

The Easternisation Thesis: Critical Reflections

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The influence of Eastern religions upon the West is often portrayed as a phenomenon of growing significance marking a watershed in contemporary religious and spiritual culture. In the most radical version of the Easternisation thesis, articulated most systematically by Colin Campbell, indigenous developments within Western culture point to the demise of the traditional dualistic religious conception of divinity as personal, transcendental and beyond worldly reality and its replacement with a monistic conception characterised by impersonality and immanence. This article subjects this thesis to critical examination and finds it deficient in four major respects. Firstly, it tends to stereotype Eastern religions in a somewhat misleading way. Secondly, it is insensitive to the marked differences between various Eastern religious traditions. Thirdly, it characterises those trends in Western culture which it sees as constituting Easternisation too readily and unequivocally as specifically religious developments. Fourthly, it ignores or glosses over the very this-worldly and therefore quintessentially Western character of these trends. The article concludes with an attempt to rescue some of the insights of the Easternisation thesis by incorporating them into a broader framework and by offering some alternative suggestions for understanding the developments with which the thesis is concerned.

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In Tai-Chi, when used as a means of self defence, an opponent is defeated not by direct assault upon him but by going with the flow of his own movements in such a way that he defeats himself. This could be seen as analogous to the whole history of the encounter between East and West. The latter has rather aggressively and forcefully subordinated the East technologically and economically yet in its relative or apparent non-resistance the East has come inexorably to triumph spiritually as Western materialism has brought about a crisis of faith and spiritual bankruptcy.

The idea that Western religious life has become increasingly susceptible to influence from Eastern traditions, and by Eastern is meant East and South Asia rather than the Middle East the influence of which upon the West is generally acknowledged to go back several millennia, is one which has been around since at least the nineteenth century. In the latter half of that century interest in Eastern religions and in particular Buddhism had been steadily growing and the influence of Eastern religions could most notably be seen in movements such as Theosophy and transcendentalism. By the turn of the century some voices were predicting that such developments heralded a spiritual transformation of a West in the throes of a spiritual crisis (see Clarke 2000, p. 46). In the mid-twentieth century such views gained further momentum an example being the prediction of Joseph Needham that the future belongs to Taoism (1956, p. 152). These were largely prognostications, however, rather than descriptions of current realities and few at the time had much actual involvement with Eastern religions.

More recently the idea has tended to take on an even firmer shape in the claim that Western forms of religion are now actually in the process of demise and giving way to Eastern forms. The impact of Buddhism upon the West by the 1960s, echoing in even louder tones the impact it had in the context of the crisis of faith of the Victorian era, has been described as a new Reformation (Parrinder 1964, pp. 12 and 22). Jacob Needleman speaks of the 1960s as witnessing a 'spiritual explosion' which recognised in Eastern religion the 'mystical core of all religion' (1977, p. xi). Harvey Cox (1977)

worried that the West was abandoning Christianity and turning East so unprecedented was the intensity at the time of the wave of interest Americans were showing in Oriental religion. Many others have made similar general observations (see [Bellah 1970](#); [Glock and Bellah 1976](#); [Wuthnow 1976](#)) while some have sought to document the contemporary impact of specific traditions, especially Buddhism (see [Green 1989](#); [Wilson 1990](#); [Bauman 1991, 1995](#); [Somers 1991](#); [Heelas 1996b](#); [Bell 1998](#)).

They are, however, less radical than the most recent version of this namely that proposed by [Colin Campbell \(1999\)](#). This goes much further in claiming that a thorough-going sea change is occurring in Western mentality by which assumptions, dispositions and parameters fundamental to the Western ethos and outlook are giving way to others which are at heart Eastern in character but not necessarily Eastern in provenance. It claims not only that there is increasing penetration of the West by religions and groups of Eastern origin and inspiration but that the West is essentially changing its entire ethos towards that of the East. This is a view which lays stress not simply upon the importation of Eastern religions into the West in the form of groups and organisations, whether Buddhist, Hindu, Sufi or other, the popularity of meditative practices and disciplines, of Eastern writings and scriptures and mystical ideas and so on, but also, and more crucially, upon the emergence of a range of ideas and trends of thought, which are, whether self-consciously or otherwise, essentially Eastern in character.

‘The traditional Western cultural paradigm’, Campbell argues, ‘no longer dominates in so called “Western” societies, but . . . has been replaced by an “Eastern” one. This fundamental change may have been assisted by the introduction of obviously Eastern ideas and influences into the West, but equally important have been internal indigenous developments within that system, developments which have precipitated this paradigm shift’ (p. 41).

Campbell draws upon Weber’s contrast between an Eastern ethos which holds a conception of divinity as essentially impersonal and immanent in reality and the Western view of the divine as essentially personal, transcendental, separate from and outside the world. The former is monistic and views the world as an interconnected, self-contained cosmos; the latter is dualistic viewing the world as governed, and even having been created, from somewhere else and by something beyond or above this world. The Eastern model is congruent with Troeltschian mysticism, about which Campbell has said elsewhere, of course, a great deal (see [Campbell 1972](#)). In this model the idea of spiritual perfection or self-deification replaces the traditional Western idea of salvation, and the Church is replaced by a group of seekers attached to a guru.

Campbell utilises in support of his thesis the work of [Gilgen and Cho \(1979\)](#) and [Krus and Blackman \(1980\)](#), psychologists who have devised ‘measures’ of Easternness and Westernness of thought. Gilgen and Cho characterise the Eastern and Western traditions under the following typifications.

Eastern

- man and nature are one;
- spiritual and physical are one;
- mind and body are one;
- man should recognise his basic oneness with nature, the spiritual and the mental rather than attempt to analyse, label, categorise, manipulate, control or consume the things of the world;
- because of his oneness with all existence, man should feel ‘at home’ in any place and with any person;

- science and technology at best create an illusion of progress;
- enlightenment involves achieving a sense of oneness with the universal; it is a state where all dichotomies vanish;
- meditation, a special state of quiet contemplation, is essential for achieving enlightenment

Western

- man has characteristics which set him apart from nature and the spiritual;
- man is divided into a body, a spirit and a mind;
- there is a personal God who is over man;
- man must control and manipulate nature to ensure his survival;
- rational thought and an analytical approach to problem solving should be emphasised;
- science and technology have given us a good life and provide our main hope for an even better future;
- action and the competitive spirit should be rewarded

Krus and Blackman provide the following list of attributes.

Eastern	Western
synthesis	analysis
totality	generalisation
integration	differentiation
deduction	induction
subjective	objective
dogmatic	intellectual
intuition	reason
anti-science	science
personal	impersonal
moralist	legalistic
non-discursive	assertive
affiliative	power
ecstasy	order
irrational	rational
imaginative	critical

This process of Easternisation is perceived by Campbell to underlie a series of significant specific changes in Western thought in recent decades; the rise of environmentalism and in particular radical, holistic environmentalism or deep ecology; the emergence of the human potential and psycho-therapy movements and of the religions of the self; declining belief in a personal God; and increasing prominence of a belief in reincarnation.

Environmentalism as a set of concerns and as a philosophy emerged as part of the counter-culture of the 1960s. By the 1980s its ideas had become commonplace and even mainstream. More radical versions emerged, known as deep ecology, which questioned the anthropocentrism of the traditional Western intellectual paradigm and the

assumption that human life was of greater value than other forms of life. Such beliefs are characterised by a holistic outlook which, in the form of some interpretations of Jim Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, sees the planet as a single 'living', self-regulating super-organism infused with quasi-spiritual if not religious significance.

Holistic also are the many strands of the human potential, personal growth and psychotherapy movements and the life affirming new religious movements and self-religions. These have little time for talk of God. Even among those who are not involved in them the notion of a personal God had declined markedly in Western nations. Gallup has documented a steady fall in the percentage of the population espousing such beliefs from the high nineties after the Second World War to the low sixties today. Alongside this, assent to the belief in reincarnation has steadily risen to a figure of around 20 to 25 percent of the populations of Western countries.

Such changes are coming about as a result, he argues, of the fact that

. . . the dominant paradigm or 'theodicy' which has served the West effectively for 2,000 years has finally lost its grip over the majority of the population in Western Europe and North America. They no longer hold to a view of the world as divided into matter and spirit, and governed by an all powerful, personal, creator God; one who has set his creatures above the rest of creation. This vision has been cast aside and with it all justification for man's dominion over nature. In its place has been set the fundamentally Eastern vision of mankind as merely a part of the great interconnected web of sentient life. (p. 47)

The primary reason for this shift in dominant paradigm lies in the rise of science and its undermining of traditional religion and the way in which, in turn, the optimistic faith and trust placed in science has itself been undermined. Eastern religion offers a new paradigm far more compatible with the scientific outlook or, at least, less vulnerable in the face of it. The Eastern religions have, however, been able to utilise the gaps in the scientific picture of reality and the uncertainties endemic in science to open up a space for more mystical orientations.

There are a number of problems with the Easternisation thesis, which is, perhaps, only to be expected with one as bold and challenging as this. Before discussing some of these problems, however, it should be acknowledged that there is a great deal that is enlightening and fruitful in it. What I shall suggest, however, is that it requires extensive modification, elaboration, specification and completion rather than outright rejection. Firstly, it is founded upon a misleading stereotypical characterisation of Eastern religions. Secondly, it is insensitive to the many and marked differences between Eastern religions. Thirdly, it too readily accepts these developments as unequivocally *religious*. Fourthly, it tends to ignore or to be unable to deal with the very inner-worldly character of trends within Western thinking.

The Nature of 'Eastern' Religion

The first problem is that the thesis is founded upon a characterisation of 'Eastern' religion (in so far as we can speak of such an entity, an issue tackled in the next section) in rather essentialist terms and which is, in the process, idealised, selective in emphasising certain aspects and neglecting others and which overlooks the way in which Eastern traditions or elements of them are modified in the process of importing them into the West.

While the immanentist/transcendental contrast, derived from Weber, seems sound enough it refers largely to philosophical, doctrinal religion of intellectuals and virtuosi

rather than to the far more widespread religion of everyday practice and of 'effective' belief, as manifested in such practice, of people in Eastern countries. In many instances the form in which Eastern religions have influenced the West is, in any case, significantly modified to suit Western circumstances or in accordance with the specific interests or prejudices of Western scholars. The general processes are insightfully discussed by John Clarke (1997, pp. 186–90) and have been thoroughly documented in the case of Tibetan Buddhism by Peter Bishop (1994). Tibet, Bishop notes, has been treated by the West as if it were a museum of a fantasised past. The West has taken from it what suits it and has ignored what does not. Pure Land Buddhism, for example, which is extremely popular in Tibet and all Mahayana countries, has been almost entirely neglected by the West (see Bishop 1989). The process of reinterpretation is sometimes so marked in the case of Buddhism that Deidre Green (1989) raises the question of whether some of the rather more worldly interpretations of it that have been successful in the West could be considered to have 'sold out'. The Vajradhatu community in the United States is a combination of Eastern hierarchy and devotionism with Western individualism and licence; a combination that has proven problematic in that it has tended to distort the teacher-disciple relationship. The consequence of importing Asian devotional traditions without corresponding Asian social controls has been scandals and crises (see Butler 1991). Bryan Wilson (1990), quoting Ernst Benz (1976) notes how Western versions of Buddhism lay little stress upon escape into nirvana or upon rebirth and more upon the achievement of a this-worldly enlightenment. Monastic Buddhism tends also, he notes, to attract less interest than the relevance of Buddhism for everyday life and he points out that the Friends of the Western Buddhist order have tended to play down the Buddhist tenet that life entails suffering because it is too depressing a sentiment for the Western mentality. Philip Mellor's study (1991) of this particular group stresses the extent to which its followers interpret and practise Buddhism as a project for the development rather than transcendence of the self. In general, Mellor argues, Buddhism in the West has become part of a liberal Protestant trend. If Buddhism is a significant new cultural development in the West it is so not because it diverts western culture into new religious channels but because it explores existing religious channels in new ways (see also Batchelor 1994). Finally, few of the respondents in Tony Walter and Helen Waterhouse's study (see Walter 2001) were interested in the idea of dissolution of individual identity. Most of those who professed a belief in reincarnation linked it to a very Western and modernist notion of self and identity that is individualistic and reflexive.

Also, it is not unusual for a more refined, reformed and allegedly purified version of a tradition to be actually re-exported back to the East and then re-imported again into the West as the 'authentic' tradition as opposed to folk or allegedly debased forms. This for example, it is claimed, is the case with 'Protestant Buddhism' as it has been called (see Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1990; Southwold 1983). In this case the 'authentic' tradition is very much more immanentist and monist than the indigenous tradition appears to have been. In the case of Hinduism, Lucy DuPertuis (1987) points out that Neo-Hinduism reacted to Western and Christian critiques by incorporating a number of innovations which sought to answer them. Even then, the version of Neo-Hinduism that has taken root in the United States is selective in the elements of this Hindu revival it emphasises and tends to interpret them in quite a different way to the meaning they have in the indigenous tradition. Its devotees do not seek as their ultimate goal to transcend ordinary time, self and existence. Their interpretation is much more this-worldly. Meditation, for example, becomes a panacea for the ills of modern urban

civilisation and a healthy alternative to tranquillisers, offering relief from stresses without any fundamental change in lifestyle.

As for the more popular forms of the indigenous traditions these are often a great deal less immanentist and monistic than the more sophisticated forms. There is little evidence of the more popular beliefs and practices of the East coming to have much of a following in the West. For example, [Sandra Bell \(1998\)](#) found in her fieldwork studies of Buddhist groups in Britain an emphasis upon meditation and an almost complete rejection of the notion and practice of merit making which is fundamental to popular Theravada Buddhism in South East Asia and Sri Lanka. And while monastic life in Britain is somewhat austere relative to standards outside the monastery, in South East Asia and Sri Lanka the situation is reversed. In the West the monastic life is admired for its ascetic renunciation which is seen as the antithesis of materialism while in South East Asia it is the withdrawal from worldly involvement that is admired and not material privation. In the West it is the lack of consumption which is admired; in the East the withdrawal from production.

One might argue, however, that there has been a revival of vernacular religious forms in the West; a return to ritual and magical practices in the form of borrowed and reinvented traditions. But they have not been borrowed specifically or primarily from Eastern sources. Also, just as the cosmological ethos to which the Easternisation thesis refers is very much that of an elite tradition, so its appeal in the West tends to be confined to rather limited sectors of the population rather than being in any sense a grass-roots movement (see [Bruce 2000](#)). It is instructive in this respect to recall that in an earlier article [Campbell \(1978\)](#) describes Troeltschian mysticism as 'the secret religion of the educated classes'. More accurately, Campbell's thesis might be modified to that of the Easternisation of the Western spiritual intelligentsia.

Even then, the more detailed characterisation of both Eastern and Western traditions based upon the work of Gilgen and Cho and Krus and Blackman seems in many respects either too sweeping or misleading. One might question both the characterisation of both the Eastern and Western ethos by these authors. In some respects the Western ethos is more that of the Protestant West than the Christian West in general. The characterisation of the ethos of the East might be considered to entail more than a hint of orientalism (see [Said 1978](#)). To take just one or two examples, even if the characterisation of Western thought as scientific and rational were to be accepted, it is highly dubious to characterise Eastern thought as anti-scientific and irrational.

The contrasts being made here are, in any case, deceptive in that they appear to be between Eastern and Western thought. The comparisons are, in fact, between *traditional* Eastern thought and *modern* Western thought. To this extent the contrast is as much between traditional and modern thought as it is between Eastern and Western and could probably be drawn just as clearly, if rather differently, between traditional Western thought and modern Western thought. If this is acknowledged, the process to which Campbell is referring could be characterised as one of the re-traditionalisation of Western thought but on a somewhat Easternised model. Moreover, that model is one which has itself been, to a considerable degree, de-traditionalised prior to its adoption. Much Eastern religion is not lacking in respect for tradition, the authority, or at least deep significance, of ancient scriptures and texts, the necessity for the subordination of the self and the ego through ascetic regimes and disciplines in order to acquire spiritual understanding and enlightenment, and so on. While much of this is admired and to some extent followed in the West, it is so only up to a point and not without re-interpretation. If a de-traditionalised West is turning East it is in search of a

selectively de-traditionalised form of Eastern spirituality which involves the raiding of Eastern traditions for elements congruent with a de-traditionalised world view which emphasises immanence of the divine, seekership and the self, the inward search for truth and meaning and plural paths to enlightenment.

Alternatively a number of recent developments in the sphere of spirituality in the West suggest a re-traditionalisation along the lines of a pre-Christian rather than Eastern model and might as much be considered a form of paganisation as a process of Easternisation (see [Bowman 1993, 1995](#)). Actually, however, this would be no more accurate a view than the Easternisation thesis. The picture is actually more complex since such movements are highly eclectic in the sources they draw upon and are by no means confined to the, largely reinvented, pre-Christian beliefs and practices of Western cultures but utilise also many allegedly native and folk traditions from around the globe, for the most part radically reinterpreted or even largely imagined.

The Diversity of Eastern Religion

The second set of problems with the Easternisation thesis is that it ignores the many and marked differences between various Eastern religions, attributing to them a greater unity than they, in fact, have. Again, the broad contrast between Eastern immanentism/monism and Western transcendentalism/dualism does, to a considerable extent, stand up. The problem is thus not so much that the Easternisation thesis is wrong on this count but very incomplete. The major contrast that can be drawn within the set of Eastern religions is that between the traditions that developed in the Indian sub-continent and those of China. In so far as contemporary Western developments have been influenced by Eastern traditions they have been differentially so. Certain ideas, particularly reincarnation and the self-orientation of human potential and psychotherapy, have been influenced by the Indian and Buddhist traditions (see [Puttick 2000](#)), while others, particularly in the area of radical environmentalism, by the Chinese, and especially the Taoist tradition. This is an important point because it shows again the characteristic eclecticism of contemporary Western spirituality which takes certain parts of various traditions whilst leaving aside others. These elements are, furthermore, far from being integrated in any coherent way nor do they inform practice or behaviour in any significant manner.

Belief in reincarnation, for example, seems largely to float freely in isolation from other aspects of this allegedly Easternised mode of thought and to have no concrete implications for behaviour whatsoever (see [Walter and Waterhouse 1999, 2001](#)). It is not always, for example, accompanied by the adoption of the idea of karma or of transmigration. When such ideas are associated with it they generally involve a one way process of mobility, namely upward. The idea of sinking to lower stations of human existence or to some non-human form of life seems largely to be absent (see [Walter and Waterhouse 2001](#)). Aspects of such beliefs are, in fact, deeply repugnant to Western values. Witness the furore in 1999 over the pronouncement of the then manager of the England football team, Glen Hoddle, a convert to Buddhism, that the disabled may well be suffering the effects of bad karma in previous lives and have, therefore, only themselves to blame.

Neither is belief in reincarnation connected in any way with the other major strand identified by Campbell, namely deep ecology. Interesting in this respect is Campbell's mention of the growth of vegetarianism associated with the environmental movement; in his view an expression of our changing relationship with the natural world and with

animals. In most historical traditions, however, vegetarianism is closely associated with belief in reincarnation and with the idea of transmigration. This is the case in the Hindu/Buddhist traditions and was so in ancient Greece as well as among the Cathars. Such a connection seems entirely absent, however, in the allegedly Easternised West. Campbell is not unaware of this apparent absence of such a link but his attempt to deal with it and to discern a connection behind immediate appearances are quite unsatisfactory. Firstly, he notes how Greenpeace has made a link in one of its advertisements which says 'When you come back as a whale you'll be bloody glad you put Greenpeace in your will', but, of course, has to acknowledge its playfulness. More seriously, he suggests that, while not technically a belief in transmigration, the advocacy that all sentient creatures should be treated not merely in a manner which takes cognisance of the fact they have the capacity to feel pain and to suffer but that they are possessed of a form of consciousness not dissimilar from that possessed by humans, is, nevertheless a logical corollary of belief in reincarnation. While deep ecology and the animal rights movements do indeed uphold the idea of a kind of kinship between humans and animals, Campbell's claim goes rather too far in suggesting that they see animals as having a consciousness not essentially dissimilar to that possessed by humans. It is also difficult to see how the attribution of certain rights to animals is the logical corollary of reincarnation.

The contemporary Western eclecticism referred to above is related to the fact that various elements of other traditions are utilised by very different, even if sometimes overlapping, groups, sectors or movements. Taoist ideas, for example, are often emphasised by the deep green movement (see Naess and Rothenburg 1989; Devall and Sessions 1985; Ip 1983; Fox 1995). But even here the prevailing ethos is one of eclecticism. Alongside Taoism frequent reference is made to Zen Buddhism, Christian mysticism and Native American or similar traditions. These, moreover, serve largely as reference points which help to root deep ecology in spiritual traditions thereby lending it an authority derived from ancient wisdoms. As Steve Bruce points out (1995, pp. 205–8) much of the new and holistic spirituality of the West seeks to found itself upon the borrowed authority of ancient, exotic and mystical systems of belief. This is done in the case of deep ecology largely by evoking these traditions in order to align it with them rather than to explore them in any real depth or to apply them in any extensive or systematic way. Fragments and pieces of these traditions are selectively utilised, reinterpreted, reconstituted and mixed with other ingredients to comprise a sort of spiritual equivalent of chicken tikka masala.

Religion or Quasi-religion?

A third area of difficulty with the Easternisation thesis relates to its assumption that the developments to which it refers are *religious* ones as opposed to certain tendencies in Western thought more broadly understood. To be fair to Campbell, he does not quite go so far as to designate radical ecology as unequivocally religious but claims it is 'at the very least, quasi-religion'; *quasi-religion* but, note, *at the very least*, and, therefore, probably really religious. It is the contention here that we should avoid such equivocation. Some, at least, of these developments are better understood as representing a movement of thought away from religion *per se* and towards non-religious meaning systems, or for want of a better term, quasi-religion, rather than as a change within the Western religious outlook (see Hamilton 2001). As Zygmunt Bauman puts it 'post-modern cultural pressures, while at the same time as intensifying

the search for peak experiences, have uncoupled the search from religion-prone interests and concerns, privatised it, and cast mainly non-religious institutions in the role of purveyors of relevant services' (1998, p. 70). In this sense they embody features of secularisation as much as they do a sea change in religious conceptions. Yet they retain a spiritual or quasi-religious character whilst eclectically drawing upon a wide range of ideas, values, beliefs and traditions including science and quasi-science whatever their provenance, Eastern or Western. It has been pointed out by Campbell himself (1972) that a key element of the cultic milieu is seekership. A characteristic of this is experimentation, readiness to try anything interesting that comes along and relatively low commitment to any particular set of ideas and beliefs. Steven Sutcliffe calls it 'serial seekership' (1997, 2000). Eastern ideas and religions are in this sense just elements of a diverse cultic milieu to be sampled and customised to suit rather than commanding any firm commitment.

Instrumental Activism

In so far as the last point is correct, the Easternisation thesis tends to ignore or to be unable to deal with, to use Weber's terminology, the very inner- or this-worldly character of the currents of ideas with which it is concerned. While some Eastern currents of thought have adopted an inner-worldly orientation, they have been for the most part other-worldly in ethos and when they have not their inner-worldliness, as in the case of Taoism, has been, as Weber put it, markedly apathetic and non-activist in total contrast to the ethos of most Western adaptations and borrowings from such traditions. The deep ecology movement may be inspired by Taoist this-worldly mysticism but it is, however, notably activist. Campbell is well aware of this difficulty with the thesis, the problem of 'instrumental activism' as he calls it, but confesses to have little by way of any answer to it apart from suggesting that there may be slight signs of a move away from it in calls for lower growth strategies, Buddhist economics and low-tech rather than high-tech solutions to problems. In the age of the internet this seems somewhat feeble. If the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century did little to affect the advance of industrialism we can be sure that something like Buddhist economics, which to the Romantic movement is as a gnat is to an elephant, is unlikely to play much role in any transformation of the ethos of Western instrumental activism.

It is instructive, in this regard, to note that while certainly Eastern in provenance, the East from which some of the more successful forms of Buddhism in the West have come is, in fact, Japan (see Wilson 1990; Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994), where instrumental activism seems even more vigorous and deeply rooted than it is in the West. What seems entirely absent from this new allegedly Easternised ethos is any sense of the value of renunciation which is so much a part of many Eastern traditions and, most notably, of the more philosophical and virtuoso dimensions of those traditions which, rather than folk and popular forms, have had some appeal among the spiritual intelligentsia of the West. Renunciation is not even an ideal in the West, not even admired in the few who are successful in practising it by those who are not, as is often the case in the Eastern traditions. When and to the extent that it does make an appearance, for example fasting and dieting, it is for the most part very much just an element in the eclectic mix, practised alongside relatively high levels of material consumption, use of stimulants and so on—a sort of spiritual bulimia.

As equally prominent in contemporary Western thought and culture as renunciatory ideals are absent, despite the current fashion of post-modernism, is the belief in change,

evolution and even progress which is something almost entirely alien to the traditional Eastern way of thinking. The West has far from abandoned its love affair with technology which advances in all spheres with bewildering pace, despite all the anxieties, suspicion of science and scientists, concerns about pollution and the destruction of the environment, and so on. The fact is the mass of the public, and especially the younger generations, take to new technological developments like ducks to water while we all clamour for more high-tech health services, more high-tech leisure goods and faster transport systems made safer by high-tech devices. Campbell forgets that much of the human potential and psycho-therapy movement to which he refers is thoroughly world affirming rather than world rejecting. One could even interpret the belief in reincarnation in this way; as a desire to dwell as long as possible in material existences and, therefore, indifferent to notions of escape from the cycle of rebirths. In this particular respect, perhaps, belief in reincarnation does reflect the more popular and pragmatic complex of Buddhist and Hindu tradition rather than the more virtuoso emphasis on *anatta* and *nirvana*. For many of those who do interpret reincarnation in a highly non-material and spiritual way, however, their belief traces not to Eastern origins at all but to spiritualism (see [Walter and Waterhouse 1999](#)). For these believers attachment to material and bodily existence is not a part of the appeal of reincarnation which is rather seen by them as the means by which spiritual progress can be pursued, the spiritual being valued much more highly than the material and the bodily aspect.

Congruent with this-worldly interpretations of Buddhist and Hindu ideas, and even more so than instrumental activism, another key aspect of contemporary Western holistic, quasi-spirituality is its very embodied nature. Campbell does not mention holistic healing, complementary and alternative therapies, bodily fitness regimes, and so on. But what about Yoga? What is interesting here is that in the West it is almost entirely divorced, at least in terms of popular following, from its religious, spiritual, philosophical background which in the East defines its sense and purpose, to become merely a physical and bodily discipline. That there might be the hope of psychological and mental benefits as well as physiological ones is not to be denied but these are to be gained almost entirely from the bodily disciplines as they might be from a good work-out in the very high-tech gym, daily jogging or a marathon run.

Again, certain Taoist ideas and practices focused upon the body have proved attractive to some in the West, such as Tai Chi and Qigong. The way these seek to integrate mind and body, their emphasis upon mental concentration in pursuit of inner harmony and balance and a heightened state of consciousness has been, as Clarke points out, 'traditionally associated with religious experience' and might be seen 'as part of a tendency, albeit a minority one, towards a religiosity without gods or beliefs, a cultivation of a sense of well-being and self-transcendence that implies no credal commitment or institutional identification, and which sees no clear break between the cultivation of physical and spiritual excellence' (2000, pp. 138–9). One wonders, however, just how much of the religious or philosophical basis of these martial arts is known or understood by most Western practitioners. As Clarke reports, it is precisely this lack of grounding which has recently prompted some who are more knowledgeable to attempt to remedy the situation through books and publications which seek to re-root the techniques in these broader religious, spiritual and philosophical foundations.

Another sphere in which Taoist thought has been particularly prominent in the West in recent decades is in relation to dietary regimes such as macrobiotics. This is largely

because they promise longevity, namely an embodied, material existence. The whole, health and organic food movements, often associated with vegetarianism and embodying as they do notions of balance and harmony, naturalness, wholeness and purity, along with fitness regimes, are as central to the kind of developments with which the Easternisation thesis is concerned as those upon which it focuses, namely environmentalism, reincarnation and the decline in belief in a personal God. These, together with holistic healing and physical fitness regimes, can be as 'spiritual' as radical ecology and are much more influential. But as important as this 'spiritual' dimension of the food and dietary movements is a very material concern, namely the key aspect of risk perception associated with food and food production. Yet it is not just that there is a spiritual as well as a material aspect to them. As with health and fitness movements, it is as if spiritual goals are attainable through the material; the spiritual is redefined in terms of material regimes and disciplines; salvation through the body rather than through the soul. While there may be some affinities here with Taoist thought (see [Clarke 2000](#)) it is, nevertheless, profoundly Western.

Instrumental activism is, of course, closely associated with ideas of progress and this in turn stems from a deeply rooted assumption and expectation of change and development associated with an evolutionary outlook quite alien to Eastern thought. Even if one accepts post-modern scepticism regarding the viability of the idea of progress, and this could be challenged in so far as it applies to most sectors of society outside certain intellectual circles, change, quite rapid change, is now endemic and the normal expectation for most people in the West. The influence of evolutionary theory and of Darwinism has, however, been double edged. One can clearly discern in the radical ecology movement the influence of this very Darwinism which displaced humans from their central place in nature and as masters over it, relocating them clearly within the animal kingdom. It renders them just as subject to nature and to their own natures, that is to biological forces, as controllers of it (see [Oelschlager 1991](#)). There is indeed a convergence of evolutionary science and Eastern influenced environmental thinking here. However, it is precisely the perception of continuous change and its possibility that drives the instrumental activism of the very ecological movements and groups that the Easternisation thesis stresses as marking a radical shift from Western to Eastern ways of thinking.

A Broader Perspective

So much for the problems with the Easternisation thesis. The remaining part of this article attempts to incorporate some of its insights into a broader framework and to offer some alternative suggestions for understanding the developments with which the thesis is concerned.

In so far as there have been a number of developments in Western thought which appear to reflect the influence of Eastern paradigms we should ask whether this is a product simply of Easternisation or whether it can be seen simply as an aspect of globalisation. Globalisation may, of course, mean different things. In one sense it refers to the process by which the whole planet becomes a single place within which commodities, finance and, to a more limited extent, people flow as freely as they do within nation states or more circumscribed regions. To a very large extent, in this sense it is a process driven by Western capitalism and enterprise leading to an extensive international division of labour. In another sense globalisation can refer to the global extension of forms of communication leading to the global spread of ideas, practices and

cultural elements. In this latter sense religious and spiritual ideas might travel in all directions; Western ideas to the East and Eastern ideas to the West. Easternisation is, in this respect, simply the other side of the coin of Westernisation. This raises the question of whether such Eastern influences as have had an impact upon the West are as much the result of a process of globalisation as they are of Easternisation. In this respect the spread of Christianity to parts of the East are on a par with the spread of Eastern ideas in the West; simply a part of the process of exchange of ideas and influences which has been going on for a considerable time but which has accelerated in pace with the development of communications, migration and rise of multiculturalism. In fact, one can argue that they have been going on for a very long time. In this respect globalisation can be seen as the process by which such transmissions occur more rapidly rather than as any qualitatively different sort of process. Globalisation as a new phenomenon is simply this qualitative change through diffusion at a pace whereby it can be perceived to make an appreciable difference within the average life-time.

But globalisation is but one process in the shaping of contemporary spirituality. It has been observed above that there has been to some degree a revival of magical and pre-Christian ideas and thought or at least of an imagined pre-Christianity. This goes along and may be mixed with borrowings from the magical and shamanic traditions of tribal peoples from around the world and with elements of archaic traditions both Eastern and Western. To this extent we might just as credibly speak of the paganisation of the West as of its Easternisation since pagan thought, or at least its imagined forms, could be claimed to espouse just the same sort of immanentist and monistic cosmological view as Eastern thought. In fact there are a whole series of influences and movements that are significant in this respect. We could just as easily speak of re-traditionalisation or archaicism as we can of de-traditionalisation, of scientisation (scientology, UFO cults etc.), of re-enchantment, or of simultaneous scientisation and re-enchantment (Star Wars). [Catherine Albanese \(1993\)](#) characterises New Age in the United States, and New Age is in many ways at the heart of the processes referred to as Easternisation, as a form of American nature religion. And as [Wouter Hanegraaff \(1996\)](#) argues, New Age owes as much if not more to the esoteric tradition as it does to anything else. It is, in his view, a syncretistic synthesis of esoteric and secular elements. Even the belief in reincarnation could be traced as much to platonic, pythagorean, and kabbalistic sources, and to philosophers such as Leibnitz, as it can to Hinduism and Buddhism. While New Age owes much to Theosophy, this itself, Hanegraaff reminds us, was rooted in Western esotericism and drew very selectively from Hinduism and Buddhism only those elements which could be readily assimilated. Much the same is true, in his view, of transcendentalism and of the metaphysical movement. All of these borrowed very selectively from Eastern traditions and ignored what did not fit. In the case of Hinduism itself, Hanegraaff characterises the interpretation for Western audiences of one its most prominent exponents, Vivekananda's version of Advaita Vendanta, as a synthesis of Indian and Western Enlightenment ideas.

Another movement which has tended to promote a synthesis of Eastern traditions with pre-Christian European pagan traditions, not mentioned by Campbell, is feminism and in particular eco-feminism. This has perceived in Eastern religions an absence of patriarchal attitudes and assumptions which have been strongly associated with Western and Middle Eastern religious traditions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. While it would be an exaggeration to say that those strands of the feminist movement that have been concerned with religious and spiritual matters have been a major conduit for the easternisation of western thought and culture, they have contributed to a growing

interest in Buddhism and Taoism in the West. Here again though, these religions are seen as providing useful resources for the feminist anti-patriarchal project; resources to be selectively drawn upon to the extent that they are advantageously deployable or ignored if they are not. In the case of Buddhism it is its antipathy to violence and compassion that attracts most; and in the case of Taoism its emphasis upon the feminine characteristics of passivity and yielding above the masculine characteristics of strength and resistance (see [Clarke 2000](#), p. 112). This is a far cry of course from, for example, black Americans actually converting to some form of Islam.

What is striking, then, about the contemporary Western spiritual ethos is its extraordinary eclecticism. Of course, it could be that being too close we simply cannot see the wood for the trees. A little more perspective might reveal that among these many diverse elements one stands out as predominant or potentially so and will be so revealed in time. However, this is unlikely. There does seem to be not only a plurality of influences, a supermarket of spiritual choices on offer but a clear proclivity not to choose any *one* of them. That is to say, not to make choices between them but to choose all or at least many of them.

This is sometimes understood in terms of an alleged post-modern condition. [Zygmunt Bauman \(1998\)](#) for example, characterises our post-modern state as one of constant choosing in every aspect of life including one's identity and in being so it is also a state of fearing of missing out on opportunities for having or experiencing something or being someone. This does not call for religious consolations as we have seen. It calls into being, rather, the spiritual supermarket of experiences all of equal validity relative to the location, background or condition of their potential devotees (see also [Beckford 1992](#); [Lyon 1993](#)). [Paul Heelas \(1996a\)](#) has argued, however, that New Age, at least, is not post-modern in character since, in its more serious forms, it is not de-traditionalised, it is compatible with modernity and even exhibits at the same time pre-modern aspects. Significant in this respect is the way much of what the Easternisation thesis is concerned with is clearly counter-cultural. This is true of Buddhism according to [Mellor \(1991\)](#), of Taoism according to [Clarke \(2000\)](#) and of New Age, as [Hanegraaff \(1996\)](#) reminds us, while [Sutcliffe and Bowman \(2000\)](#) stress the dissenting and 'alternative' character of this ethos. In short, it perceives itself and defines itself as running counter to the mainstream, both religious and secular, and much of its attraction lies in this and its challenge to the main thrust of change in the West, rather than in its congruence with such change as a new incipient orthodoxy.

These are clearly complex processes and on this question none of us can yet clearly see the wood for the trees let alone predict the course of Western religion or spirituality. As far as the importation or adoption of Eastern religions is concerned the analysis above points to a continuing process of interaction, mutual transformation and synthesis in which the Eastern traditions are themselves transformed rather than the supplanting of Western traditions by Eastern ones. But not just of Eastern and Western ideas. What is so characteristic of contemporary Western society is its pluralism and eclecticism. All and any sources might be drawn upon in the search for more satisfactory constructions of life's meaning and significance.

In so far as such searching will continue to draw upon Eastern religions, one suspects that however influential and attractive Buddhism has been and continues to be, it will increasingly be Taoism to which seekers will turn. The chief strength of Campbell's more radical version of the Easternisation thesis is its acknowledgement of the West's disillusionment with transcendentalism and dualism and shift towards more holistic and immanentist ideas. Its main weakness is the difficulty it has with Western instrumental

activism. The resolution may lie in the recognition that the convergence he discerns is actually between modern Western spirituality and Taoist thought. The latter seems to offer spirituality without transcendence, a holistic basis for a better way of relating to nature, a de-emphasis upon dogma and acceptance of relativism and the limitations of rational, conceptual thought, an acceptance, even celebration, of our material, bodily nature and of physicality as not incompatible with our spiritual nature, and a this-worldly orientation which is not incompatible with instrumental activism.

It is difficult to imagine, however, that the development of Western religion and spirituality will simply come to reflect or echo Taoist ideas. Most probably the Western ethos of instrumental activism and of individualism will act as a prism through which holism and immanentism will be refracted to be mixed with many other strands of thought producing not one but an ever evolving and diversifying array of ideas, beliefs and practices.

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