Book Reviews

THE NEW RELIGIONS
By *Jacob Needleman.*
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Review by Marco Pallis.

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A BRILLIANTLY expounded study of a contemporary religious phenomenon affecting the West, and more especially the United States, by an observer endowed with lucidity and fair-mindedness in a high degree. As he explains in his opening pages, he himself started out with many of the characteristic prejudices of the liberal-cum-academic mind; a spell of practical experience as a clinical psychologist opened a first chink by letting him gauge the insufficiency of modern psychological science in relation to the things it so patronizingly professes to handle and this discovery, in its turn, paved the way for further questioning of the assumptions on which contemporary philosophy, sociology, and even religious exegesis rest. His own appointment to teach philosophy in a Californian university effected a further change in our author's outlook by placing him right in the midst of those movements, all of them claiming Eastern origins, which form the subject of the present book.

If the situation he had to face in California brought out the character of the new movements with particular acuteness, something of the same can be said to be happening in all countries where sophistication has reached a certain pitch; but admittedly, it is in America that feelings of youthful disillusion with what hitherto had passed for the Christian religion have been most passionately aroused, with the result that the young, and even many of the not-so-young, are flocking to what the author has called "the new religions" in the hope of finding there something that will make life mean more than the unheeding pursuit of the kind of carrots that a materialist-technological civilization holds out to the human donkeys in order to make them continue to draw their respective carts in no one knows what direction. For a hundred different reasons the long-cherished dogma of human "progress" is being called in question: but how to replace this discredited belief with something more intelligible, here is the great question to which so many people are now seeking an answer. Whoever seems to promise such an answer coupled with practical means of testing its validity, not rationally but "ontologically", gets a ready hearing: hence the success of "the new religions" all of which have this in common that they tend to bypass "doctrine" in favor of "method"—in effect what they say is "do this and you will get the result, nothing is required of you beforehand, for the knowledge is in the practice and cannot be had apart".

In the above statement, across a certain over-simplification verging on distortion, one can recognize echoes of initiatic teachings to be found, under various forms, in all the great

religions of the East; as it stands, however, such a statement, especially when put out indiscriminately for the benefit of masses of people operating outside any exoteric framework such as these religions had always and everywhere taken for granted, quite evidently carries with it no protection against the grossest deceptions; this is a possibility which one must always bear in mind while trying to assess the probable or actual effects of such a presentation of religion by spokesmen of the new movements as described in the book here under review.

At the same time one also has to remember that this association of a wisdom or state of awareness and of appropriate methods for actualizing it in the human soul is not something peculiar to the Eastern traditions, for the same considerations apply by rights to the Jewish and Christian forms of spirituality, as the author has pointed out again and again; all the ritual, moral and legislative prescriptions associated with the latter traditions, as well as their more specifically mystical disciplines, have as their ultimate purpose a conditioning of each human being to the Divine Image he carries within himself in virtue of his creation; but this purpose attaching to the formal elements in the tradition—a purpose which is *intellectual* as well as utilitarian in the truest sense of the word—has long been disregarded in favor of the accumulation of merit or the avoidance of its dark counterpart of sin, to the practical oblivion of all other motives. The consequent discredit in the eyes of many of the younger generation has become such that in their present defiant mood they do not wish to hear a word in defense of the religion in which their elders tried, rather half-heartedly, to bring them up; since the familiar labels no longer evoke in them any sympathetic response, they are now determined to look East, or in the direction they take for east, and if the phraseology they hear from that quarter has an exotic ring about it, this, for them, is but an additional cause of attraction since they see in it a guarantee that what they will gain from following an eastern way will at least be very different from the banal stuff dished out to them before, or so they hope.

For better or worse, such is the situation we have to reckon with at the moment; merely to wish things otherwise will get us nowhere. Whether those particular Eastern cults now being purveyed to the spiritually hungry souls of the young Westerners will in the long run bring what they profess to bring, or else something less desirable, remains to be seen; but in any case their rapid and widespread diffusion in the hitherto alien climate of the far West does amount to a collective phenomenon on a scale sufficient to merit, and indeed to demand, a most serious examination, and this is the phenomenon which Professor Needleman has set himself to study with such acumen on our behalf.

It is important to note from the outset that his dialectical method is descriptive rather than evaluative; deliberately the author holds back from definitive criticisms and tends, if anything, to giving benefit of the doubt in cases where others would incline to taking a more severely negative line. Howbeit, it is easy to see, from the way he writes, that if he has chosen to lie low in certain cases, this is not because he overlooks the grotesque features these new teachings plainly exhibit. In any case, the author does not try to cramp his reader's right to exercise discrimination in the light of the evidence as put at his disposal through this book or else as obtained by him from other sources.

Taking all in all, the author sees in the wish evinced by so many Americans to find some alternative to the current materialistic view of the world (with or without a Christian veneer upon it) a motive already carrying positive overtones, as also in the parallel wish to replace the diminished view of man propagated by the psychologists by

one in which human life on earth will be linked to a finality transcending all we mean by the earthly plane. Therefore while sticking to a scrupulous presentation of the facts as far as he has been able to ascertain them, the author tends to treat the entry on the Western stage of "the new religions" as at least *potentially* beneficial in its long-term effects, their many dubious features notwithstanding and even while admitting that things might go sadly wrong long before those effects are able to ripen into anything describable as a spiritual awakening at the collective level. This is the author's position at the moment, a position he admits to be no more than provisional and therefore modifiable at any time in the light of developing events.

To pass now to a few particulars: of the four movements that have provided our author with the bulk of his material—Zen Center, Meher Baba, Subud, and the "Transcendental Meditation" of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi which between them occupy some one hundred and nine pages of the book—the latter three have this in common that each of them seems to offer itself as an esoterism minus any of those exoteric supports such as have normally provided the formal structure of a given religion. In the case of Soto Zen, on the other hand, as practiced under the guidance of Suzuki Roshi it would seem that here the basic teachings of Buddhism may be taken for granted as would needs be the case in the Japanese homeland of this tradition. Moreover, the strict retention of various formal elements pertaining to the *Zendo,* such as certain rules of deportment, may fairly be accepted as evidence of Buddhist orthodoxy, a fact which puts Zen Center *a priori* into an entirely different category from the other three movements that follow in the text. Certainly, the impression given of Suzuki Roshi is of a man who adapts the traditional method to his audience in clear awareness of what is needed and also of what is possible under a particular set of circumstances. Moreover a most excellent collection of talks by the Roshi (*Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind,* published by John Weatherhill, Inc. of New York and Tokyo, 1970) has just arrived to heighten and confirm the impression already created by Professor Needleman's eloquent tribute.

If a brief digression be permissible here, I should welcome an opportunity to ask Mr. Needleman whether his widespread exploration of the American religious scene has ever brought him in touch with centers where the way of Pure Land Buddhism (*Jodo Shin* in Japanese) is being followed by Americans in any numbers, since this reviewer has both read texts emanating from Shin centers in California and also met one distinguished representative of this school, the Reverend G. M. Kubose, who is in charge of a temple at Chicago. I put this question deliberately because, as it seems to me, Pure Land Buddhism has much to recommend it as a way for Europeans to follow, and if comparatively few of them have felt drawn in this direction there must be a reason for this which it would be useful to ascertain. It may well be that a certain allergic feeling against Shin has been engendered in some Western minds on the strength of ill-understood resemblances between this form of the Buddhist wisdom and Christianity, e.g., the role of Amitabha Buddha as Savior and the stress laid on the prevailing weakness of mankind in these latter days, when disciplines calling for heroic effort are become less and less feasible for men to carry out. An ex-Christian seeking an Eastern way is apt to dislike any reference, however justified, to his own intellectual and moral incapacity; he likes to be told that he must stand on his own feet without expecting any help from above, and so on, but this is a great cause of deception when taken, as it so often is, in an ego-inflating sense. Misunderstandings apart, whoever examines *Jodo Shin* with any care can be left in no doubt as to its essentially Buddhist character. The part played there by Amitabha (*Amida*

in Japanese), all-important though it is, amounts to no more than a specification of the first of the three Refuges which, for every Buddhist, defines his own adherence to the tradition. "Taking refuge in the Buddha" will always imply a resorting to the avatâric grace, logically if not explicitly, otherwise the expression becomes vague to the point of losing much of its effectiveness. Moreover, in the case of Pure Land Buddhism it is perfectly consistent with its originality as one Buddhist *upāya* (method) among others that between its use of the invocatory formula enshrining the Name of Amitabha, the *Nembutsu,* and the use of the "Jesus Prayer" by the Hesychasts of Eastern Christianity there exists a genuine parallelism-a case of spiritual coincidence and not, as some have been at pains to argue, one of historical borrowing in either direction. I hope one day, when Professor Needleman carries his survey a stage further, to hear something from him concerning Pure Land Buddhism and its prospects in America at the present time.

Returning to the other three main examples described in the book these pertain to the category of ersatz-spiritualities devoid of any valid link with those Eastern religions in which their respective founders were born. It is, however, a matter of passing interest to note that both Meher Baba and Bapak (founder of *Subud*) went through some kind of spiritual experience in early life; but it would be a grave error to argue that such an experience *ipso facto* renders a man immune to illusion at all levels. This cautionary remark applies also to the case of Mahesh Yogi: it seems safe to assume that he started life as a regular initiate of some Hindu *guru;* what prompted him to develop his queer travesty of Vedantic teachings and to try and propagate this in the West is not made clear in the book.

Concerning the extreme "facility" claimed for the method inculcated by the Transcendent Meditation school, as also by the two others named before, this calls for a little consideration since indirectly it raises a big question, namely what, in a spiritual path, is the place of effort—the *virya pārāmita,* to use a Mahāyanist term—and also the place of ease, since both attributes enter into the definition of the religious life viewed as a whole. Christ said that "my yoke is easy and my burden is light", yet what he offered his followers was the Cross. A friend whom I recently consulted about this matter cited the advice given by a Moroccan Sufi master to a disciple, namely to beware of any teacher offering him a way of Mercy unless he had first made him pass by a way of Rigor. The masters of the Jewish *Kabbala* have got things right when they point out that, *in divinis,* Mercy is always to be found concealed at the heart of apparent Rigor and vice versa. Man's natural response to rigor is renewed effort, while to mercy his response is repose in his own being; to the eye of "non-duality" these two human attitudes and the two divine aspects to which they correspond belong together; but while knowing this, one has the right to expect, in any presentation of a spiritual way deemed to be self-sufficient, that the polar balance between these aspects will be duly maintained, both by implication and also sometimes more explicitly. To say the least, there is nothing of such an equilibrium to be found in the extravagant simplifications of Mahesh Yogi.

Krishnamurti, to whom the author devotes a longish chapter, must be accounted something of a fringe manifestation of "the new religions" seeing that he himself rejects, as self-imprisoning products of a bad habit of thinking, practically all that the word "religion" covers for an ordinary mind. For him there is no question of revelation, therefore not of tradition either; doctrines or formal elements of any kind which others regard as reliable supports for truth and as its eventual catalysts in the soul are discounted by him as being no more than creations of a wish to feel comfortable and secure; the inter-relationship

between Intellect—the intelligence uncreated and untreatable, as Meister Eckhardt put it—and Truth on which all acts of discernment ultimately rest seems to be omitted from Krishnamurti's calculations so that, for him, the human task reduces itself to a psychological process of self-observation sufficing unto itself, a kind of "art for art's sake" from which all ascertainable finality is *a priori* excluded as being but one more deception of the arch-enemy "thought"; such is the impression gathered from the quotations to be found in the book including a fairly long excerpt from a dialogue between him and various inquirers at one of the annual meetings held at Saanen in Switzerland. I can only add that, having read and re-read the chapter in question, I find it difficult to distinguish anything in the evidence there presented that would go to prove Krishnamurti's own technique of Socratic questioning and repartee to be the product of ought but a thinking just as in the case of us his weaker brethren; the rather repellent sophistication of his mode of expression when answering his interlocutors certainly does not suggest otherwise.

If Krishnamurti showed good sense in breaking loose from the grotesquely inflated role for which he was being briefed by his Theosophist sponsors-for a young man of spirit, life under their ceaseless battery of adulation must have been terribly boring—one may yet wonder whether, after that, he might not have done better to retire quietly into the fold of his ancestral Hinduism where his remarkable gifts could then have ripened in the normal way, and who can say how far this course might subsequently have taken him? This is only speculation, of course, since in fact the world-stage has continued to be his field of activity: which leaves one with the thought that Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater may, after all, have carried out their briefing more thoroughly than they knew of, even if things did not work out exactly according to plan from their own point of view.

In the latter part of his survey the author touches on certain possibilities of spiritual development that could evidently only become accessible to the few, namely the attempted introduction of the esoteric teachings and methods of the *Vajrayana* into the West by the agency of Lamas belonging to the Tibetan diaspora. Experiments on these lines have been going on in several places, the results of which it is, however, too early to assess definitively; one must in any case beware of rushing into optimistic forecasts concerning these attempts which, by the nature of things, are beset with difficulties, though neither is there any need to assume *a priori* that this is an impossible task even if in some cases serious hitches are already known to have occurred after an apparently hopeful start.

It is while speaking about the Tibetans that the author incidentally displays an insight not easy to match even among those who, prior to the disaster, were privileged to view the old Tibet at close quarters, loving what they found there. In a particularly moving passage the author refers to the providential part devolving on an intact Tibet in relation to that modern world of whose scale of values it stood as a living refutation he puts the position most aptly when he writes that "a land like Tibet perhaps stands to the whole world like such a teacher stands to ordinary men;" he has just been speaking of the function of the *guru* in transmitting an esoteric teaching, hence the above comparison. One can truly say that this remote land behind the snowy rampart of the Himalaya had become like the chosen sanctuary for all those things whereof the historical discarding had caused our present profane civilization, the first of its kind on record, to come into being. By the mere fact of existing in the face of that civilization Tibet acted as a focus of compassion for the unheeding majority beyond its borders. On such a showing, the violation of this sanctuary and the dissipation of the sacred influences hitherto concentrated there becomes

an event of properly cosmic significance, of which the ulterior consequences for a world that tacitly condoned the outrage or, in many cases, openly countenanced it on the plea that it brought "progress" to a reluctant people have yet to ripen fully. In drawing attention to this far-reaching aspect of the Tibetan catastrophe Professor Needleman has spoken in a manner that has a prophetic ring about it; I can only corroborate, on the strength of my own memories of the sacred land, what his own intuition has enabled him to grasp so clearly.

From Tibet it is but a short step to the Red Indians of America, to whom the author had dedicated some of his most moving pages. He is speaking of a particular kind of spiritual power, the one that enables a man to take the open book of Nature for his Scripture and there read the multiform message of the Great Spirit. The exemplar and representative of this power or skill, in the eyes of the searching young, is *par excellence* the Red man who has remained true to his tradition: in Professor Needleman's own words "is it any wonder, then, that the younger generation has fallen in love with the American Indian?" This part of the book is so charged with vitally important ideas that it seems almost like an impertinence to try and paraphrase it further; it would be worth buying the book for the sake of pages 203-209 alone.