

Running Head: Eastern Philosophy

Geographical, Political and Educational  
Implications of Eastern Philosophies

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Eastern philosophy is broad in scope and emotional in nature. Because of this the religions themselves will not be examined. Rather a multi-approach to the examination of the topic will be explored. Geographical, political and educational aspects of Eastern philosophies will be examined. This examination will be in conjunction with a comparative view to the West.

As previously stated, Eastern philosophy is a very broad topic. It can be subdivided into two philosophical categories: Far Eastern and Middle Eastern philosophies. The dichotomies of the Far East and the Middle East philosophies are on opposite ends of a continuum. Far Eastern philosophy includes Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism among others. They range from polytheist to non-theist. Far Eastern philosophies focus on a detachment of self from the material world. Adherents try to achieve enlightenment, nirvana, or an oneness with the spiritual self in order to fulfill their highest potential. In contrast, the Middle East philosophies of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are monotheist. They focus on an individual's interaction with the world in order to reshape the world. This is done based on their philosophical dictates in order to achieve access to heaven (Ozmon and Craver 91-112).

It is often proposed that the Western world, specifically America, is an extremely career oriented society. This is posed as a negative aspect that brings about isolation and self-absorption among its citizenry (Conroy 5). However, the very opposite is true. A society cannot survive without its inhabitants actively supporting and participating in that society. Careers, per se, are an integral component to the continued existence of a society. Isolation and self-absorption may be by products of any chosen path or field. However, it is not an exclusively Western phenomenon. Far Eastern philosophies strive

to achieve this in order to become one with a universal spirit. To seek out material gain suggests a weakness of an individual that must be overcome in order to gain a balance with nature (Ozmon and Craver 115). This rejection of material possessions is one of the primary differences between Western practices and Far Eastern philosophy. Westerners perceive that anyone can change their status in life if they chose to do so. In Far Eastern philosophy an individual's station in life is viewed as their destiny, something one must accept (117).

Is material possession a bad thing then? No, it is not, but it has been put in a negative spin especially when viewed in context of Western society. Middle Eastern philosophies, in contrast to Far Eastern philosophies, do not achieve spiritualism through detachment from materialism. The primary difference between materialism in the West and the Middle East is that the religious philosophy encompasses the political philosophy while in the West they are separate (Beverley 677). This gives an impression that what is materially achieved in the Middle East is given by god, while in the West what is achieved is gained immorally.

This vilification of the Western way of life, while appearing to be petty jealousy, may possibly be a result of nonwestern cultures limited access to resources of a given geographical local. Thus, the question then arises does the resources of a land factor into the type of philosophy of an area?

Geography may be a factor, for people generally possess the same philosophy as their parents, grandparents, etc. Geographical location is the means for unity among people through common customs, morality and experiences (Light and Smith 95). If the natural resources typically do not allow for the prosperity of the masses the inhabitants

would then be denied access and exposure to other people and cultures. Without exposure to other cultures a form of isolation will occur whether resources or governmental dictate imposes it (97). This isolation may produce an intolerance to other cultures and a mistrust of other philosophies. As Newman and Halvorson state, "... societal trends entirely determine patterns among religious organizations ... [rather than] to contend that religious organizations have a life of their own, separate from social and cultural forces." (24). For the purpose of playing devil's advocate, it can also be said that exposure to other cultures, as is the case in the West, does not necessarily breed an acceptance of others. This exposure, though, can be a step toward tolerance of others and their philosophies.

Another question may now be posed, does this then indicate that a philosophy, particularly a religious philosophy, lends itself to allowing a particular type of political governance? Fundamental Middle Eastern philosophy dictates the law, and thus the type of government its adherents must follow. The Islamic religion pervades every aspect of an adherent's life (Beverley 677) Judaism has been influenced by the cultures and social norms of the societies in which it exists. It does not (other than Israel) establish a code of law by which to govern the land (Bishop and Darton 5). While Christianity, according to Maurice Canney, exists "... not in a national or political realm, but in the minds and hearts of men." (Beverley 690). Thus many Christian nations are based on a separation of church and state.

Some Far Eastern nations, most notably China, possess communistic governments. An interesting examination of governments based on the religious philosophy would include China and the former Soviet Union both of which were

communist. China, with its detached spiritualism of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism was able to embrace communism, a non-theistic philosophy. Buddhism is a very adaptable religion. It blends well with the culture, traditions and political climate of the country it is housed (Reynolds and Hallisey 336). While the USSR, mainly a non-detached Christian area was not able to sustain a communistic regime (Michel 28).

A further comparison of the two nations is in order. The similarities of both countries were that they were formerly ruled by monarchies, had diverse populations, and had various geographic regions. Both nations experienced social upheavals when communism took control.

The differences between the two countries included religious philosophies and natural resources provided by the regions. The USSR was primarily a monotheist society with few natural resources to sustain its people. China was primarily non-theist or polytheist society with varied natural resources (Cooper 260).

Indicators of success for Chinese communism would include the natural resources of the land. The nation was able to support its people. Also, the diverse religious philosophies of China lend themselves to absorbing a communistic non-theist doctrine (Reynolds and Hallisey 336).

In the reverse, indicators of failure of Soviet communism would include the lack of natural resources to sustain its people (Michel 37). In addition, a non-theist government was philosophically at odds with a theist populous. Basic communistic tenants could not be readily absorbed into the philosophic fabric of the nation.

In both situations, the government imposed isolation of the population. Material possession was restricted due to lack of personal funds and personal freedoms that were

severely limited. Educational policies and practices were set within the parameters of the political philosophy. Exposure to other people, countries, and cultures were almost nonexistent (Michel 51, Cooper 267). Based on this limited examination, Far Eastern philosophical countries would be better able to adapt to various governmental types. Middle Eastern philosophies would not tolerate governmental practices that are diametrically opposite to them.

Another consideration when examining Eastern philosophies would be to determine if the philosophies expand or retard the educational growth of the adherents. Geographic location of the philosophy may once again be a factor to the educational policies. In the Middle East, which is predominantly Islamic, education is based on understanding the tenants of the religious practices taught through literature, history and philosophy. The child is educated to understand and practice the religious doctrines thus the normative practices and beliefs of the society as a whole. Female education is typically for performing duties of religious knowledge and then performing duties of wife and mother (Chandras 90-92).

In India, a predominantly Hindu nation, the type and amount of education a child receives is determined by the caste into which the child is born. The caste system is a basic tenant of the religion. Therefore it is the religious philosophy that determines the education of the child (35). While in the Far East, religious philosophies do not generally factor into the education of children. Therefore early education falls into mainly secular realms. Monasteries, though, often functioned as a center of learning for mature students (Reynolds and Hallisey 341). Western nations, primarily Christian, do not generally teach a particular religious philosophy in the public school setting. Religious education is

usually left to the parents (Newman and Halvorson 127). Again, based on this limited examination, the religious philosophy of a geographic location does have an impact on the education of its youth.

How then, do Eastern philosophies impact the West, America in particular?

Eastern philosophies are viewed as religious philosophies in the West rather than national dictates of life styles. Western societies have developed, or tried to develop, peaceful co-existence of the varied philosophies of its citizens. Most do not advocate the preeminence of any one religious philosophical theory (156). If the government, as a whole, can remain religiously neutral its people may develop what philosophy it wishes. This allows for the economic growth of a society while allowing for individual differences. Education in this type of system must then be completely secular. Educational policies therefore, are set by the society based on current needs of that society as a whole and not the religious philosophies of individuals.

This brings the topic back to the original statement of Western education causing isolation and self-absorption. These characteristics are obviously by no means solely a Western trait. If anything, they are the reflections of preexisting philosophical practices. How then, since the traits are viewed so negatively, do Western societies overcome the negative aspects of these traits? Possibly if the non-western countries become more global in nature the negative implications will no longer exist. There are indications that the West is influencing the East. Far Eastern regions are rapidly becoming centers for banking and industry, which is changing the socio-economic status of their countries (Ozmon and Craver 118). In the Middle East recent events have also caused a reexamination of the role of women in society and Western theories of human rights in

Islamic law (Beverly 690). Western society may never overcome negative images in some geographic regions. This, however, does not mean that an attempt at tolerance of various philosophical leanings should not be included in Western education.

Much is written about incorporating Eastern philosophy in Western educational practices. The text by Ozmon and Craver, for example, makes note of utilizing Eastern philosophy to develop students' self worth (113). It is not Eastern philosophies in general that the authors are espousing, but rather Far Eastern practices not the actual philosophy. Educational methodology of the Far East has been primarily of the oral tradition with meditation, yoga and adherence to a hierarchical code of conduct also addressed (Ozmon and Craver 115). Buddhist educational practices give importance to discussion, debate and memorization. While traditional vocational training of Buddhist followers was similar to Hindu practices of apprenticeship and family schooling (Chandras 68-9).

The belief systems of polytheism or non-theism are disregarded when addressing Far Eastern philosophy as an educational aid. This is because of the philosophical pluralism of the West. The geographic expanse of America provided for the cultural, ethnic and religious diversity of the land (Newman and Halvorson 31). Practices that are not religious in context would be the easiest to assimilate into a pluralistic society. Practices that show a religious leaning, such as Middle Eastern philosophy where education supports the religious teachings of the philosophy (Chandras 94), smack of favoritism that is not easily brought to bear in a multicultural society.

Therefore, perhaps an examination, not an advocacy, of the various religious philosophies would be warranted in the school systems in order to promote an



understanding of the cultural differences of the students thereby negating the taunts of isolation and self-absorption. Children are taught intolerance and this usually stems from their environment not their education. Through education awareness of others, and in turn self, may be garnered. This would bring about a tolerance that is needed in this growing global community. This may be a desire for Utopia; however, the cultural diversity of Western societies indicates that, while Utopia may never be achieved, a middle ground on the religious philosophical continuum is attainable.

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