipping God," she noted apologetically. But, she insisted, those who accurately understood

Buddhism realized the idol was only a symbol. "When I worship Buddha I'm really worshiping myself," or, more accurately, the Buddha within. The Light of Buddha lifestyle had begun to feel confining, though, and she was thinking of leaving the temple to study Taoism. "I miss sex and drugs," she told me a bit coyly.

Feeling outnumbered by the idols and her revealing shirt, I left without asking any very critical questions.

On the way out, I noticed blueprints for a new facility planned for the Los Angeles area. It would be called "Come to the West" temple, invoking the intuition on the part of many Asian Buddhists that the Western world was ripe for Asian spirituality.¹

That belief has been well-corroborated in years since. Within a few minutes walk of a home I lived in when I returned to the United States thirteen years later, I could drop in at a Tibetan Buddhist temple, Hindu ashram, yoga center, Zen meditation class, or Taoist study center. (Conveniently housed in the auditorium of a church of my own denomination.) Bumper stickers on cars in front of me proclaimed, "born-again pagan," "the goddess is alive and magic is afoot," and "my other car is a broom." Both Christian bookstores in our part of town closed, while stores specializing in mystical, New Age, eastern philosophical and occultic topics ran an apparently flourishing business. Works by the Dalai Lama, Daisetz Susuki, Yogananda, Thich Nhat Hanh, Deprek Chopra, and Chuang Zi were filling a mainstream spiritual void.

Interest in socialist paradise evaporated after the fall of the "Evil Empire." The sexual revolution has begun to occasion cautionary reflections in some quarters. But the third revolution against the West's Judeo-Christian heritage, the Aquarian Revolution, has reached a new peak of popularity. As I write this, "Religion and Spirituality" on *Amazon.com* features a selection of books which reflects the same search for a spirituality unfettered by Christian dogma that I had seen among many travelers in Asia: "*God's Funeral*," by A. N. Wilson, about the fading of Christian orthodoxy in England; a new edition of the *Dao De Jing*, the short, pithy, but enigmatic Taoist classic whose

¹ Built for \$25 million in Hacienda Heights, California, the temple seems to cater primarily to overseas Chinese. Vice President Al Gore got in trouble here years later when he accepted surprisingly generous donations from clergy who, in theory, had renounced the world.

translation seems to serve as a kind of a coming-out exercise for scholars of classical Chinese; a devotional reader for Zen Buddhists; a book on Zen for Jewish readers; a book immodestly called "*The Magic Power of White Witchcraft: Enjoy a life of profound happiness, unbelievable riches, and long-lasting love with the secrets of white witchcraft*"² Finally, "*Spiritual Tourist*."

The latter might serve as the *Odessey* of the Aquarian generation. Brown gives an intensely introspective tour, "half believing, half doubting" as the Chinese put it, of divine gurus and sacred communes currently in vogue around the world, from Sai Baba to the Divine Mother to the Dalai Lama. In the end, Brown comes to rest in a personalized merger of western skepticism and Buddhist philosophy: "I do not believe in a Redeemer. We must save ourselves, and have faith in that belief. . . Joy is non-attachment. Joy is to be found only in the moment. And in the moment, I feel giddy with joy, knowing even as I feel it, that this, too, will pass."³

Unlike Odysseus, and more in tune with most modern seekers, however, while Brown traveled hopefully, his hope seemed to consist less in the arriving than in the journey itself.

The third moral revolution of our time no longer appears as a few pinpricks of interest on the part of one or two left-over hippies or eccentric scholars, but a vast and still growing shift in Western consciousness.

Thousands of years ago, a ribbon of commerce across Central Asia called the Silk Road brought East and West together. Today, a Silicon Highway, and 747s in place of camels, bring the world together in a dramatic new way. Humankind is becoming one, if not politically, at least as a market of spiritual concepts and philosophical categories. Even in the Middle Ages, Europe vacillated between a dogmatic view of a holy, majestic and distant God, the Sky God transformed into an engine of orthodoxy like Islam, and a mystic view of God revealed through nature and the heart of men and women in a manner not unlike Hinduism or Buddhism. Now we

² Disclosure seems to be a trend in esotericism, no doubt reflecting the general world-wide movement towards democratization. Master Lu Sheng-yen, whose True Buddha movement I studied, has devoted more than a hundred and thirty volumes to "leaking the (esoteric Buddhist) secrets of heaven" to his audience.

³ Mick Brown, *The Spiritual Tourist*, Bloomsbury, 1998, p. 306-7

have direct access, in translation and easy travel, to a wealth of interpretations of life which have developed in isolated and "pure" forms for thousands of years as someone else's orthodoxy. Why are young Westerners attracted to the mystic traditions of Asia as against, say, Islam or Confucianism? Some of it has to do, perhaps, with aesthetics: if opposites attract and familiarity breeds contempt, it is not surprising that westerners find delight in pillars of winding dragons and ponds of blooming lotus, while Japanese scholars sketch cathedrals of Europe. Moralistic Confucianism and dogmatic Islam seem too familiar and confining to serve as a locus of neo-romantic attraction. Our generation may feel a reaction against Marxism and other brands of reductive materialism. We seek a transcendent link to the rest of humankind and current models of nature, a universal cosmology which allows us to connect with truth beyond the confines of our tribal deities. To many, 19th Century materialism and monotheism both seem narrow, lifeless and anti-scientific. And while we have lost hope of establishing Shangri-la through political or military action, or through free love, many hope to find an escape for their souls from globalized commercialism in some hidden valley, secret ceremony, or ancient lineage of Gnostic teachings.

For the past fifteen years I've indulged a bit of Mick Brown's spiritual tourist fantasy: visiting temples, living among tribal peoples, reading the works of religious revolutionaries, even studying an ancient sacred language or two. I interviewed hundreds of Asians, asking questions like, "what is the purpose of life?" "what is the most important virtue and the worst vice?" and "what happens after death?" I went, though, not as a tourist, but as a missionary. I had doubts but also an underlying belief that the Truth was "out there." Chesterton said the ideal philosophy should allow us to "feel the universe at once as an ogre's castle, to be stormed, and yet as our own cottage, to which we can return at evening."⁴ I wanted adventures, but also to come home in one piece afterwards.

A wise traveler prepares before setting out on a trip. He buys a guide-book. He compares hotel prices. He asks if she can drink the water. He gets shots. If he is traveling to unsettled regions, he pays attention to reports of terrorist activity or civil

⁴ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, Doubleday, 1908, 1959, p.72

war, and alters travel plans if need be. Why? Because despite a growing permeability of cultural boundaries, the world can still be a complex and sometimes dangerous place.

So can the world of the spirit.

If I met the girl at the Light of Buddha mountain again, I would like to ask her three questions, questions any tourist should consider before going abroad. First, "What are you looking for?" Do you want a pretty postcard, a mandala, a jade Buddha to impress visitors? A heroic adventure? Firm truths on which to settle your heart? Or to somehow combine the adventure of faith with the stability of reason? My second question is, "What dangers are out there?" Considering the history of the 20th Century, let us not dismiss this question too quickly. Third, a practical matter which guidebooks address by printing a list of embassy phone numbers. "Who can you call if you get in trouble?"

Things to Look for In Buddhism

What is the faith that caused an advanced and scholarly civilization to blossom from a warlike kingdom fourteen thousand feet up on the Tibetan plateau? What power made the Japanese warrior class artists, without ceasing to be warriors? What ideal gave Thich Quang Duc courage to burn himself alive during the Vietnam War to protest the destruction of his land?

Buddha's life story pulses with eternal personal as well as social relevance. Leaving his father's palace, Buddha first saw a sick man. We hear through the media how AIDS is spreading like Black Death in Africa, leaving millions of orphans in its wake, and malaria is making a worldwide comeback. Next, He met an old person. This is hard for any young person to fathom. Will a day come for me "when the watchers of the house tremble, the strong men are bent, the grinders cease for they are few, and those looking out the windows are darkened?" (Ecclesiastes 12) Then, he saw a corpse. The "silver cord severed, the golden bowl shattered." One day, the fingers that type these words will be bleached bones. Siddhartha's final sight startled him in a different way: a monk, begging for a meal. Here's someone who lives by different

rules. He has opted out of the rat race. What has he have gained in return?

From his renunciation, Buddha is said to have gained a great deal that the modern world finds attractive. Peace. Detachment. Mindful attention to the beauty of each moment. A fellowship of monks seeking after the same goals, cultivating their spirits in unity. Many who have joined ashrams or temples have sought for and, to a degree discovered such treasures.

One perennially-attractive ideal eventually rose above all others in the Buddhist tradition, and captured the hearts of the Asian masses: the bodhisattva of compassion. Guan Yin, they called her in China, Kannon in Japan, Avolokitvara in India. Her Thousand raised arms symbolized the hope of the common people for a salvation from outside themselves. She was the heavenly Queen who conquered the Monkey King, and having conquered him, made him a loyal vassal. Her figure adorns hot springs and fishing harbors in Japan, and a thousand temples throughout China. She rescues drowning fishermen, turns bad people into good, and blunts the blow of swords.

Such were the ideals by which Buddhism enticed East Asia. But Asians with a skeptical turn of mind note that for all its beautiful ideals, Buddhism accomplished less in a practical way for the common people of China than, for example, Mao Zedong. And the Chinese revolution was a muddied channel diverted from a purer source, from a river that rose in the West, a story of a God of compassion who walked in Palestine.

Taoism

Taoism, even more than Buddhism, is a hodge-podge of historical influences and religious ideals which are interpreted in a variety of contradictory ways.⁵ The term "Tao" itself (pronounced "dow" as in Dow Jones) originally referred to a road or path, and seems to have first been used in a metaphorical sense by Confucius. It came, in both philosophical and religious Taoism, to mean the ultimate principle in the universe, the "way" which serves as essence and origin of all things. Lao Zi, the enigmatic

⁵ In Chinese there are two terms: the philosophical school called *Dao Jia*, and the religion called *Dao Jiao*, whose teachings are in many ways opposite. Intellectuals, both Chinese and Western, tend to praise the virtues (and vices) of the first, and denigrate the vices (and virtues) of the second, which I will discuss in the context of folk and secret society religion.

philosopher who is taken as founder of the school, spoke of *Wu Wei*, "lacking action." Success can be accomplished by "going with the flow." For some Taoist philosophers, this meant accepting the course of nature. For Taoist believers, this meant trying to prolong one's life by exploiting secret cross-currents of nature, often through alchemic potions, magic cures, and a prolonged search for the herbs of immortal fairies who were said to dwell on remote mountain peaks. But this search also encouraged the stirrings of something akin to experimental science. The greatest of China's discoveries, the compass, gunpowder, and printing press, helped lay the technological foundations for the industrial revolution in the West.⁶

The girl at the temple expressed a common western perception that among "Eastern" religions, Taoism was most likely to provide an escape from Puritanical sexual morality. But this perception may tell us less about Taoism, than about what she was looking for.

The *Secret Instructions of the Jade Chamber* does give love advice (if we can call it that)startlingly unorthodox by Christian or even secular Humanist standards:

"According to Pengzu the long-lived, if a man wishes to derive the greatest benefit, it is best to find a woman who has no knowledge of (these techniques), between fourteen and fifteen and eighteen or nineteen. In any event, they should never be older than thirty. Even those under thirty are of no benefit if they have given birth. My late master (!) handed down these methods and himself used them to live for three thousand years. If combined with drugs, they will even lead to immortality."⁷

The text advises the disciple to "not limit yourself to just one woman. . . the

⁶ Francis Bacon spoke with a touch of hyperbolic of three "recent" discoveries whose origin "is obscure and inglorious: namely, printing, gunpowder, and the magnet. For these three have changed the whole face and state of things throughout the world, the first in literature, the second in warfare, the third in navigation. . . no empire, no sect, no star, seems to have exerted greater power and influence. . .

"*Novum Organum*, from Joseph Needham, *Science and China's Influence on the World*, in *The Legacy of China*, Oxford U. Press, 1964, p. 242

⁷ *Yufang Bijue (Secrets of the Jade Chamber)*, from Livia Kohn, *The Taoist Experience, An Anthology*, State University of New York Press, 1993, p.156

more the better!" One should deceive young partners so as to draw sexual energy and life force from them; leaving them sick, but adding to one's own life-span. Woman of means could profit from the same techniques: the text notes that the Queen Mother of the West (a deity identified with the Indian Kali, the Greek Aphrodite, and the Canaanite Asheroth) "attained the *Tao* by cultivating her *yin* energy. As soon as she had intercourse with a man he would immediately take sick, while her complexion would be ever more radiant. . . "

But it would be a mistake to take Taoism in general as proof of cultural relativism. On the contrary, one thing we can learn from the history of Taoism is just how universal and stubborn moral absolutes tend to be.

Lao Zi advised us to be rid of the moral rules of the sages. "When the great way falls into disuse, kindness and righteousness appear."⁸ "Put an end to compassion and be done with right action, and the people will become loyal and kind again."⁹ I think like Jesus, Lao Zi was disputing not so much the goals of the sages, as the legalistic means by which they hoped to attain them. The Queen Mother certainly "put an end to compassion," but it is clear from the *Dao De Jing* as a whole that that is not what Lao Zi had in mind. Still, it is remarkable that within a few hundred years, mainstream Taoism was rather pedantically interpreting Lao Zi's rebuke to mean not that rules are bad, but that you have to follow the right (Taoist, not Confucian) rules. Not long after, schools of Taoism invented their own "Ten Commandments," modeled on the Buddhist version, to which one sect added the symmetrical and auspicious count of one hundred eighty rules. This list of proscribed sins makes fascinating reading for anyone interested in what human beings share between cultures:

- "The sin to pick a fight with a good fellow. . .
- The sin to transmit scriptures to the wrong people. . .
- The sin to speak nicely while thinking something bad. . .
- The sin to burn the mountainsides in order to hunt. . .
- The sin to abort children or harm the unborn. . .

⁸ *Dao Dejing*, 18

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19

The sin to speak or walk about with a woman alone. . .
The sin to get too close to members of other clans. . .
The sin to ridicule the poor and humble. . .
The sin to worship ghosts and spirits. . .
The sin to proudly claim to be special or call yourself a perfected. . .
The sin to accumulate superfluous clothing instead of distributing it to the needy
The sin to idly set up taboos. . . ."¹⁰

The greatest apologist of the 20th Century, C. S. Lewis, believed no ethic could be valid if the whole world did not affirm it (at least in theory) already. When it comes to morality, innovators should not be trusted. In *Abolition of Man*, though he did not limit it to that meaning, he borrowed the term *Tao* to describe the morality all peoples share in common. I think the Bible agrees. Even the New Testament book of *Romans*, which Christians who emphasize the "total depravity" of man apart from the Gospel tend to emphasize, speaks of Gentiles who "naturally practice the Law," written on their hearts, and whose thoughts "defend" as well as "accuse" them. (Romans 2)

Lao Zi described the self-effacing humility of one who lives by the *Tao*. "The sage, the holy man, abandons himself (lit. 'puts himself to the back') and so find himself. He loses his life ('puts himself outside') and so preserves his life." (*Dao De Jing*, 7:2,3) Jesus described his Way in similar terms: "If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross day by day, and follow me. For whoever . . . loses his life on my account. . . will save it." (Luke 9: 23-24) One who follows the *Tao* succeeds through weakness rather than force. We don't know how Lao Zi practiced his philosophy or even *if* he did. With Jesus, however, the *Tao* appeared not only in words, but as records of a life lived in public, among crowds and critics.

Chinese Christians have written provocative essays comparing John's concept of "*Logos*" to the Chinese term "*Tao*." Both terms refer not only to morality but to that which is the source of all things, from which all life comes to being. The *Gospel of John* in Chinese begins, "In the beginning was the *Tao*. The *Tao* was with God. The

¹⁰ *Chishu yujue and Sanyuan pin*, from *The Taoist Experience*, Chapter Four

Tao was God. All things were made by Him." (John 1)

And then, John makes a quantum leap and confronts us with a stupendous claim. "The *Tao* became flesh and dwelt among us."¹¹ Indeed, how did a blue-collar Jewish laborer with no official position, program, weapons, or political ambition, change the world in three years more than any emperor or general? Taking time along the way to talk to bag ladies, hookers and madmen? Yuan Zhimin, a philosopher whose ideals influenced the democracy movement in China, has recently written a book called *Lao Zi and the Bible, (Lao Zi Yu Sheng Jing)* in which he argued that Jesus fulfilled the ancient ideals of Lao Zi better than any other human being.

Tribal Values

When I lived in Taiwan, I sometimes stayed in the homes of the original inhabitants of Taiwan, descendants of the Polynesians. I spear-fished with tribal families in a mountain creek, hitched a ride with a Taya tribal man in a pickup heading up to the hills with a dog to hunt pigs and with Ami young people on a holiday from the city, out to dig roots.

Before the government coaxed the tribes down to the lowlands for schooling, they lived in thatch homes in the mountains, in a simple, natural, community-based lifestyle. When boys played with matches and burnt down a house, villagers pitched in and rebuilt it in a few days. While many "civilized" Asians scorned such "primitive" tribes, in many ways these people knew more about the country they lived in than my professional friends who worked for Texas Instruments or trading companies. Young men and women learned to survive on what they found growing and moving around them. "From this fruit you can make soap," they knew, "but this one is poisonous." To this day, the older generation of Taiwanese tribal men can survive for years in the jungle. That knowledge stood one tribal man well who, during the Japanese occupation, was inducted into the Japanese army, and survived in the hills of Malaysia for forty

¹¹ One early Platonist reportedly advised Christians to inscribe these words in letters of gold and set them in the most prominent place in every church. Augustine, *City of God*, translated by Henry Bettenson, Penguin, 1984, p. 417

years after the war.

Sports are an attempt by civilized peoples to recapture some of the physical challenge and solidarity of the hunt our ancestors enjoyed as an everyday part of life. It is no coincidence that ethnic groups with a tribal background, whether black, Native American, or tribal Taiwanese, tend to excel in sports. I suspect "back to nature" cults derive their attraction as much from yearning for community as for connection with the natural world.

It is hard not to admire the courage of the tribal warriors. The religion the Taya once practiced enshrined that courage in a ritual of headhunting. One Taya explained to me, "A Taya was not a man until he had killed a man from the plains." This quality made mountain tribes like the Apache, the Burmese Wa, the Montagnards of Vietnam, formidable adversaries even against enemies equipped with modern weapons.

In an attempt to revive communal action, courage, and closeness to nature, the men of the Makah Indian tribe in Washington State re-instituted a hunt for whales in 1999. White Americans angrily denounced the tribe for the "greed and ignorance" of its "war on whales." "If the tribe wanted to revive its culture, why did it use high-powered guns and power boats?" "Shouldn't they row out and throw the harpoons by hand?" Came sarcastic comments, over the Internet, Faxes and other traditional Norwegian messaging systems from the McDonaldded suburbs of Puget Sound.

I had lived on the Makah reservation for five months, and did not view the Makah attempts to revive their culture with such cynicism. I remember strolling outside one frosty January morning to meet a Makah fisherman who labored all night on a frozen river to catch a single salmon. It wasn't the Indians who wiped out the marine mammal and fish runs. They were ruthless and unsentimental when necessary, as nature is ruthless and unsentimental, but with a fundamental respect and understanding more attractive to me than the cheap sentiment of weekend John Muirs who hunt their meat at Cosco.

In *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, Samuel Johnson described how isolation encouraged the development of clans and tribes in hidden valleys of the Scottish highlands, and how already in the 18th Century, this way of life was

threatened by modernization. His description of the Highlanders -- distinct, quarrelsome poverty-stricken, given to theft, among whom "the quality of highest esteem is personal courage," the reigning vice mutual suspicion, "every Highlander can talk of his ancestors, and recount the outrages which they suffered from the wicked inhabitants of the next valley" -- could be word-for-word what lowland peoples of modern Asia say of modern hill tribes. The Highlanders were already feeling the draw of a larger capitalist culture, which in the 21st Century threatens to consign proud mountain cultures around the world to oblivion. This is the wind of change against which the Makah Indians, having lost language and lifestyle, were proud enough to spit.

It is understandable that those who admire tribal cultures feel animosity towards Western culture, which has done so much to destroy native cultures. Christian missionaries have sometimes contributed to the mayhem. Yet the wisest leaders among tribal peoples are not, for the most part, seeking isolation, which is in any case impossible, but to save the particular within the universal. This is the central problem modernization sets for tribal peoples.

Beyond all this, one finds three spiritual commonalities among tribal peoples that many politically-correct observers seem slow to notice. I will discuss these later: an almost universal concept of a Supreme God, an equally universal fear of evil spirits, and the repeated notion, that unites a thousand mountain tribes with Jewish, ancient Indian Vedic, and three millennia of Chinese, that sin can only be dealt with through an atoning blood sacrifice.

Code of the Rebel

The *Water Margin* records episodes in the struggles of 108 Chinese brigands, heroes according to the view of the book, in a long epic of swash-buckle and chaos, a bloody, and occasionally supernatural *Robin Hood* or *Three Musketeers*. The leader of these rebels is Song Jiang, scholar, though scholarship alone does him no good, and a man of action. The anti-hero Li Kui described the code of honor by which he acted as follows: "Song Jiang is not a common man. We are not old friends, and yet he

immediately advanced me this money. He is a hero who despises wealth and stands for justice -- of that there is no shadow of doubt."¹² Song, like other Chinese rebels and tribes of Asia, claimed kinship to the gods by marriage, pledged comrades with wine mixed with blood, and received a sacred stone from heaven with the names of the rebels written on it, vowing to "uphold justice." The band's spirituality lent it high morale, compared with unruly bands of common thieves: "His followers help the poor, and the old, and are welcomed by all the people."¹³

Communism is not usually thought of as "eastern" or "religion," but many of its key concepts found deep root in this Asian tradition. The young Mao Zedong was deeply influenced by these semi-tribal ideals of heroism and solidarity:

"What I enjoyed were the romances of Old China, and especially stories of rebellions. I read the . . . *Water Margin*. . . and *Journey to the West*. . . while I was still very young, despite the vigilance of my old teacher, who hated these outlawed books and called them wicked. I used to read them in school, covering them up with a Classic when the teacher walked past. So also did most of my classmates. We learned many of the stories almost by heart, and discussed and re-discussed them many times. We also knew more of them than the old men of the village, who also loved them and used to exchange stories with us. I believe that perhaps I was much influenced by such books, read at an impressionable age."¹⁴

Few would claim this tradition moved Mao entirely to kindness. In fact, reading the random acts of cruelty of the *Water Margin*, including cannibalistic "heroes" who ran the original "Hotel California," I am inclined to agree with Mao's teacher: the book *is* wicked. Having met Chinese who starved in prison and lost their loved ones to Mao's continuing resentment against teachers and other authority figures has not changed my mind. Still, it would be unfair to dismiss the genuine heroism of the

¹² *Water Margin*, p. 523

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 854

¹⁴ Edgar Snow, *Red Star Over China*, p.127

quest for justice, or the courage and egalitarianism at the heart of the revolutionary ideal. Mao's "brotherhood" rid China of opium, taught prostitutes new trades, and brought about medical revolutions which prolonged the lives of millions. One missionary in a remote mountain post wrote of her admiration after meeting an idealistic young communist girl:

"You have been a real challenge to me. You have deliberately stripped yourself of privileges you might have had in order to come down to the level of the Lisu people. You walk their trails -- thirty miles you did yesterday, and that is superb. You sleep on their board beds, eat their course food without a murmur, never asking for anything better. I've been disgruntled sometimes lately because living conditions continue to be so rough -- that old ladder, the smoke, the drafts, and so on. But I see now it was the Lord's kindness to me, so that I might not have to blush in your presence."¹⁵

Secret societies were a poor man's Kiwanas Club, a gnosticism of the lower classes that retained many elements of good sense which the religious clubs of the upper classes found expendable. The heroes of the *Water Margin*, like the heroes of the kung fu movies which copy it, did not show contempt for the body by shaving their heads and putting on formless robes, but implicitly affirmed the goodness of creation through weightlifting. While the religious clubs of the rich existed to exclude, outcasts of the *Water Margin* affirmed, with a call that echoed down the centuries, "all men are brothers." They sealed that brotherhood in blood sacrifices often similar to communion.

Jackie Pullinger, who has worked with gangsters in Hong Kong for thirty years, notes that sometimes she also finds honor among thieves, and is moved when she meets gangsters who pimp and steal yet at a crucial moment reveal for "little brothers" that greatest of all loves, the love Jesus said prompts a man to "give his life for his friends."¹⁶ She tells them about a Savior who reveals the characteristics of their own

¹⁵ Isobel Kuhn, *Stones of Fire*, Moody Bible Institute, 1960, p. 184

¹⁶ Jackie Pullinger, *Chasing the Dragon*

ideal "big brother": Personal strength. An authority figure alienated enough from temporal authority to stand against injustice. ("You brood of vipers! How will you escape the flames of hell?") (Mat. 3:7 pph) A leader with the strategic wit to outflank stronger opponents. ("Who's likeness is on this coin?") (Mat. 22:20 pph) One who does not merely manipulate those who follow him for his own ends, but has the welfare of followers truly in mind. ("If you're after me, let the others go.") (John 18:8) Who teaches that "all men are brothers." Who knows that there may come a time for shedding blood, and is not paralyzed by the possibility that it may be his own.¹⁷

Hinduism

There is also much the world can gain from the insights of the subcontinent.

Dr. Paul Brand, who was born in India and made pioneer contributions to the rehabilitation of lepers as a missionary doctor, notes that one of the medical innovations he used in plastic surgery was invented by a brilliant Indian physician five hundred years before Christ.¹⁸ Dr. Brand grew up in the hills of southern India, and has said that apart from the lack of modern medicine, his ideal lifestyle would be that of Indian villagers. Among other things, he noted that in contrast to the protected, ulcer-driven, pain-drugging, entertainment-saturated West, he is impressed with the ability of Indian patients to endure pain without complaining. In *Pain: The Gift No One Wants*, he related that skill to Indian religion and to what modern medicine had discovered of the dynamics of pain receptivity:

"First as a child, then later as a physician in India, I was fascinated by the fakirs and *sadhus* who had exquisite command of their bodily functions. They could walk on nails, hold a difficult posture for hours, or fast for weeks. The more advanced practitioners even managed to control heart rate and blood

¹⁷ During the 19th Century, a school teacher in the Chinese countryside, calling Jesus his "big brother," started a rebel movement which almost overthrew the Qing Dynasty. He drew on a social environment in which the categories of "rebel" and "bandit" were closely intertwined, and many of his followers had been members of secret societies like the famous "Heaven and Earth" society.

¹⁸ Personal correspondence, 1999.

pressure. Hindu "holy men" were known for their asceticism, and esteem for that high cultural value percolated down to the society at large. From an early age, the Indian people learned to respect discipline and self-control, qualities which helped them to cope with suffering. . .According to Eastern thought, human suffering consists of "outer" conditions (the painful stimuli) and "inner" responses that take place in the mind. . . As I became acquainted with these philosophies, I could not help noting the parallel to the signal-message-response stages of pain I had learned in medical school. In effect, Eastern philosophy affirms that stage-three pain, the response in the mind, is the dominant factor in the experience of suffering, and also the one we have most control over."¹⁹

Hinduism is a rich and complex matrix of sects, values and beliefs. The ideals the most popular sects share in common may be reduced to five: caste obligation, monism (all is one), karma (what goes around, comes around, so what comes around, must have gone around) tolerance (in theory and often in practice), and the centrality of the guru.

Karen Armstrong admires the religion of India for what she sees as the humanistic quality of this latter emphasis. "The greatest religious insight of the subcontinent," she argued, is that a religious teacher is "higher than the gods."²⁰ The chronicles of spiritual tourists often cause one to question such optimism. Mick Brown tells the story of a brilliant Oxford fellow named Andrew Harvey. Harvey had become an enthusiastic disciple of a young woman named Mother Meera, a supposed incarnation of the Supreme Mother. Brown described his conversion story, *Hidden Journey*, as "one of the most remarkable spiritual testaments of all times." "There was no self in her; only a Presence like the red-gold sunlight and warm wind." After following this "sunlight" for *ten years*, he succumbed to her divinity in a blinding and bedazzling series of psychic experiences. "Her life force seized me and began to pour itself into me. I felt as if the lid of my head and my entire face had been peeled off and

¹⁹ Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, *Pain: The Gift No One Wants*, Harper Collins Zondervan, 1993, p. 234

²⁰ Armstrong, *History of God*, Ballantine Books, 1993, p. 16-17

molten radiance was being poured directly into my heart and mind."²¹ Aware of similarities between this experience and those of more sinister cults, Harvey was reassured by Mother Meera's lack of pretension: "There is no cult of adoration around her. . . She is the only normal human being I've ever met. . . .And her message is very simple. We must live in harmony with the environment and with each other."

But within a few years, Harvey had changed his mind. He described ashrams as "lunatic asylums" filled with "jealous and needy people." He no longer believed in Mother Meera, and suggested we "do away with the guru system." "A lot of those we now call 'enlightened gurus' are nothing of the sort," he wrote bitterly. "They are. . . extremely powerful occult manipulators. . . Mother Meera simply wanted me to remain her devotee and to go on 'using' me, and her lies prove she is not enlightened (to say the least)."²² Mick Brown, having interviewed a remarkable sample of the world's gurus, seemed nearly as disillusioned.

Certainly, manipulative Messiahs belong on the short list of items to be avoided in our spiritual tour. But I think there is something positive to learn from such an experience as well. Could an idea which attracts people so strongly contain no important element of truth? Abstract philosophy is all very well. But one thing Hindu religion teaches us, is that people need a *human* face to follow. Faiths which make cosmic principles rather than personalities ultimate (dialectic materialism, Theravada and Zen Buddhism) tend reverse course before long and mold idols, proving this law of human nature. Perhaps the problem lies in the refusal to discriminate among gurus and imposing a monistic oneness on the dissimilarities of spiritual leaders. What we need is a guru who, like Gandhi, stoops to conquer, and illustrates the humility of God.

In one sense like sadhus who walk on coals or allow fingernails to grow through their hands, Dr. Brand's missionary parents embraced a lifestyle that involved a great deal of pain. The couple lived in remote and disease-ridden mountains. His father died of black-water fever as a young man. His mother, "Granny Brand," rode mountain trails on mules and lived in the hills to the age of 95. But the pains they suffered

²¹ Quoted by Marc Brown, *Spiritual Tourist*, p.169

²² *Ibid.*, p.182-3

were not self-inflicted assertions of mastery. They suffered only to heal. This is the ideal Dr. Brand and his missionary colleagues embraced, which they learned not from abstract philosophy, but from the "man of sorrows" who was *their* guru.

China's First Teacher

The lifestyle of the Confucian sages was grounded in an assumption about the body opposite to that of the Indian fakirs and tribal warriors. To Confucius, willful self-harm was an act of ingratitude to one's parents. At the core of Confucius' teaching were loyalty and a love which begins at home but extends towards all the world. Within that context, many of the ideas Confucius and his disciples bandied about were surprisingly modern: God as love, (hundreds of years before St. John), empiricism, environmentalism, even supply-side economics! All these concepts were part of knowing one's limits.

In our progressive and self-confident age, perhaps it is not surprising that these ideas seem tepid to many Western pilgrims. Nor was Confucius a rebel. Like Edmund Burke or Samuel Johnson, he built on traditions of loyalty to family, state and the Supreme Deity.

China's "First Teacher" did show a wistful side, however. Like Bono, he "Still hadn't found what he was looking for." His ideal was a "holy man," a *Sheng Ren*, who would incarnate the kindness of Heaven and bring blessing to all mankind. He knew of no one who lived up to his ideal in the past, and did not expect to see such a person in his own life. According to Mencius, Confucius' greatest disciple, a sage could be expected to appear once every five hundred years. Confucius died in 479 B. C.

The more we study the ideologies of humankind, the more we see the dialectical quality of revolution that is needed: a revolution which takes us back to our roots. Which affirms authority and attacks it. Which tell us to save ourselves, and promises a savior who will leave paradise and enter the phenomenal realm to save those in need.

A leader with courage and wit who affirms the body and teaches us to embrace and fulfill our humanity, yet "puts himself to the rear" and is willing to die for his brothers. Who overcomes by weakness. Who stoops to conquer. One who makes all men – and women -- one family. A bodhisattva. A filial son. A sacrifice whose death will "coerce an abrogation of death itself."

Let us not, at this point, jump to conclusions. I am not saying, at least not yet, "Jesus is the man." We will later look in more detail at the way Jesus fulfills the ideals of humankind. For now let us only leave it as an open question, as we take a look at the other side of the account: elements in world religions we best avoid.

What Should We Look Out For, Out There?

After a firefight broke out in the local media between Christians and New Agers, an affable skeptic wrote to the *Seattle Times* advocating a cease-fire. "So what if people want to commune with crystals, get guidance from rocks, consult channelers? What is it that we're afraid of in all that?" Is it only our own petty egos, our need to be right, that leads Christians to bad-mouth other religions?

Well, it was a strange century. Our ancestors were afraid of devils. Our mothers worry instead we'll "join a cult:" follow some teacher who hides a grim spirit behind sunglasses, manipulates followers with flattery, has them shave heads and sell carnations in airports, and tells them what to think. A few have earned special infamy through mass murder or suicide. But just as every natural disaster wounds ten for every fatality, so only a minority of the casualties of modern religion can be counted in the fields of Magadan or jungles of Guyana.

Only fools are never afraid. Perhaps such wariness is a sign of health.

Yet it may be that we are too eager to project danger onto an external object, whether human or demonic. Jesus said that from within, out of the inner person, comes all manner of evil. (Mk. 7:15) Perhaps the greatest danger "out there" arises from something "in here." But at the same time, the role occult religion plays in bringing it out is not, I think, arbitrary.

The Great Divorce

The first danger of many forms of monism is disattachment of faith from reason. Mystics have claimed for millennia that people have untapped mental powers which aid us not only in overcoming pain, but in allowing us to escape the confines of personal attachment. When we "realize our true selves," our identity with Universal Mind, we realize the distinction between self and others, between spiritual and material, is an illusion. When we realize this, we will be free, not just to believe, but to accomplish, all we desire. Indian guru Sai Baba once claimed, "I have the power to change the earth into the sky and the sky into the earth."²³

George Orwell showed that skeptical monism could lead to the same conclusion. In *1984* his villain O'Brien, who believed in the supernatural no more than Orwell himself, told his hapless victim, Smith,

"We control matter because we control the mind. Reality is inside the skull. . . I could float off this floor like a soap bubble if I wished to."²⁴

Orwell called this kind of thinking "goodthink," but the traditional philosophical term for believing reality is "in the mind" is "solipsism." The most horrible episodes of the Chinese, Cambodian, North Korean and Soviet revolutions did in fact occur when leaders of godlike status attempted to recreate their nations, in effect, through mental energy and the power of mantra-like slogans. They believed, as Neale Walsch put it in *Conversations With God*, "Whatever you shall choose, so shall it be . . . To the degree that it is fervently held as truth, to that degree will it be made manifest in your experience."²⁵ The exercises in Goodthink they conducted swept up millions in mass-enthusiasm and faith; people who starved to death or were thrown out of windows a few months later. Philosopher A. J. Ayer, an old-fashioned materialist, wrote,

²³ Tal Brooke, *Riders of the Cosmic Circuit*, Lion Publishing, 1986, p28

²⁴ George Orwell, *1984*

²⁵ Neale Walsch, *Conversations With God, An Uncommon Dialogue*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995, p.12

"Admittedly, the philosophical problem of justifying one's confident belief in the existence and contents of other minds has not yet been satisfactorily solved. . . even so. . . no philosopher has acquiesced in Solipsism."

The "problem" of faith in the external world ("dualism" as pantheists call it) can never be "solved," because the mind organizes data, rather than gathering it. Faith is the faculty which allows us to input data. Reason is the faculty that enables us to sort it wisely. One danger of New Age thinking is that it can encourage Westerners who never came within a thousand miles of India to think, as one New Age enthusiast put it: "The entire physical universe itself is nothing more than patterns of neuronal energy firing off inside our heads. . . There is no physical world 'out there.'" Complete skepticism and complete gullibility have this in common: whether all religions are equally true, or equally false, in both cases empirical data, and the critical thinking and argument which rely upon it, are rendered superfluous. Both, in the end, throw the mind back on its own resources.

The Magic Eye

Another hazard of monist faith is the power of feelings detached from moral absolutes.

Consider the seductive appeal of gurus like Rasputin and Rajneesh. If there is an argument for reincarnation, extant photographs of those two lust-haunted faces has to be it. Rasputin seduced court ladies and gained a following in early 20th Century Russia by the healing touch of his hands, the magnetic attraction of his eyes, and his teaching of "salvation through sin." The infamous "Guru to the rich," Shree Bagwan Rajneesh, preached the same message, and recruited disciples from the same strata of the bored rich. Why did so many intelligent people follow them both? Their smiles would make a dog growl. Believers explained, as one of Rajneesh's disciples wrote,

"Many people have asked me how a sensible, independent person could be mesmerized by someone like Bagwan. The answer. . . is that once you had been affected by his energy and experienced the sensation of being touched by it, you knew that there was nothing like it, no bliss to compare with it. Once you had experienced it, you had to go back for more, to try and regain that feeling of harmony and being at one with the universe."

Marx called religion the "opiate of the people." This disciple of Rajneesh' certainly sounds as if he were addicted to something, or a spell had been cast upon him, with a narcotic rather than an opiate effect on his senses, however.

Jim Jones had a similarly mesmerizing effect, as his long-term disciple, Deborah Layton, described in her aptly-titled autobiography, *Seductive Poison*: "His firm voice was consoling. It called out to me to trust him. His eyes told me he had waited almost his entire life to meet me. He leaned over and kissed my forehead. I felt weak, swooning in his intense and wholly focused attention. . . My forehead, where he had kissed me, remained extraordinarily warm. I was convinced that this man truly and unconditionally loved me."²⁶

Andrew Harvey recounted his psychic experience in Mother Meera's presence in almost exactly the same terms:

"She was looking at each person so attentively. She was all there. The room itself was like a force-field, dense with peace and sweetness. . . then I became aware that she was looking at me. And what I felt was, she knew everything; she knew me entirely; she knew me better than I knew myself, and she could see my goodness. . . . I felt a pure unconditional love streaming into me. I knew she really cared for me."²⁷

If all is one, and there are no firm categories, right or wrong, heaven or hell, true or false, and no "thou shalt nots," what can we hope for but feelings? You can

²⁶ Deborah Layton, *Seductive Poison*, Doubleday, 1998, p. 43

²⁷ Mick Brown, *The Spiritual Tourist*, p. 179

analyze a feeling, what it symbolizes, whether the states which give rise to it correspond to mundane material appearance. But you can't argue with it. And like any other stimulant, arbitrary spiritual thrills are not only addictive, they are subject to a law of diminishing return. Thus Chesterton wrote of those who, "seek stranger sins or more startling obscenities as stimulants to their jaded senses. . . They try to stab their nerves to life, if it were with the knives of the priests of Baal."²⁸

The defining moment in Huxley's *Brave New World* was a virtual reality experience called the "Feelies." Before attending, participants got high on the ancient Indian sacred drug *soma*. The state of oneness with the universe, which is the goal of mysticism, has indeed often been attained through physically-harmful drugs. One of the authors of the Rig Veda, one of the oldest Scriptures in the world, writes drunkenly: "The two world halves cannot be set against a single wing of mine. Have I not drunk Soma? In my vastness, I surpassed the sky and this vast earth. Have I not drunk Soma? Yes! I will place the earth here, or perhaps here. Have I not drunk Soma? . . . I am huge, huge. . ."²⁹ To give a modern example, Elliot Miller wrote:

"The drugs themselves led me to pantheism because on them I experienced a loss of ego or self-image boundaries. I began to feel intrinsically connected to the universe as my larger and more real self -- an infinite consciousness into which my finite consciousness was merging. . . I was God! With very little outside help I'd seemingly gone through all the classic mystical experiences and come to all the standard pantheistic conclusions."³⁰

Surely that ought to give us a clue to the anti-rational and unhealthy character of such experiences! How could the origin of personhood and the Creator of the human mind be the source of "insights" arrived at by assaulting the brain with destructive chemicals?

²⁸ Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, p.160

²⁹ *The Soma-drinker praises Himself*, from *The Rig Veda*, Penguin Classics, 1981, p. 131

³⁰ Elliot Miller, *A Crash Course on the New Age Movement*, Baker Book House, 1989, p. 213-4

The Angel of Death

Unreason. Emotional seduction. What else should we be wary of? The devil, perhaps?

I met a tall, stocky young man in a park in a suburb of Taipei. "Zhang" told me about a voice that often talked to him. Sometimes it claimed to be Jesus, sometimes the "Son of Matsu," Chinese goddess of the sea. This voice first came to him, he said, while playing *Dian Chi*, an occult game like Ouija. Zhang bragged his neighbors were afraid of him. He told me matter-of-factly that he sometimes felt as if the spirit were compelling him to jump in front of a car. We rode a train to visit a pastor friend I hoped would be of help. We stood between carriages so he could smoke. The countryside whizzed by with nothing between it and me but the cool night air.

"I've heard people in his state can be as strong as several men," I thought. "He's bigger than me anyway. He could push me off this train if he wanted." Zhang looked over at me, as if he guessed what I was thinking, and gave me a grin rather like that of Rasputin or Rajneesh. "Are you afraid of me?" he asked. He seemed to hope I was.

I do not know, to this day, what was the matter with that young man. Maybe the "Son of Matsu" was "merely" a psychosis. It hardly matters. It did not seem Zhang was much interested in being cured. He was trying to start a cult of his own, using the mysterious powers at his disposal to recruit followers. I know he picked up his illness through practice of the occult, and that this "projection" or "complex" influenced him towards destruction of himself and others. I had the chance to note on more than one occasion in Taiwan an association between spirit possession and depression, self-delusion, and suicide. Anthropologists have written field studies of mutilation that would curdle the blood of anyone with blood in their veins instead of ink.³¹

³¹ See Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors*, Chapter 4

When I say it doesn't matter whether such occult powers are "real" or contrived, let me give an example from Western history which will also throw light on the universal character of the psychological phenomena involved in channeling. The Salem witch trials, a series of episodes in which superstition worked on public opinion and resulted in the public execution of twenty innocent persons in colonial Massachusetts, occurred when a group of adolescent girls began to act in a strange way. One historian of the period relates, "the Salem hysteria had its rise in a small gathering of young girls who met one evening a week to learn what magic a West-Indian slave woman could teach."³² Soon, they began to accuse members of their society of satanically hoaxing them. They barked like dogs and purred like kittens. They "frothed at the mouth, vomited pins, threw their legs and arms and necks out of joint, were constantly pinched and bitten -- they could always show the marks of the accused of the moment." It was on the testimony of these girls that, first those generally held in suspicion in the community, such as a Catholic woman, then those who stood up to the girls, were accused and executed.

There is much that is peculiar about these trials, conducted as it is supposed in the interests of Biblical orthodoxy. I'll save the bulk of that discussion for appendix B. But perhaps the most peculiar aspect of the trial was this. If we define "black magic" as "the attempt to use occult arts to exert power over and harm one's enemies," then the only magicians in the case were the girls on the witness stand. They took the initiative to study magic. They manifested signs of spiritual possession which other cultures relate to the presence of malevolent powers. The parties most guilty of all in these strange cases, usually blamed on overly-fervent Christianity, were wanna-be sorcerers' apprentices! Why were they believed, and their enemies put to death?

The hysteria of the witch trials was not unique. If these girls had lived in a modern democracy, they might have accused their enemies of rape or ritual Satanic abuse. If they had lived in the Soviet Union, they might have gained equal power and attention by calling their neighbors "counter-revolutionaries."

What caused them to act as they did? We are protective of our children, and

³² Ralph and Louise Boas, *Cotton Mather: Keeper of the Puritan Conscience*, p. 105

sometimes loath to admit the depths of cruelty to which teenagers can descend. The use of occult forces to pursue power over other people is almost the definition of witchcraft, and that is what those girls in Salem did. Whatever the devil is, part of the human personality, emanation of the collective unconscious, hungry ghost from the underworld, or fallen angel; if you travel to certain regions in the spirit world, an exorcist seems as practical an accessory as malaria pills or a motion sickness bag.

Skeptics have laughed long and hard at medieval believers. "So. You believe in witches, do you?" Actually, the Bible doesn't believe in the kind of witches Cotton Mather preached against. But then society moved in the blink of an eye from laughing at the idea there were once witches to the realization that there are thousands of witches (practicing white magic) in our midst, and frowning on past Christian intolerance. And no doubt many of the modern priests and priestesses of Wicca see themselves as healers, men and women in pursuit of the rhythms of nature. But the occasional appearance of a Charles Manson or Jim Jones reminds us of bodies discovered in the bogs of pre-Christian England, blood-stained skulls in museums, little corpses in charcoaled pits in Canaanite villages, and Aztec stones coated with blood. Many of the great villains of modern Western history, Marx, Hitler, Jim Jones, and Rasputin, also showed an interest in spiritualism, and seemed to work on the same assumption as Tantric operators who taught that human sacrifice was a key to gaining power over the spirit world. If we note the premises of the New Age that Ascended Masters are undying, and good and evil ultimately aspects of the same Oneness, where were these spirit guides when the innocent were sacrificed to immortal cosmic spirits of an earlier age? The issue may sound ludicrous to some, but for those who are interested in spiritual tourism, it seems to me a very practical question. I wonder that more people have not asked it.

Start a religion and make a fortune, advised Ron Hubbard, who founded Scientology. Isn't that really what most cults are about? cynics ask. Bagwan Rajneesh accumulated dozens of Rolls Royce (defining status symbol of the Indian maharaja), and had beautiful women at his beck and call. A sucker is born every minute. Who needs any more explanation?

George Orwell understood the pleasures of such people as something more subtle and spiritual. His villain, O'Brien, asked his hero in the belly of the state torture chamber:

"How does one man assert his power over another, Winston?"

"By making him suffer."

"Exactly."

Tal Brooke noticed that Sai Baba's favored apostles expressed a bemused contempt for lesser disciples who punished themselves to gain enlightenment. The tantric interpretation of Asian religions is, in essence, "Sin and grace will abound." By reversing the moral commandments of Buddha, one could gain power over beings in other spheres of existence, that can aid in pursuit of both mundane (healing, making money, cursing an enemy) and supra-mundane (spiritual) goals. But is power means or end? The sadism and masochism inherent in the means is, I suspect, the key to understanding the goal. Ability to inflict suffering shows power.

Tibetan scholar David Snellgrove notes that, "a young generation of Western Buddhists, much attracted by the Tibetan form of this great religion" objects to "the most natural translations" of ancient tantric literature "because they suggest the kinds of superstitious and magical practices such as were prevalent in our own 'unenlightened' Middle Ages."³³ It may be dishonest of these scholars to distort ancient texts in this Way. But it may also be a sign of health.

Rudyard Kipling tells the story of a shy but hard-working Englishman who returned from three years at a remote outpost in the Indian jungle addicted to secret drink. He met a woman whom he took to be a paragon of kindness, and fell in love. Everyone knew this woman was cruel, and cultivated such friendships to enjoy her power over men, but being shy, he did not hear the opinion of society. In order to make himself worthy of her, he conquered his inner demons and stopped drinking. Later, happily married to another and better woman, he ended a friendship rather than

³³ David Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and Their Tibetan Successors*, p.130, Shambhala, 1987

allow someone to cast doubts on the goodness of his previous "benefactress."

The history of religion tells many such tales. Malcolm X transformed himself from petty criminal to honest man to make himself worthy of a con man named Elijah Mohammed. Many Marxists laid down their lives with an idealism Marx lacked. It is often said modern believers fail to live up to the ideals of the founders of their religions. But many respectable religions were founded by scoundrels who preached noble ideals followers live up to better than they themselves.

Huston Smith's desire to focus attention on the good in religion may also be a sign of a healthy innocence, too. But has its dangers. If we ignore the down side of religion, we ignore something which, if not "out there" waiting to get us, expresses something inside the human psyche. There is a famous photograph of California Democratic Congressman Ryan in Jonestown the night before he was murdered. On the crossbeam behind him a sign reads, "those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

How do we oppose the "dark side of the force?"

Don Richardson tells how he discovered, to his horror, that Yali headhunters who had begun to accept Christianity, maintained a custom called *gefam ason*, or "*touching the stench*." When a loved one died, his body was tied into a tree and left to rot in the tropical heat for nine days. Mourners caked in mud surrounded his body, "shrieking like banshees," reached out as if to touch his corpse. One began to dance beneath the rotting remains as maggots rained down on him. Another worked up his courage and plunged his hand into the body, then ate sago from the contaminated hand.

Richardson considered. "I knew it would not be enough simply to tell them: 'Look here! Stop doing this! It's not nice!' They already knew it wasn't nice. Obviously the very unniceness of it was somehow related to its purpose." Then he thought of another practice in the Sawi culture, called a *waness* bind in which a man would manipulate a person by humiliating himself before her. "Could the custom called *gefam ason* simply be a way of trying to impose a massive *waness* bind . . . on not just an individual, but on the whole supernatural world?. . . But what could be the purpose of such a large-scale *waness* bind, carried out by unnumbered Sawi over aeons

of time? Could it be to coerce an eventual abrogation of death itself?"³⁴

Witchcraft which arises from such a deep fear and need cannot be overcome by preaching platitudes, as Richardson realized, or with imprecations to "be nice." Ordinary evil may be opposed with platitudes. But Dracula is only vulnerable to a cross.

I also wonder what it really means to worship "the Buddha within."

"The Buddha, the goddess or idol, is merely a symbolic representation, while the true object of worship is the Buddha within." The woman at the True Buddha temple correctly understood orthodox Buddhist doctrine. As C. N. Tay wrote, "when self nature is awakened, we are Buddhas." The goal is to realize unity with all things, and the means is worship of an external object which represents the higher self, beyond duality, in one of its guises. But how does one distinguish between transcendence of ego boundaries which is pride, and transcendence of ego-boundaries that is mystical unity with the Absolute?

In practice, this distinction does not always seem as obvious as many spiritual tourists seem to assume. Even a creepy guru to the rich, like Bagwan Rajneesh, can preach emptiness:

"You have to peel your being the way one peels an onion. . . You will find layers within layers and finally when all the layers are discarded or eliminated you will find in your heads pure nothingness. . .emptiness. . .Shunyata (a Buddhist term for emptiness)is your essential (being.)"³⁵

Empty yourself. Realize your identity with the godhead. You are a divine being. You will be a scorpion in your next life. Why do so many gurus want us accept as our "essential being" everything except our humanity?

We are told to tear down the walls which divide us from the universe and embrace Infinity. But walls exist for protection. A bacteria dies when its cell wall is ruptured. The Starship Enterprise is blasted by the Klingons when it lowers its shields.

³⁴ Don Richardson, *Peace Child*, Regal Books 1974, p. 259

³⁵ From Tal Brooke, *Riders of the Cosmic Circuit*

Worship opens the front door of the soul. Letting someone into one's heart is a perilous hospitality. Surely if one is selective about whom one allows into one's bed, and body, we should be most cautious and careful of all, deciding whom to worship. The Bible equates the two, warning us against "spiritual prostitution," and telling us God is "jealous," not I think for His sake, but for ours. The world within, like the world without, is a hazardous country.

"Who Can We Go To When We're In Trouble?"

My third question was asked twenty-five hundred years ago by an Assyrian general with a tactical interest in comparative religions. Sennacherib, emperor of Assyria, sent troops marching on Jerusalem. The valley dark with his warriors, the general in charge approached the city gate to negotiate with, or at least taunt, the ants trapped in their little monotheistic hill. Sending an ultimatum to the pious king Hezekiah, he asked a series of questions he thought his enemies would chew over for a few hours, but still seems worth consideration 2500 years later.

The envoy began by needling the officials sent to meet him with the weakness of the Jewish position. He spoke loudly and in Hebrew, so the people manning the walls -- who would have to "eat their own excrement and drink their own urine" if the king refused to surrender -- could hear. "The emperor wants to know whom King Hezekiah is depending on in defying him," he asked. "Do you think empty words can take the place of military power? Do think Egypt, that reed that breaks when you lean on it, is going to come to your aid now?" The general stopped and considered what he knew of the spiritual inclinations of the Jewish people. "Or maybe you think your God, Yahweh, whose altars Hezekiah has been destroying, is going to save you? Actually it was God who sent me here to punish you." (The general had, perhaps, not been fully briefed on the iconoclastic nature of the Jewish God; but it's always worth an effort to stir up internal antagonisms.) He offered carrot as well as stick: "Surrender, and we'll lead you to a land not so different from this, and give you two thousand horses if you can provide the cavalry to make use of them."

Finally the general made an appeal to skeptics in his audience by asking the \$64,000 question. "Come, now. What god have you seen ever save any nation from the hands of the Assyrian army? Where now are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah? Where are the gods of Samaria? Did they save Samaria from me? Among all the gods of the nations, can you name a single one who saved his land from me? Do you really think this Yahweh is going to save Israel?"

Modern man, who prides himself on being scientific, talks of spirituality as a "potluck dinner," or calls himself a "spiritual tourist." Here, by contrast, was a man who approached questions of faith in a scientific and serious manner. "Does ivory soap float?" "Which god answers prayer of a people about to be swallowed?"

The Jewish historian says Yahweh gave an answer through the prophet Isaiah. "Do you not know? Can you not understand? Long ago I planned it. But now I am going to shield this city from you."³⁶

But the general's largely rhetorical question remains historically interesting. Where are the gods of the states he envoy mentioned -- Hamath, Arpad, Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah? Where, for that matter, are the people of those states? Or even Assyria? Swallowed up without a trace into larger or more vigorous ethnic identities.

The Jewish people, however, survived Sennacherib. The Hebrews came back from exile in Babylon, as prophesied by Jeremiah, while greater nations were absorbed. They survived the rise and fall of Alexander the Great. The Romans sacked Jerusalem and sent them into exile, where they remained for two thousand years, keeping their identity intact through shared worship of this "tribal" god who was now identified as Creator by half of humanity. They survived the Grand Inquisitor, the Russian patriarchs, and Adolf Hitler, whose thousand-year Reich fell in thirteen. Then the Jewish state was resurrected, as the prophets predicted 2500 years before. Jews trickled into Tel Aviv from places as far afield as Hangzhou, China and Lima Peru, and again survived "weapons of mass destruction" and promises to push them into the sea.

"What other god has ever done that?" Among the thousands of people groups

³⁶ I have condensed and paraphrased this story from 2 Kings 19.

which inhabit the earth, I can think of -- none.

In a broader sense, (to get ahead of myself a bit) Yahweh saved the poor, orphan, and widow for centuries from sacred prostitution and religious exploitation. He saved families from sexually-transmitted diseases and divorce. The prophets mandated a systematic program of social justice that allowed the poor a dignified opportunity ("sweat equity") to glean the fields, saving them from both hunger and the dependent status of beggars.

By contrast, consider India, land of monism and tens of millions of gods. A land that has the distinction of being about the only country in the world where the life expectancy for women is lower than for men. Which of India's gods saved widows from being burnt with their husbands? Which allowed outcastes to escape from social animosity or Brahmins from self-sufficiency? Which protected girls from temple prostitution? Kali? Shiva? Ram? Agni? Forgive my intolerance. But I happen to think a god that, rather than protecting children, demands them as an object of pleasure and sacrifice, ought to be smashed to crumbs and fed to the crocodiles of the Ganges River.

Did any of these millions of gods accomplish the moral revolution and social cleansing India needed? Or were monism and tolerance precisely the problems? Could it be that mythology and philosophy are powerless against the demonic apart from a God who made boundaries and took sides? Which god shook up the caste system and rescued the poor and helpless in India and around the world? For the traveler heading to the realms of other gods, I think it is a question worth considering.

What should a Christian say to an idealist setting out on a journey? Seek the good in every spiritual tradition and cherish it; but don't be naive. Allow yourself to become desperate enough to be heretical, and even desperate enough to be orthodox. Give credit where credit is due, but also blame where blame is due. Take ideals seriously enough to live by, even die for. But be careful to whom you open your heart. Follow each star to the place where it leads. Then come and look again in a town called Bethlehem.

What is it you are looking for? Look, then, for a god among the gods of humanity. Look for a guru among the gurus of humankind at whose feet to find enlightenment. Wear tennis shoes out upon the holy hills of the Incas. Shake clouds of dust from ancient manuscripts of the sacred libraries of Lhasa and Alexandria. Ponder every sect, tribe and teacher from Tierra Del Fuego to Tibet. Then come, open the New Testament. Look again at the life and teachings of the man who said of the Jewish writings, "You investigate the Scriptures, because you suppose you have eternal life in them, and yet they bear witness to me." (John 5:39)