CHAPTER THREE

WHAT THE WEST HAS LEARNED FROM THE EAST IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Andrzej Flis

INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the twentieth century, monumental changes occurred in Western culture, both in the sphere of values and cultural norms, as well as in the field of ideas and symbolic consciousness.1 Some of these changes were of an endogenous nature and were simply the result of an internal transformation in Western civilization, while other changes were the creation of diffusion, i.e., the influence of foreign cultural pressures. Among the changes caused by diffusion, two deserve special attention due to their far-reaching effects: the birth and rapid development of an ideology of “fighting without violence,” which significantly transformed the political culture of Europe and North America in the 1960s and 1970s, and the evolution of a Western attitude towards nature in general and the animal world in particular. Both of these shifts should be traced to the influences of the East, and more precisely, to the cultural tradition of India. Both of these changes also affected the Christian worldview and meant the rejection of a way of thinking that was dominant in the West for more than twelve centuries.

---

1 The discussions in this work will be based on a twofold concept of culture which can be represented schematically via the following diagram:

\[
\text{CULTURE} \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{system of ideas, signs, and symbols} \\
\text{system of values, norms, and sanctions}
\end{array}
\]

Culture seen this way constitutes an abstract-sensual reality, or ideal-material reality, comprising two mutually interconnected structures: the system of values, norms, and sanctions as well as the system of ideas, signs, and symbols. The changes to which this text refers to penetrate both these structures and, as such, are of a systemic—and not partial or superficial nature.
In the last quarter of the past century, pacifist and ecological movements took root in Europe and the United States so deeply that, in the end, they had become organic products of Western civilization. Nonetheless, they never were specifically western in their origins. The Christian faith—the axionormative foundation of European culture—for centuries justified aggression and violence not only in social life, but also in relations between man and nature, all in the name of higher goals. The development of pacifism and ecological sensitivity in Europe and America should thus be assigned not so much to an internal evolution in Atlantic civilization, but to external influences—specifically Asian ideas. These were transformed and adapted to the new context and in time became components of contemporary Western culture.

Christianity and Violence

The Biblical God is cruel and vengeful. Without scruples he resorts to violence in realizing his purposes. He condemned mankind to a terrible flood, turned Sodom and Gomorrah into ash with fire and brimstone, murdered the firstborn of Egypt starting with the heirs of the pharaohs and ending with the “firstborn son of the slave by the mill” (Exodus 11: 5, 29), and handed the people of Israel over into Babylonian captivity, “sparing neither youths, nor virgins, nor elders” (II Chronicles 36: 17). Violence and destruction are not only attributes of past actions of Jehovah, but also the axis of future ones. According to the prophecies of the Old Testament regarding the ultimate triumph of good over evil, the constitution of Heaven on Earth is to be preceded by a global cosmic catastrophe which, acting as a sign of the imminent coming of the Messiah, will swallow the world whole. The ground will slide out from under mankind’s feet, mountains will smoke, stars will fall from the skies and turn into dust, the oceans will boil and steam, and a gigantic fire will complete the destruction of the world.

The Church—just like the Biblical God—also unscrupulously resorted to violence and physical force aiming to fulfill its goals. From 381 AD, it methodically persecuted other religions of the Roman Empire with a brutality which greatly exceeded that which it had experienced itself under the reigns of Decius and Decollation. The bestial thirteenth century crusade against the Catharists in the south of France arouses shock and amazement to this day. The papal legate’s reply to the question of how to differentiate the Catholics from the heretics—“kill them