

NOTES

THE VALUE OF ORIENTAL HISTORY FOR HISTORIANS<sup>1</sup>

by

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I

THE WESTERN DISTORTION OF HISTORY

(i) Trying to be an historian means trying to jump clear of the particular time and place at which one happens to have been born and brought up. It means trying to look at history from some standpoint that is outside one's own, and that is more central, and therefore more objective, than one's own is likely to be. This is the first, the most important, and the most difficult piece of business on the historian's agenda.

(ii) Actually, this ideal can never be achieved by the historian more than partially. Every current view of past history turns out, on analysis, to be partly a reading, into the past, of present conditions which may illuminate the past but are quite as likely to obscure and confuse our vision of it.

(iii) In the latest age of the world's history, which, in our generation, is only just ceasing to be the present age, the salient feature has been the predominance of the West in the world. This feature in the contemporary landscape has been reflected in the modern West's presentation of the world's past history. Modern western historians have been inclined to make the world's history centre round Western Europe. The Americas, Asia, and Africa are not brought onto the stage before the last years of the fifteenth century of the Christian Era. The Americas are then presented as a field for colonization by West Europeans, and Africa as a field for exploitation by West Europeans.

(iv) Owing to the temporary predominance of the West over the rest of the world, there has been a tendency, in the rest of the world, to take over this western view of history uncritically,

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1. Notes upon which the author based his lecture which was delivered at the December 4, 1956, meeting of the Siam Society.

together with the dominant western civilization's other manners and customs.

(v) This consensus is a testimony to the contemporary power and prestige of the West, but it is not evidence that the West-centred view of history is right. Actually, this view corresponds with the facts only for the years 1492-1914, or perhaps indeed only for the years 1683-1914. The West's predominance in the world was not indisputably established until after the raising of the second Turkish siege of Vienna; and in 1914 this western ascendancy suffered the first of the blows that have now shattered it.

(vi) Down to the close of the fifteenth century, Western Christendom was in an outlying position, at one end of a festoon of civilizations stretching right across the Old World. Japan, at the opposite extremity of the festoon, was the only other province of civilization that was as remote from the centre as Western Christendom was till that date.

(vii) The invention, in the fifteenth century, of the ocean-going modern western sailing ship made Western Europe suddenly become the centre of the world, instead of continuing to be one of the Old World's two dead-ends. The new type of sailing ship gave them access, by sea, to the domains of all the other living civilizations.

(viii) But this map of the world, with Western Europe as the world's centre, has been short-lived. The invention of railways in the nineteenth century, and of aeroplanes in the twentieth century, has been bringing the map back to its normal shape, in which the centre is, not Western Europe, but Southwest Asia and Egypt.

The mediaeval western map of the world, in which the centre of the world was taken to be Jerusalem, was much nearer to the normal than the modern western map, in which the centre has been taken to be, first Western Europe, and then the Atlantic Ocean.

Since the French and British conquests in India during the eighteenth century, Egypt and Southwest Asia have been progressively recovering their historic central position (a) as the region offering the short overland or Suez Canal route between India and Western Europe, in place of the long sea route round the Cape of Good Hope; (b) as the bridge between the two areas in which the world's population is massed: India, Southeast Asia, Eastern Asia on the one side, and Europe and North America on the other; (c) as the world's largest unexhausted reservoir of mineral oil.

(ix) On a map of the world in which Southwest Asia and Egypt are the centre, the civilizations to the east of the centre count for as much as the civilizations to the west of the centre. And the civilizations of the first two generations count for as much as those of the present generation. An example of this may be found in the Americas. History there is not blank before the arrival of conquerors from Western Europe at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries of the Christian Era; the pre-Columbian civilizations of Middle America and Peru take their place in history on an equal footing with the civilizations of the Old World.

## II

### LIGHT FROM THE EAST

When once we have brought the histories of all the civilizations back into focus, and have reduced the history of the Western Civilization to its proper position and proportion, we gain light on the history of mankind which is hidden from us so long as the Western Civilization's history is allowed to eclipse all the rest of history.

#### (i) Light on the Origins of Civilization.

When, where, and how did the kind of society that we call civilization arise? Our Western Civilization is a civilization of the third generation, so its history throws no light on the origin of the

species of which it is one representative. To find light on this we must look to Southwest Asia and Egypt, and dig down to the Neolithic stratum there. The foothills of the ring of mountains half encircling the plains of Iraq on the north, east and west seem to have been the region in which agriculture was invented and in which this new source of food supply made it possible for people to live a sedentary life in villages. What are the salient features that differentiate civilization from this previous Neolithic life? Perhaps three: (a) the emergence of towns, in addition to villages; (b) the emergence of a small class not directly engaged in producing food; (c) the invention, by this leisured minority, of writing, mathematics, and astronomy. N.B. In Middle America, astronomy was carried far, but writing not very far; in Andean America, writing was never invented; the Inca Empire kept its administrative records by means of quipus (strings of different colours with different kinds and sequences of knots in them).

In the Old World, civilization seems to have been started by Neolithic agriculturists reclaiming the jungle-swamp of the lower Tigris-Euphrates basin, and thereby opening up much more fertile agricultural land over a much larger area. From the plains of Iraq this new way of life spread to other river basins of the same kind: to the lower Nile basin quickly, to the Indus basin not quite so soon, to the Yellow River basin decidedly later. About the time when civilization took root in the Indus basin, it also took root in a new kind of physical environment, the Aegean archipelago. Here the main artery of communications was not a river, but the sea; and navigation, instead of the control of river waters, became the master art.

#### (ii) Light on the Origins of the Higher Religions

By 'higher religions' I mean those which present a, to our minds, loftier vision of the nature of God or Absolute Reality, and of God's attitude towards, and behaviour to, human beings.

The chief representatives of this higher kind of religion that are alive today are Southern Buddhism (the Hinayāna),

Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Northern Buddhism (the Mahayāna), Hinduism, Christianity, Islam.

Other higher religions have become extinct or have been swallowed up by one or other of the still surviving higher religions; *e.g.*, Mithraism and the worships of Cybele, Isis, and Juppiter Dolichenus were partly extinguished and partly absorbed by Christianity.

The history of our Western Civilization throws no light on the origins of the higher religions. Western Europe has not been the cradle of any one of them. Southwest Asia and India have been the two regions in which the majority of the higher religions have made their first appearance. Within these two regions, two provinces have been specially fertile in bringing higher religions to birth: (a) Syria, in the widest geographical sense of the name, including everything that lies between the Antitaurus, the Mediterranean, and the Arabian desert, with the Hijaz thrown in; (b) Central Asia, in the widest sense of the name, including the Oxus-Jaxartes basin, and the Tarim basin, with the Panjab thrown in.

These two provinces have one significant common characteristic: both are 'roundabouts'; *i.e.*, meeting places of routes that converge from far afield and radiate out in all directions. Because of this convergence of routes, Central Asia and Syria have been 'melting-pots' in which elements of population and culture drawn from several different civilizations have met and fused.

When we turn from the space-dimension to the time-dimension, we find that the higher religions have arisen in the two Asian 'roundabouts' at times in which civilizations of the second generation have broken down and disintegrated, and in which they have also collided with each other. These breakdowns and catastrophes took the form of wars, revolutions, atrocities, deportations, evictions, and the intermingling of 'displaced persons' in conditions of extreme suffering. This has been the social milieu in which the higher religions have come to birth. In the history of the Western Civilization there has been nothing like this till the bout of war and revolution that began in 1914, and that is still continuing today.

(iii) Light on the Contact between Different Civilizations in the Pre-Oceanic Overland Age.

For 400 years, beginning in the fifteenth century of the Christian Era, the ocean was the main medium of intercourse between the domains of the different living civilizations, and the sailing ship was the instrument through which the ocean was turned to account. From about the eighteenth century B.C. to the fifteenth century of the Christian Era, the part played in the following chapter of history by the ocean was played by the steppe, and the part played by the sailing ship was played by the horse.

The steppe is a kind of dry ocean. Like the ocean, it adjoins the domains of all the civilizations of the Old World. Like the ocean, again, it is 'conductive.' People, tools, weapons, ideas, ideals, styles of art that establish themselves in any corner of the steppe rapidly spread to all other parts of the steppe, and thence into the domains of adjoining civilizations (Illustrations: the spread of 'the Animal Style' of art over, and out of, the steppe to China in one direction and Scandinavia in the other; the spread of the Sarmation military equipment to China in one direction and to Western Europe in the other).

The role of serving as the intermediaries between different civilizations, which was played by western seamen from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century of the Christian Era, was played by the Eurasian nomads during the preceding 3,000 years and more.

In Turkey in the nineteen-twenties, President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was annoyed, and at the same time stimulated, by the current West-centred chart of world history; so he produced a history of the world centred not on Western Europe but on the Turks. This view of history was derided by Westerners, yet it was a true view of the historical facts over a period twice as long as the 400 years during which Western Europe has in truth been the centre of the world. For eight centuries—from the fourth to the twelfth century of the Christian Era—the Turkish-speaking nomads were masters of the Eurasian steppe, and during those eight centuries they really did

play the central role in the history of the Old World. In the fourth and fifth centuries the Huns, who were the first westward-breaking wave of Turkish-speaking nomads out of the steppe, invaded China, India, Persia, and Europe simultaneously. As recently as the eighteenth century, Turkish-speaking dynasties were still ruling the centre of the Old World from India to the Crimea inclusive, and from the Oxus-Jaxartes basin to Algeria inclusive.

Moreover, the Turks were neither the first nor the last swarm of Eurasian nomads to play this central role in the history of the Old World. From the eighteenth century B.C. to the fourth century of the Christian Era, this role had been played by Sanskrit-speaking and Iranian-speaking nomads who had spread eastwards as far as the northwest fringes of China, southwards as far as the Deccan, and westwards as far as Syria, Anatolia, and Hungary. In the thirteenth century the Turks' successors, the Mongols, simultaneously invaded China and Burma, Persia and Iraq, Russia and Hungary. It was only in the seventeenth century that the Eurasian nomads were at last encircled by the sedentary civilizations, when the Russians, advancing eastward, made contact with the Manchus, advancing westward, in the original homeland of the Mongols on the border between Transbaikal and Manchuria. It was not till the eighteenth century that the Manchus, wielding the whole power of China, united under their rule, subdued the Mongols' cousins the Kalmucks. It was not till the nineteenth century that the Russians subdued the last surviving independent Turkish-speaking nomads: the Turkmens of Transcaspia.

Thus the horsemen of the Eurasian steppe have had much longer innings as the protagonists on the stage of history than the seamen of Western Europe.

#### (iv) Summary

I have given three illustrations of the light that is thrown on history by giving Asia her due. I could add many more, but I hope that these three illustrations are enough to make my point. The point is as simple as it is important: the value of Oriental history for historians.

