

CHARLES LE GAI EATON, FORMER BRITISH DIPLOMAT (PART 2 OF 6)

Rating: 4.3

Description: The search for the truth of a philosopher and writer, faced with a constant internal struggle of harmonizing belief and action. Part 2: A personal dilemma with institutionalized religions.

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Where should I seek for knowledge? By the time I was 15, I had discovered that there was something called 'philosophy' and that the word meant 'love of wisdom'. Wisdom was what I sought, so the satisfaction of my need must lie hidden in these heavy books written by wise men. With a feeling of intense excitement, like an explorer already in sight of the undiscovered land, I ploughed through Descartes, Kant, Hume, Spinoza, Schopenhauer and Bertrand Russell, or else read works which explained their teachings. It was not long before I realized that something was wrong. I might as well have been eating sand as seeking nourishment from this quarter. These men knew nothing. They were only speculating, spinning ideas out of their own poor heads, and anyone can speculate (including a school boy). How could a 15 or 16-year-old have had the impudence to dismiss the whole of Western secular philosophy as worthless? One does not have to be mature to distinguish between what the Quran calls dhann ('opinion') and true Knowledge. At the same time my mother's constant insistence that I should take no notice of what others thought or said obliged me to trust my own judgment. Western culture treated these 'philosophers' as great men, and students in universities studied their works with respect. But what was that to me?

Some time later, when I was in the sixth-form, a master who took a particular interest in me made a strange remark which I did not at understand. 'You are', he said, 'the only truly universal skeptic I have known'. He was not referring specifically to religion. He meant that I seemed to doubt everything that was taken for granted by everyone else. I wanted to know why it should be assumed that our rational powers, so well adapted to finding food, shelter and a mate, had an application beyond the mundane realm. I was puzzled by the notion that the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' was supposed to be binding on those who were neither Jews nor Christians, and I was no less baffled as to why in a world full of beautiful women, the rule of monogamy should be thought to have a universal application. I even doubted my own existence. Long afterwards I came across the story of the Chinese sage, Chuangtzu, who, having dreamed one night that he was a butterfly, awoke to question whether he was in fact the man Chuangtzu, who had dreamed that he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming that it was Chuangtzu. I

understood his dilemma.

Yet, when my teacher made this remark, I had already discovered a key to what might be a more certain knowledge. By chance - although there is no such thing as 'chance' - I had come across a book called 'The Primordial Ocean' by a certain Professor Perry, an Egyptologist. The professor had a fixed idea that the ancient Egyptians had traveled to part of the world in their papyrus boats spreading their religion, mythology, far and wide. To prove his case, he had spent many years researching ancient mythologies, and also the myths and symbols of 'primitive' peoples in our own time. What he revealed was an astonishing unanimity of belief, however different the images in which that belief was expressed. He had not proved his theory about the papyrus boats; he had, I thought, proved something quite different. It seemed that, behind the tapestry of forms and images, there were certain universal truths regarding the nature of reality, the creation of the world and of mankind, and the meaning of the human experience; truths which were as much a part as our blood and our bones.

One of the principal causes of unbelief in the modern world is the plurality of religions which appear mutually contradictory. So long as the Europeans were convinced of their own racial superiority, they had no reason to doubt that Christianity was the only true Faith. The notion that they were the crown of the 'evolutionary process' made it easy to assume that all other religions were no more than naive attempts to answer perennial questions. It was when this racial self-confidence declined that doubts crept in. How was it possible for a good God to allow the majority of human beings to live and die in the service of false religions? Was it any longer possible for the Christian to believe that he alone was saved? Others made the same claim - Muslims, for example - so how could anyone be sure who was right and who was wrong? For many people, including myself until I came to Perry's book, the obvious conclusion was that, since everyone could not be right, everyone must be wrong. Religion was an illusion, the product of wishful thinking. Others might have found it possible to substitute 'scientific truth' for religious 'myths'. I could not, since science was founded upon assumptions regarding the infallibility of reason and the reality of sense-experience which could never be proved.

When I read Perry's book I knew nothing of the Quran. That came much later, and what little I had heard of Islam was distorted by prejudices accumulated during a thousand years of confrontation. And yet, had I but known it, I had already taken a step in the direction of Christianity's great rival. The Quran assures us that no people on earth was ever left without divine guidance and a doctrine of truth, conveyed through a messenger of God who always spoke to the people in their own 'language', therefore in terms of their particular circumstances and according to their needs. The fact that such messages become distorted in the course of time goes without saying, and no one should be surprised if truth is distorted as it passes from generation to generation, but it would be astonishing if no vestiges remained after the passage of the centuries. It now seems to me entirely in accordance with Islam to believe that these vestiges, clothed in myth and symbol (the 'language' of the people of earlier times), are directly descended from revealed Truth and confirm the final Message.

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