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AN OUTMODED CONCEPT

ORIENTALISM IN THE MODERN WORLD

By Walter Zander

The recent International Congress of Orientalists in Moscow, at which some 1,500 scholars discussed - in 26 sections and sub-sections - subjects as far removed from each other as "Assyrian Oracles" and "The Labour Problem of Japan in the Post-War Period", poses the question whether Orientalism has not grown to such an extent that its component parts have lost their inner connexion. Suggestions have, therefore, been made to replace future congresses of such size by smaller gatherings with more limited objectives. However, before a tradition which has developed over a long period of time, is discontinued, it is advisable to pause, to survey the changes which have taken place since the beginnings of modern Orientalism and to investigate how much common ground exists between its different branches.

The first step to such investigation is the question whether the very word Orientalism still adequately describes the studies which it purports to cover. The word Orientalism obviously is taken from the region with which it is concerned. It was the Romans who in classical days called the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, where to them the sun appeared to rise, the Orient. This did not mean, as some writers have assumed, a division of the world into two equal continents of west and east - the notion that anything could equal their own world probably never occurred to them. But it expressed the conviction that they themselves formed the centre from which all other parts of the earth were to be determined.

This conception of Rome as the heart of the universe was later re-asserted by the Church. Renaissance and Humanism further developed this tradition by basing their world on the triad of Rome, Jerusalem and Athens, and from the days of the explorers onwards the area which was considered the world's centre gradually widened to comprise the whole of Europe.

EUROPE THE CENTRE

Accordingly, Universal History was conceived to be essentially the history of Europe to which the traditions of the Old Testament were added. Thus Bossuet, in his *Discours sur l'Histoire Universelle* (1681) painted a canvas which reached from the creation of Adam over the destruction of Troy and the founding of Rome to the empire of Charlemagne; and Schiller, in his famous inaugural lecture at Jena University on "The Meaning of Universal History" (1789), proclaimed

Europe as the summit of all historic development and compared the non-European peoples "in their various stages of education with children of different ages grouped round a grown-up person reminding him of his own past and origin".

The Romantic movement, as a reaction to such an attitude, brought an exaggerated enthusiasm for everything oriental. Victor Hugo believed that the oriental literature would become what Greek literature had been to the sixteenth century, and Friedrich Schlegel exclaimed: "In the East we shall have to find the fulfilment of Romanticism". But even he, in spite of his knowledge of Sanskrit and his belief in India as the mother of the European nations, in his lectures on Universal History considered "Mongols and Turks, noteworthy only because of their connexion with the European nations, and not because of their own religions, customs and constitutions". Although the understanding of the East throughout the nineteenth century grew and deepened, the superiority of Europe in science, industry and military power was so overwhelming that she continued to see herself the pivot from which all other regions were to be viewed and studied.

These conditions have changed. Moreover, whilst in the past studies of the East were mainly undertaken in the West, now the peoples of Asia and Africa themselves have begun to apply western methods to inquiries into their own civilizations. It would be strange for them to call such investigations concerning their own life oriental studies; and it would even be paradoxical if peoples in the East, say the Chinese, would consider studies of countries thousands of miles to their West, such as Iran or Arabia, as Orientalism.

LITTLE IN COMMON

The question, however, arises whether "Orientalism", apart from its regional connotation, contains a specific element, common to all its branches, which requires some special methodology and thus justifies a particular name. So far as languages are concerned no such claim has ever been made. For history, on the other hand, the situation is different. According to Hegel, China and India represented a static element in the development of humanity. To him they were lacking in historical character and were almost "outside world history". F. C. Schlosser saw a fundamental difference between the history of the East and that of Europe in the fact

that "the States of the Orient with their hierarchic and despotic organization are based on the principle of permanence and stability". Similarly, until recently many have doubted whether Africa before the beginning of Western penetration really had a history of her own.

Today these theories are no longer held. On the other hand, in our days the Soviet school of thought maintains that all studies concerning Asia and Africa are fundamentally affected by the fact that the peoples of these continents have been subject to "colonial exploitation" and that this creates a common element in their history. But however understandable the emotional resentment among the once colonial peoples may be, it can never account for the vast scope and depth of studies which have been devoted to their civilizations; and with the colonial system fading away this experience cannot in future provide a common basis for scholarly work.

The idea of Orientalism remains, therefore, essentially a regional conception; and although Orientalism - thanks to the loving labour of countless scholars throughout the years - has acquired an aura of emotions and associations- "L'Orient, Romantisme suprême" - it is suggested that we should speak in future rather of "Asian and African Studies". Today Europe is no more the centre of the world than China is the "Middle Kingdom", and it is wise to recognize in every sphere the basic equality of all nations. The next Congress of Asian and African Studies is due to be held in Delhi in 1963, and a great effort should be made to work out in advance for this congress on which of the many issues special emphasis should be laid and how much common ground can be found for fruitful discussion.