

Charles Le Gai Eaton, Former British Diplomat (part 3 of 6)

Description: The search for the truth of a philosopher and writer, faced with a constant internal struggle of harmonizing belief and action. Part 3: Wisdom in the mind without penetration of human substance, and the discovery of God.

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From Charterhouse I went on to Cambridge, where I neglected my official studies, which seemed trivial and boring, in favor of the only study that mattered. The year was 1939. War had broken out just before I had gone up to the University and, in two years time, I would be in the army. It seemed likely, after all, that the Germans would succeed in killing me as I had always thought they would. I had only a little time in which to find answers to the questions which still obsessed me, but this did not draw me to any organized religion. Like most of my friends, I was contemptuous of the Churches and of all who paid lip-service to a God they did not know; but I was soon obliged to moderate this hostility. I remember the scene clearly after more than half-a-century. A few of us lingered on, drinking coffee, after the evening meal in the Hall of King's College. The conversation turned to religion. At the head of the table sat an undergraduate who was universally admired for his brilliance, his wit and his sophistication. Hoping to impress him and taking advantage of a brief silence, I said: 'No intelligent person nowadays believes in the God of religion!' He looked at me rather sadly before answering: 'On the contrary, nowadays intelligent people are the only ones who do believe in God,' I would willingly have sunk out of sight under the table.

I had, however, a wise friend, a man forty years my senior, whom I found totally convincing. This was the writer L. H. Myers, described at that time as 'the only philosophical novelist England has produced'. Not only did his major work, 'The Root and the Flower', answer many of these questions that gnawed at me, but they conveyed a marvelous sense of serenity united with compassion. It seemed to me that serenity was the greatest treasure that one could possess in this life and that compassion was the greatest virtue. Here, surely, was a man whom no tempest shake and who surveyed the turmoil of human existence with the eye of wisdom. I wrote to him, and he replied promptly. For the next three years we wrote to each other at least twice every month. I poured my heart out to him, while he, convinced that he had at last found in this young admirer someone who truly understood him, replied in the same vein. Eventually we met, and this cemented our friendship.

Yet everything was not as it seemed. I began to detect in his letters a note of inner torment, sadness and disillusionment. When I asked him if he put all his serenity into his books, leaving nothing for himself, he replied: 'I think your comment was shrewd and probably true'. He had given his whole life to the pursuit of pleasure and of 'experiences' (both sublime and sordid, so he said). Few women, in high society or low, had been able

to resist his astonishing combination of wealth, charm and good look, He, for his part, had no reason to resist their seductions. Fascinated by spirituality and mysticism, he adhered to no religion and obeyed no conventional moral law. Now he felt that he was growing old, and he could not face the prospect. He had tried to change himself and even repent his past, but it was too late. Little more than three years after our correspondence had begun, he committed suicide.

My affection for him endured and, in due course, I named my eldest son after him, but Leo Myers' death taught me more than I could ever learned from his books, although it required some years for me to understand its full significance. His wisdom had been only in his head. It had never penetrated his human substance. A man might spend a life reading spiritual books and studying the writings of the great mystics. He might feel that he had penetrated the secrets of the heavens and the earth, but unless this knowledge was incorporated into his very nature and transformed him, it was sterile. I began to suspect that a simple man of faith, praying to God with little understanding but with a full heart, might be worth more than the most learned student of the spiritual sciences.

Myers had been profoundly influenced by a study of Hindu Vedanta, the metaphysical doctrine at the core of Hinduism. My mother's interest Raja Yoga had already pointed me in this direction. Vedanta now became my principal interest and, ultimately, the path that led me to Islam. This would seem shocking to most Muslims and astonishing to anyone who is aware that the very basis of Islam is an uncompromising condemnation of idolatry, and yet my case is by no means unique. Whatever may be the beliefs of the Hindu masses, Vedanta is a doctrine of pure unity, of the unique Reality, and therefore of what, in Islam, is called Tawheed. Muslims more than others, should have little difficulty in understanding that a doctrine of Unity underlies all the religions which have nourished mankind since the beginning, whatever idolatrous illusions may have overlaid 'the jewel in the lotus' just as, in the individual, personal idolatry overlays the heart's core. How could it be otherwise, since Tawheed is Truth and, in the words of a great Christian mystic, 'Truth is native to man'?

All too soon my time at Cambridge was ended and I was sent to The Royal Military College, Sandhurst, emerging after five months as a young officer supposedly ready to kill or be killed. To learn more about the arts of war I was then dispatched on what was called 'attachment' to a regiment in the north of Scotland. Here I was left to my own devices and occupied my time either reading or walking on the granite cliffs above the raging northern sea. This was a stormy place, but I felt at peace as I had never done before. The more I read of Vedanta and also of the ancient Chinese doctrine of Taoism, the more certain I was that I at last had some understanding of the nature of things and had glimpsed, if only in thought and imagination, the ultimate Reality beside which all else was little more than a dream. As yet I was not prepared to call this Reality 'God', let alone Allah.

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