

Charles Le Gai Eaton, Former British Diplomat (part 4 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 4: T. S. Eliot and Gai's first book.

By Gai Eaton

Published on 16 Jan 2006 - Last modified on 03 Feb 2006

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When I left the army I began to write, needing to express my thoughts as a way of putting them in order. I wrote about Vedanta, Taoism and Zen Buddhism, but also about certain Western writers (including Leo Myers) who had been influenced by these doctrines. Through a chance meeting with the poet T. S. Eliot, who was at that time head of a publishing firm, these essays were published under the title 'The Richest Vein', a quotation taken from Thoreau: 'My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snouts or forepaws, and with it I would burrow my way through these hills. I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabout...' But by now I had a new guide through the hills. I had discovered Rene Guenon, a Frenchman who had lived the greater part of his life in Cairo as the Sheikh Abdul Wahed.

Guenon undermined and then; with uncompromising intellectual rigor, demolished all the assumptions taken for granted by modern man, that is to say Western or westernized man. Many others had been critical of the direction taken by European civilization since the so-called 'Renaissance', but none had dared to be as radical as he was or to re-assert with such force the principles and values which Western culture had consigned to the rubbish tip of history. His theme was the 'primordial tradition' or *Sofia perennis*, expressed-so he maintained-both in ancient mythologies and in the metaphysical doctrine at the root of the great religions. The language of this Tradition was the language of symbolism, and he had no equal in his interpretation of this symbolism. Moreover he turned the idea of human progress upside down, replacing it with the belief almost universal before the modern age, that humanity declines in spiritual excellence with the passage of time and that we are now in the Dark Age which precedes the End, an age in which all the possibilities rejected by earlier cultures have been spewed out into the world, quantity replaces quality and decadence approaches its final limit. No one who read him and understood him could ever be quite the same again.

Like others whose outlook had been transformed by reading Guenon, I was now a stranger in the world of the twentieth century. He had been led by the logic of his convictions to accept Islam, the final Revelation and, as it were, the summing-up of all that came before. I was not yet ready for this, but I soon learned to conceal my opinions or at least to veil them. No one can live happily in constant disagreement with his fellow men and women, nor can he engage in argument with them since he does not share their basic, unspoken assumptions. Argument and discussion pre-supposes some common ground shared by those involved. When no common ground exists, confusion and misunderstanding are unavoidable, if not anger. The beliefs which are the very basis of

contemporary culture are held no less passionately than unquestioning religious faith, as was illustrated during the conflict over Salman Rushdie's novel, 'The Satanic Verses'.

Occasionally I forgot my resolve not to become involved in fruitless argument. Some years ago I was a guest at a diplomatic dinner party in Trinidad. The young woman beside me was talking with a Christian Minister, an Englishman, seated opposite. I was only half attending to their conversation when I heard her say that she was not sure she believed in human progress. The Minister answered her so rudely and with such contempt that I could not resist the temptation to say: 'She's quite right - there's no such thing as progress!' He turned on me, his face contorted with fury, and said: 'If I thought that I would commit suicide this very night!' Since suicide is as great a sin for Christians as it is for Muslims, I understood for the first time the extent to which faith in progress, in a 'better future' and, by implication, in the possibility of a paradise on earth has replaced faith in God and in the hereafter. In the writings of the renegade priest Teilhard de Chardin, Christianity itself was reduced to a religion of progress. Deprive the modern Westerner of this faith and he is lost in a wilderness without signposts.

By the time 'The Richest Vein' was published, I had left England for Jamaica where I had a school friend who would, I knew, find me work of some kind. I had been described on the book's cover as 'a mature thinker'. The adjective 'mature' was singularly inappropriate: as a man, as a personality, I had barely emerged from adolescence, and Jamaica was an ideal place to work out adolescent fantasies. Only those with some experience of West Indian life in the immediate post-war years could understand the delights and temptations which it offered to those seeking 'experience' and sexual adventure. Like Myers, I had no moral print such as might have restrained me. I was embarrassed when I began to receive letters from people who had read my book and imagined that I was an old man - 'with a long white beard', as one of them wrote - full of wisdom and compassion. I wished I could disillusion them as quickly as possible and be rid of the responsibility they were putting upon me. One day a Catholic priest arrived in the Island to stay with friends; he had, he told them, just been reading a 'fascinating book' by someone called Gai Eaton. He was astonished to hear that the author was actually in Jamaica and asked how he could meet me. His friends took him to a party at which they were told I might be found. He was introduced and, seeing before him such a foolish young man, gave me a long hard look. Then he shook his head in amazement and said quietly: 'You couldn't have written that book!'

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