Far Eastern Spirituality in Europe

Antoaneta Nikolova

South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, BULGARIA
Faculty of Philosophy, Blagoevgrad

Abstract

In recent decades, we are witnessing in Europe a great interest towards religions, teachings and spiritual paths coming from Central, South and East Asia, such as Buddhism, Daoism, and different trends of Hinduism. The influence of these teachings pervades almost imperceptibly through art and the interest in Eastern healing and self-development practices: yoga, martial arts, meditation. In their depth, all these activities are charged with concepts and ideas that are incompatible with traditional Christianity. However, in most cases, the followers and sympathizers of the Eastern teachings do not see any contradiction between Eastern spirituality and their own initial or traditional religion, and they might follow such a path still regarding themselves as, e.g., Christians. The aim of this paper is to analyze the reason for the interest in Europe towards Eastern teachings, in terms of intersection of the peculiarities of the contemporary “spiritual” European situation with the peculiarities of “Eastern religions”. The analysis of the East-West interaction raises many open research questions concerning understanding of the self and perception of otherness, which need discussion.

Keywords: Eastern philosophy, Eastern spirituality, European religiosity, East-West dialogue.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, we are witnessing in Europe a great interest towards teachings and practices coming from Far East. These are practices of self-development such as yoga, martial arts and different kinds of meditation. In their essence, all these activities are charged with concepts and ideas that are different from the traditional European concepts. What is the reason of the interest towards these practices? Is this a result of curiosity to the unknown, search for extravagance, fashion, and attempt to relax the everyday stress or besides all of these reasons there still is some inner necessity? Is there something that Western people lack in their contemporary situation so they turn to different cultures? Does this interest reveal the inner development of the Western thought itself or it is just a side result of interconnection between cultures provoked by globalization?

As everywhere, the answer could not be one-sided. In great degree the reasons for this interest towards Eastern teachings in Europe are at the cross point of both the contemporary “spiritual” European situation and the peculiarities of the “Eastern religions”. What do these religions offer and what in the contemporary situation makes them appealing? To seek for answer in a different culture means to pre-formulate one’s own self-identity. What challenges the European self-identity and what do Eastern religions offer in this respect?
In this paper, I will analyze the preconditions on which such a consideration should be based. My analysis is based on observation of communities connected with Eastern practices in Bulgaria and Ireland.

2. Remarks on “self-identity”

The questions of the self, the identity as well as of the self-identity are among the most complex ones within the development of the human thought. These questions do not have a single answer. As Charles Taylor explained “our modern notion of self is... a historically local self-interpretation which would... be opaque and perplexing to outsiders” (Taylor, 1989: 113). In the modern Western concept, an interpretation is established that defines the self from within. This “modern inwardness, the sense of ourselves as beings with inner depths, and the connected notion that we are “selves” (Ibid., X) regards us as relatively stable, separated and independent beings. There however could be different interpretations. The Far East perspective, for example, regards the self from outwards as being in a constant exchange and dependence on the world around. In this mutual interaction, “the self” is understood not as an entity but as a process.

So, there are at least two main approaches to the self-identity. One is the approach of the Western tradition where “the person‘ was essentially defined (i.e. defined in terms of a unique essence one has that makes one a full-fledged person)” (Santiago, 2008). The other is the approach of the Chinese tradition where “the person is progressively defined” (Ibid.) – not according to his/her inner qualities but according his/her relationships. The outer determination presented by the East thought is based on the premise of interaction, mutual dependence and oneness. The inner determination presented by the West thought is based on the premise of differentiation – in order to understand the entity as entity the Western thought isolates it from the environment and regards the entity as independent and self-relying.

If we combine both approaches, we will have a fuller notion of what self-identity might be. It will be defined both from within and outwards, both as a state and as a process, both as independent and as determined, both in terms of “being” and in terms of “becoming”.

I suppose that namely this “becoming” is the important nuance that we should add to our notion of self-identity. This “becoming” regards us in relations and attitudes towards our “inner” as well as to our “outer” space. Exactly this side of self-identity that situates us within a bigger whole is something that is missing in the Western awareness and Eastern teaching have answers particularly to this issue.

If we regard self-identity in terms of becoming, we should regard at least four aspects of our relations including relation to ourselves, to other humans (beings), to nature and to the sacred.

3. Questions of the contemporary European situation and challenges to the self-identity

Our time challenges all these aspects. We are in a period of great changes that shake the very foundations of our understanding of ourselves, others, nature and the sacred. One of the main characteristics of the contemporary European and world situation is the dynamism, the multitude of possibilities as well as the development of many diverse processes and tendencies going in different even opposite directions.

---

1 In this paper, I will not discuss debates about relations between different terms expressing identity regarding principles of type differentiation.
It would be correct to say that Europe and the whole world is at a bifurcation point of possibilities and experiences inner as well as outer transformations that question both our “beings” and “becomings”.

Our understanding of ourselves is challenged by the mixed presence and complex relationships between tendencies belonging to different models of living, understanding and organizing reality, namely traditional, modern, postmodern and even post-postmodern, meta-modern, and trans-postmodern ones. These are not only different historical periods but rather “both a diachronic and synchronic construct” (Hassan, 1987: 6). All these models suggest different vision of individuality and our place in the world. The traditional model implies a not well-distinguished individuality, prescribed status of the individual and great personal dependence on the family, authority, and estates. The model of modernity distinguishes individuality, it views the world in terms of determinism, progress and linearity, one-variance development and hierarchy. Postmodernity’s view of reality is in terms of locality, fragmentation, indeterminacy, and rhizome, plurality of variations, which leads to more fragmental and relative vision of the self.

Our attitude to others and to ourselves is challenged also by opposite tendencies and consequences of globalization. From one side globalization may lead to a cosmopolitanism, openness and awareness to plurality of possibilities to view and understand the reality. Its other sides, however, are particularization and closeness. The multitude of possibilities leads not only to a feeling of freedom of choice, but also to uncertainty, instability and fear. Anthony Giddens calls this consequence of globalization “risk consciousness” (Giddens, 2000: 40). The new global society “is shaking up our existing ways of life, no matter where we happen to be... Many of us feel in the grip of forces over which we have no control” (Giddens, 1999).

Our attitude to nature is challenged by the achievements of science from one side and from consequences of the ecological crisis from the other. Achievements of technologies lead to great alienation not only from nature but from other people and from ourselves as well. Paradoxically, the new possibilities of communication lead to decrease of real relations.

All these tendencies question our attitude to the sacred as well. European society has a great degree of secularization. At the same time, people more and more experience necessity to find some deeper meaning of their lives beyond just a material satisfaction. Charles Taylor argues that in modern time we are missing the fullness that offers us “a path towards a fuller, higher good”, a good that is “quite beyond ordinary flourishing, and perhaps even incompatible with making this flourishing our highest end” (Taylor, 2007: 611). Habermas debates on awareness that something is missing (Habermas, 2010) and writes about a post-secular age. Peter Berger even develops the concept of desecularization of the world (Berger, 1999).

We may conclude that each of the aspects of self-identity is connected with diverse processes. Globalization and particularization, traditionalization and de-traditionalization, cosmopolitanism and uncertainty, openness and closeness, individualization and new opportunities for communication, secularization and de-secularization go hand by hand forming the dynamic model of contemporary existing.

In this plenitude of options, the individual feels lost. Who am I? Why am I? These existential questions seek their answers. What could Eastern teachings and religions offer us in this respect?

4. Answers of Eastern religions/teachings

Eastern teachings have some answers to the problems of self-identity of the contemporary Europeans. They offer different visions of the self, its place in the universe and its
relations to the other aspects of reality. They offer different organization of spiritual life, different visions of the sacred and different ways to it.

Eastern teachings fit to the diverse tendencies and demands of the contemporary situation combining in suitable way traditional, modern and post-modern tendencies. They correspond both to the cosmopolitan attitudes and need of novelty from one side, and to the need of security from the other, bringing the feeling of the freedom of choices as well as the feeling of stability of the long traditions.

The ideas of these teachings are in tune with the achievement of both sciences and humanities. In many aspects, their ideas are relevant to or can be described in terms of the ideas of the contemporary quantum physics, biology, and psychology. They correspond also to the ideas of the contemporary post-modern theories and in some cases had even influenced them. It is not by chance that most of the followers of Eastern teachings have higher education and many of them are scientists and scholars.

These teaching, and especially Buddhism and Daoism, fit to the critical attitude of the seeking mind questioning the established model of the absolute truth peculiar to the tradition and modernity and revealing the relativism of opinions that is closer to the post-modern view. The understanding that all our affirmation are only relative opinions that depend on our level of development and state of consciousness is peculiar for almost all Eastern teachings. At the same time, these teaching provide a sense of integrity. All the diverse opinions and opposite affirmations are but aspects of one integral whole.

The feeling, understanding and intuition of integrity as well as the well-elaborated practical side offering clear practices for work with mind, psyche and body are among the most attractive features of Eastern teachings. In contrast to the Western religions that oppose divinity, human and nature and require faith and obedience, Eastern teaching offer a vision of oneness and comprehensible methods of self-development in order to achieve this oneness.

These technics relay predominantly on personal efforts. Therefore, they are attractive for the Europeans. First, they fit to the modern Europeans trust in science and in progress. They correspond to or at least could be presented in terms of scientific achievement in psychology, physics, and biology. They could be explained rationally, could be verified by the scientific technologies, and could be tested and proved personally. These practices also fit to the idea of progress and development – a person has an aim that is achievable with one’s own efforts here and now, not in some other reality. This connection with the idea of progress is a little bit paradoxical because in the original Eastern traditions there is no understanding of linear development but of cycles or pulsations.

Second, offering reliance on one’s own power as well as well-elaborated methods of self-development, these teachings are in tune with the individualism of the Europeans. Here we also come to a paradox. Eastern teachings were developed in traditional cultures, where the individual was perceived as an integral part of the whole. The underlying philosophy regards all objects and phenomena as interdependent aspects of this whole. The inherent philosophy in Europe, however, is predominantly that of subject-object dichotomy distinguishing the subject and opposing it to the rest of the world. In many cases, Europeans follow Eastern teachings exactly because of their own well-distinguished individuality that is opposed to the outer world.

At the same time, people who are attracted by Eastern religions are often people who need a new kind of integrity and feeling of oneness. The vision of integral wholeness developed by Eastern teachings is one of the main feature of Eastern thought that simultaneously challenges and attracts the European understanding. Eastern teachings reveal everything in terms of oneness and mutual dependence. Therefore, they give, at least theoretically, answer to the alienation of the contemporary life and show what should be our attitude to nature, to other people and even to the
sacred: we all are but one and the attitude to everything outside us is in fact an attitude to ourselves.

The vision of integrity and wholeness is not only theoretical; it could be vividly experienced through meditation and other practices of mind-body work. It could be experienced in common spiritual life as well. Giving to the individual a sense of self-conviction and feeling of freedom of following one’s own path, these teachings offer also a feeling of belonging to a community of like-minded mates. Many people who follow Eastern paths express their experience with them as returning home. Returning home means security, support, warmth, and kin relations. Returning home after being away of it means obtaining once again yourself.

Eastern teachings give also a different attitude to the sacred that fits better to the rational approach of the Europeans from one side as well as to their deep longing for inner meaning from another.

First, in most of the Eastern teachings there is no idea of personal God creator or some transcendent personal power. The Ultimate reality in Buddhism is void or suchness, in Daoism – dao or way. Dao is neither creator nor even a principle but the course of unfolding of the Universe. In Hinduism, there are gods but they all are names of the manifestations of that underlying nameless oneness that precedes everything and is everything. Being immanent to all, it is not some transcendental reality but our own deepest essence as well. Therefore, according to these teachings self-understanding means understanding of everything else, macrocosm leads to microcosm and vice versa.

Second, because of this inner divinity of human being, the path to the sacred is a path to oneself. In contrast to the traditional European religions that demand the person to believe and to rely on some external power, Eastern teachings demand personal efforts of the individual in order to acquire again his/her true nature.

Third, in most cases these teaching do not offer some big institutionalized organization but communities of friends. Their organization seems intimate and understandable. Often, they also provide possibilities for individual practices that fits to the demand of the contemporary European to forge one’s own path to the sacred.

5. Conclusion

Eastern religions have clear practical aspect offering methods of self-development; they have weak religious institutionalization, that make them easy and flexible to follow, their worldviews have some features that might be interpreted as being more adequate to the contemporary scientific and post-modern worldview.

All Eastern teachings demand personal effort and transformation of our attitude and even of our consciousness. They present our existence here as a spiritual journey in the end of which we will find our true Self and will remember that it is equal to the whole universe.

Even when they deny personality or because they deny personality, i.e. the masks and roles imposed by our circumstances, Eastern teachings help to reveal our authenticity. It might be the understanding that our inner essence is an eternal unchanged consciousness that is equal to the divine essence, as it is in Hinduism that penetrates in Europe mainly through yoga and is based on the ancient Upanishads. Or it might be the realization that our self is merely a name for the perishable composition of frail and fragile psychophysical states that – like the self itself – are empty, as it is in Buddhism. Or, as in Daoism, we may reveal that our self is a process among other processes that is always in rhythmic transformations. In each of these cases, the realization is that of non-duality of micro and macrocosm.
In times of vanity and hurry, Eastern teachings give us a silence, peace and harmony, a meditative glance towards ourselves, feeling of integrity, and a sense of meaning.

In many aspects, in Europe these teachings are accepted exactly as teachings, not as religions. They are not a tradition that should be followed but new visions and attitudes that are attractive mostly for the minds seeking development, improvement, meaning, fulfilment. They are more and more commercialized but at the same time, they imply collaboration and new dialog between East and West. Combining of the ideas of Eastern teachings with the ideas of our own cultures could contribute to the development of something new and more beneficial for the whole humankind.

Acknowledgements

The research is a part of a project within Marie Sklodowska-Curie Action, European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme, grant No. 753561.

The author declares no competing interests.

References


