

III. Religious Pluralism: Origins and Ideas

B. Eastern ideas

During the 1950s and '60s Eastern thought began to spread through the United States through the writings of such people as Alan Watts, Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, Herman Hesse, and Aldous Huxley.¹ Eastern scriptures, such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, were read and discussed. Interest in Buddhism and Hinduism grew. The Beatles sang about it in such songs as *My Sweet Lord*. Missiologist Hendrik Kraemer saw it happening: "There is evident in the fields of pictorial arts, of novels, of thinking and of depth psychology, a kind of premonition. They manifest a spontaneous openness, a readiness to be invaded, to be 'spiritually colonised' by the Orient. There are open 'gates' for an eastern invasion."²

Two significant ideas came from the East. First was the idea that all is one, that there are ultimately no distinctions: good and bad, light and dark, etc., are all the same. This idea extends to religion as well. In the 19th century, the Indian Ramakrishna began to teach that Hinduism was the "crown of the world's religions." His disciple, the Swami Vivekandanda, came to Chicago in 1893 for the first Parliament of World Religions where he echoed that idea and announced that "we accept all religions as true."³ He traveled throughout the USA and England spreading this idea.

The second important idea coming from the East merged with the skepticism of the West. Recall that in Western philosophy there developed the idea that ultimate realities cannot be known; we can't know "things in themselves" but only how they appear to us.

According to Eastern thought, ultimate reality by its very nature cannot be verbalized. It can only be spoken of negatively. God is "not this" or "not that." "God is always beyond, unknowable in his pure essence; any description we give him in terms of words or pictures is only a reduction for our human understanding. God cannot be known through rational, conceptual, verbalized thought of any kind. He is to be known only through intuition or meditation, both of which stress the nonrational or the super-rational."⁴

Modern Indian philosopher, D. S. Sharma, points us toward the significance of this for the matter of religious pluralism. He wrote: "The particular name and form of any deity are limitations which we in our weakness impose on the all-pervading Spirit which is really nameless and formless."⁵ People today, especially of the younger generations, accept the idea almost as a maxim that all religions worship the same deity; that the various names given him are our own inventions. Although we might see this ultimate reality differently, it is the same.

¹ I am indebted to Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1973), 193ff, for this overview.

² Hendrik Kraemer, *World Culture and World Religions* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1960), 18, quoted in Guinness, 195-96.

³ Guinness, 199.

⁴ Guinness, 204.

⁵ Guinness, 204-05.