

Western Knowledge and the East

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The reference, in the Report just read, to the good work done by Mr. and Miss Phillips shews how extremely useful and fortunate it is for societies and studies when persons are contented to devote themselves to one cause or subject to make a “hobby” of it, as we say.

The Report shews that at present the work of your Society consists of “talking.” Now, however valuable and necessary talk may be, it might fairly be hoped that as your Society grew older and stronger and wiser, it would take up some social work and would thereby increase its usefulness and tend to strengthen and prolong its life.

The existence of a Chinese Christian Association is an indication of the great event of the century, which is the bringing to the East by a Western nation of a great religion which has been born in the East. In the East alone, the great religions have been born; and Britain cannot share in the great honour of being the birthplace of a religion: its people can only help in the development and spread of a religion which they have received from the East.

This work is being done, and the sphere and influence of the Christian religion is being widened. But the agents in the great work are, it must always be remembered, only men,—men who are by no means perfect; and therefore the task of Eastern peoples is not ended by mere imitation of the lives of their Western brethren. They must search all things and hold fast only that which is true. The British have their failings and bad habits, and Chinese as well as others must not be lured into acceptance of these merely because they are practised by Christians: they must leave behind bad habits, just as they have left behind those practices of the Chinese which did not make for their welfare and progress.

The great event of the century—the infusion of a new religion into Eastern peoples has not been limited, however, to the introduction of a new creed nor to the opportunity given of imitating a Western people in their habits of life and conduct; it has created inevitably the thirst for acquiring knowledge regarding politics and science and the treatment of social questions in the West. It were fruitless to discuss whether this spread of knowledge was expedient or otherwise; may be, “where ignorance is bliss, ’tis folly to be wise;” but the great fact stands out that for weal or woe, Western knowledge, as men are wont to term it, is being acquired by every Eastern nation. Perhaps no more thought was taken by its devotees of the consequences which would follow than was in the mind of a Western school-boy who read History and Geography

at the age of 13, without an idea of the passion which at double that age he would feel on the facts so long since stowed away in his brain. So with Eastern nations, the knowledge they are acquiring will ferment in their brains and evolve products of which there is but little indication in the early days of study. Look at India to-day: whence came the great feeling of unrest which is causing so much anxiety? From the feverish anxiety of some to realize in their own lifetime the ideals which in England had been the growth of centuries, and could only be fitting when applied to a people whose characters had been moulded in the turmoil of that long battle! From the irritation and disappointment of those who saw power wrested from them and reposing in the hands of those who in former times they were wont to despise the disturbance of class and caste and privileged the passing of the old customs and the bringing in of the new!

And so whilst you are to drink and drink deeply of Western knowledge, yet you need to pray above all for wisdom that the knowledge may tend to the increase of happiness and contentment and patience instead of feverish anxiety and unrest. What then does it come to? We are to be wise enough to see that not to us is given the creation by “explosions” of a perfect state: that as generations have gone before us, and as the actions of each have built up but a small step in the great ladder of progress, we must be contented to share in the same work and in the same fate. We should not stand aside seeking “for some great thing to do or secret thing to know,” but, with the talents which have been given to us, we should labour to make as perfect as it may be the little block we have the opportunity of working upon. The idea of doing nothing at present because the opportunity is not as large as we should desire is injurious and unworthy and must be abandoned.

There was yet the field of science and art. Much has been said as to the opposition of science to religion. Between true religion as the revelation of God and facts in Nature created by God there can be no difference, there may be in the conceptions of what some consider to be true religion and what some others consider to be the facts in Nature: both sets of investigators being only men of limited vision and transient experience. The knowledge of science need have the terrors for Christians, and the blessings of applied science and art should be freely laid hold of by all. There is no more valuable work being done than by the lady medical missionaries in India: and your Society may well consider if it cannot organise means for introducing such aid in Singapore.

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