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Turning East[†]

JOHN A. T. ROBINSON*

We have seen his star in the East and are come to worship him.
And they returned to their own country another way.

(Matthew 2:2: 12)

There are many reasons for turning East. To me one of the less obvious has always been why in a Christian church we should do it to affirm God in the creed. Today of course many have been doing it to get away from the Christian God, to discover what they feel they have not found in the creeds. And many have found light and love and many disenchantment. Of that spiritual trip—and for it the East obligingly these days comes to us—the wittiest and wisest treatment I know is the latest book by the American theologian, Harvey Cox, called *Turning East*. He is honest to what he really got from it, in the understanding of meditation and so on, and where it left him—in many ways to his surprise a better Baptist than he was before! Another reason for turning East, and this gets much nearer why I found myself going there, is simply to learn, to be stretched by truth and ways of life of which it is possible to remain wilfully ignorant by just sitting in Cambridge—and we can no longer have the effortless superiority to presume like Frazer that one can write *The Golden Bough* without ever leaving Trinity Great Court! That is a good and a necessary reason for an academic to go East. But here I want to speak also of why as a Christian I felt impelled to turn East. And that could be summed up in the first words of my text, which I found myself using more than once around Epiphany-time in South India to describe the pilgrimage that my wife and I were on: 'We have seen his star in the East and are come to worship him.' Not simply to understand Hinduism and Buddhism better, though that was a major objective; nor to look for other light than that of Christ, though if one is humble and sensitive how much comes; but because we have seen *his* star in the East, to worship him, to shape his worth more wholly, more roundedly, than a one-eyed Western approach has often allowed. We came to expand, to deepen, our vision of Christ from the light which the East sheds on him.

† A sermon preached by the Rt Revd Dr John A. T. Robinson in Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge, on Sunday, April 23, 1978.

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Now the source of this light, which illumines and points to the Christ, is not distinctively, let alone exclusively Christian, any more than it was for the Wise Men. It was something from within their own world, drawn from the ancient wisdom of the East, whose significance they understood, but which pointed them beyond themselves till it came to rest over where the light of the world lay. Then they opened *their* treasures, rich and rare, to honour the King of kings.

And this has been the process, prefigured by our first lesson (Isaiah 60:1-11), by which the nations have brought in their glory to fill out the worth of the Christ. Think what Europe would have made of Christ if the understanding of him had been limited to the Messianic categories of Palestinian Judaism. Beginning with St Paul and continuing through the work of men like Clement of Alexandria and Origen, the wisdom of Greece, albeit from an alien culture, was boldly drawn upon to fashion the worth of Christ for us, the children of that western world. We think of Christianity now as being a western religion, but this is only because it has become that through men who took great risks in theology, in spirituality and art that we might know through the medium of our own cultural conditioning the wonderful works of God. But this cultural conditioning which has given us marvellous glories and shaped so rich a worth, in everything for instance that this Chapel says to us, architecturally, musically, liturgically and the rest, has become also a constriction. And it constricts not only our capacity for communicating the faith to others but now our own worship of the universal Christ. In our one world men and women are turning East because they sense how one-eyed we in the West have become. And they recognise that no other country in the third world is so rich in spiritual resources as India and the places that India has influenced.

Now this throws a major responsibility upon the churches of India and upon Christians from the West in helping them to use and shape these resources for the worship of Christ. For it is only thus that the light from the East can reach the West through the glass of Christian vision. Otherwise it will simply be Hindu or Buddhist wisdom, however valuable, mediated through whatever current guru can capture the imagination or touch the pockets of the West. Indeed I conceive it an important task of Christian mission today—in direct line with what inspired Bishop Westcott and others of this University a hundred years ago in founding the Cambridge Mission to Delhi—to be present and assist at the birth of this new Asian theology, at this explication or unwrapping of the mystery of Christ in eastern terms. As I went round the world I was frequently asked what do you make of the new liberation theology from Latin America or black theology from South Africa or women's theology from North America—all vital correctives to the image of God as the great white male upon the throne which for so many now is not only irrelevant but blasphemous. But no one asked me what do you make of the new Indian theology. For it has been slow in coming and what there is has not travelled.

Yet there is a wealth and depth of tradition here, spiritually, philosophically and aesthetically, from which the entire catholic and ecumenical Church could come to worship the Christ more richly and more roundly. Of course, as I said, it means taking risks and making mistakes as the categories and thought-forms, the symbolism and the art, will often be as alien now as when the great apologists of the early Church or Aquinas in the Middle Ages wrested them from the exclusive use of the Platonists or Aristotelians. And the churches of India, inspired by the missionaries and by what they are still hearing from many of the more evangelical missions, and would hear here, have been on the whole timid and defensive. Understandably conscious of their minority status and cultural insecurity, they have not been, by and large, positive towards the symbols of the East, innovative in their theology, imaginative in their art, prophetic in their witness to the establishment. With notable and courageous exceptions their record for instance under the recent Indian Emergency was not glorious. Indeed, again with notable individual exceptions, usually on the edges rather than at the centre, it was not in the new 'pilgrim' churches from which we in the West had learned to expect so much by reason of their unity restored, the Church of South India and the Church of North India, that I sensed the most pioneering work being done. Rather it was from within the Mar Thoma Church, the reformed Syrian Orthodox of South India, and above all from the Roman Catholics that one learned to expect the most exciting witness. Psychologically and sociologically one can understand this, because they have the confidence born of long roots and widespread links. With a good deal of expendable ballast (very necessary in any church) they have the freedom and the courage to be radical. But they also have a wholeness in their understanding of the Gospel and a depth of spirituality which we found profoundly convincing. Indeed I had to confess to a Roman Catholic Archbishop that if I stayed in India for much longer I might have to become a Roman Catholic. But fortunately I was leaving in a few days! Yet on the frontiers of Hindu and Buddhist dialogue and of spiritual renewal it was the Benedictines and Jesuits in particular who seemed to be setting the pace. And in the very impressive National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre at Bangalore, which was as massive as its name, they were engaged on a programme of indigenization from the top which would cause many a flutter in Protestant breasts. Just as the windows in King's College Chapel present a profound, if often obscure, typology of themes from the Old Testament taken up and fulfilled in the New, so the iron grilles in their Chapel windows dared to take the Hindu symbols and match them with their fulfilment in Christ; and their new Orders for the Mass of India were deeply thought through, theologically and spiritually. This was no shallow syncretism but a real baptizing into Christ of the treasures of the East.

But let me throw in two other examples just to show you that the Romans are not making all the running! One of the most encouraging things we saw was the Christian Arts and Communications Centre in

Madras, which does much through the public media and the living theatre. And this was actually founded and financed by the Missouri Synod, the most fundamentalist wing of the American Lutheran Church, most of whose members would probably be horrified to know what their money is being used for. Indeed in the Christian dances they were creating, drawing on the traditional Hindu temple dancing, they found themselves in a bind. They could not get Christian girls to take part in them, and then they could not get churches to put them on because the performers were not Christian! Finally I must say that the most radical form of seminary training I have seen anywhere, through immersing the students in running workshops for the unemployed, through agricultural projects and slum-living, came from the Church of South India, and one of the most radical reports (yet, I may say, to be implemented) for the future pattern of the Ministry came from the Church of North India. Yet by and large at the local level the art, the architecture, the music, even the printing, is only too often what Osbert Lancaster might have labelled 'tired missionary'. Indeed, as I took part in an Anglican service in Japan, I came to the conclusion that the only thing there you wouldn't have found in the West was the slippers, with which you are carefully provided at the door of every house—a great improvement, I may say, on picking your way barefoot through Hindu temples (Buddhism is at least so much cleaner a religion—both in Sri Lanka and of course in Japan)!

We saw his star in the East and came to worship him. But, says the Epiphany story, 'they returned to their own country another way.' (One of the intriguing questions incidentally left with me as a result of our time in Palestine, of which I have been able to say nothing here, is how they could have got back east or north from Bethlehem without going through Jerusalem!) We came back through what I learnt to recognise as the North Pacific Community, almost as much a unit these days as the North Atlantic (the-greatest cultural shock of the tour was going straight from Calcutta to Hong Kong). And if you keep on travelling East you hit the far West, and 'the end of all our exploring,' says Eliot, 'will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.' You can only come home by doing the journey, and this is particularly characteristic of our age. As John Dunne has put it, not the English poet but the American Roman Catholic,

The holy man of our time, it seems, is not a figure like Gotama or Jesus or Mohammed, a man who could found a world religion, but a figure like Gandhi, a man who passes over by sympathetic understanding from his own religion to other religions and comes back again with new insight to his own. Passing over and coming back, it seems, is the spiritual adventure of our time.

For in the last analysis we each have our own truth to make. Apart from the inspiration of Thomas Merton's *Asian Journal*, I carried with me in my mind a quotation from Jung, reflecting on his only visit to India:

I studiously avoided all so-called 'holy men'. I did so because I had to make do with my own truth, not accept from others what I could not attain on my own. I would have felt it a theft had I attempted to learn from the holy men and to accept their truth for myself. . . I . . . must shape my own life out of myself—out of what my inner being tells me, or what nature brings to me.

And finally we must shape the worth of our own Christ—not of another century, even the first, nor of another land, even the Holy Land. Yet unless we do the journey, spiritually if not physically, we shall be impoverished, and our worship and witness to Christ will also be impoverished. For increasingly in our one world and for our one world we find ourselves convicted by the words of one of J. B. Phillips' titles, 'Your God—or your Christ—is too small.' So in the words of the Epiphany hymn with which we shall close our worship,

Brightest and best of the sons of the morning,
Dawn on our darkness and lend us thine aid;
Star of the East, the horizon adorning,
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.