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ASIAN AND AFRICAN STUDIES

THE NEW MOVE

By Walter Zander

Some 14 months ago the fourth N.A.T.O. parliamentary conference in Paris resolved that the study of Asian and African languages throughout the Atlantic Community should be strengthened and broadened. As a result a study group met in London in May last year. It submitted a report and a number of suggestions which now have been accepted.

The purpose of this new move towards Asian and African studies, according to the resolution, is to bring about "a better understanding of mutual interests" between the peoples of the two continents and the Atlantic Community. How does this purpose compare with the aims of Orientalism in the past? Oriental studies have been going on in different degrees in the western world for many centuries, and their purposes have varied according to historical conditions and the intellectual and spiritual movements of the times.

Thus, when in 1312, in the era of the Crusades, the Council of Vienne resolved that chairs for Hebrew, Arabic and Chaldaic were to be established in Rome and the Universities of Bologna, Paris, Oxford and Salamanca, the essential purpose was to further the conversion of the infidels. *Ut errantes in viam veritatis inducere valeamus.*

CHANGES OF AIM

The Renaissance and humanistic approach was fundamentally different. The trilingual colleges for Latin, Greek and Hebrew founded in the early sixteenth century at western universities were to serve learning in search, for their own sake, of the lost

treasures of Greece and of a deeper understanding of the Bible through the study of its original languages. Then, when in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Jesuit scholars penetrated into China and Japan, studying the languages and civilisations of Asia, their main aim was missionary.

The French Revolution, in its turn, gave a new aspect to Oriental studies by putting practical application to economic and political issues into the centre of interest. The *École Nationale des Langues Orientales* was established in Paris in 1795 for the study of living languages. They were to be selected for their usefulness "pour la politique et le commerce de la République." In addition the teachers had to lecture on the economic and political relationships between France and the peoples concerned.

Since that time a multiplicity of causes have been at work throughout the western world to expand the scope and intensity of Asian studies and to develop a scholarly interest in Africa. These causes have ranged from the enthusiasm of the Romantics for Sanskrit and Ancient India, and the revival of the missionary spirit (both Catholic and Protestant, and particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world), to demands from colonial administrators, imperial and commercial expansion, and the need to train large numbers of men in the armed forces in eastern languages during the Second World War.

What is now the new trend in this long development? The first point which springs to mind is that the approach is not made on a regional basis

but for the Atlantic Community as a whole. True, something similar was done in the days of the Council of Vienne within the world of medieval Western Christendom. But when this unity was broken up by the rise of European nationalism, Oriental studies became largely determined by national issues. Just as the *École Nationale* in Paris had been established for the sake of French policy and commerce, so other European countries founded Oriental schools to strengthen their position in the general struggle for markets and influence.

The Reay Report of 1908, for example, which led to the establishment of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, refers explicitly to the example of the Oriental schools in Berlin, Paris, and St. Petersburg. "the capitals of the three greatest European rivals of Great Britain in commercial interest and Oriental expansion." After a special reference to the competition of Germany, the report adds: "If the British are to maintain and improve their commercial position in the East and the Far East, knowledge of Oriental languages is indispensable."

To-day, competition of western countries in Asia and Africa among themselves is obsolete. The new unified demand for Asian and African studies springs from the identical concern of the whole Atlantic Community in the establishment of a new relationship with the peoples of these continents.

It is well known that within the Soviet block similar efforts are being made to develop Asian and African studies. The recent establishment by the Academy of

Sciences in Moscow of a great African institute is only one link in this chain. It would, however, be most unfortunate if the new move towards Oriental studies were to be considered as a part of the cold war with both Power blocks trying to sway the uncommitted peoples of Asia and Africa to their respective sides. Asian and African studies must not be reduced to means to an end. They must be undertaken for their own sake and for the sake of the peoples themselves.

It is natural that the new interest in these studies arises at a time when the Asian and African peoples are taking an ever-increasing part in world affairs. This interest is, in fact, part of the readjustment of our relations towards the peoples of these continents. There is

no 'longer any claim for western domination or superiority. The studies are to serve, as the resolution says, "mutual interests," and the new relationship with the peoples of Asia and Africa is to be built on a basis of equality.

WORLD APPROACH

The purpose of the studies must be to understand the Asian and African civilisations in their essential manifestations. For the western mind this understanding will have a new and profound significance. Humanism in Europe-based on Latin, Greek and Hebrew for 400 years determined the outlook of the West but was essentially a civilisation of the Mediterranean.

Today, this limitation no longer holds good. A universal understanding is required which integrates into the western consciousness the history and aspirations of these rising continents.

It is to be hoped that corresponding studies of the West will be undertaken in Asia and Africa in due course. This may widen the outlook of the eastern peoples themselves, who were largely accustomed to look upon the world in terms of their own experiences and traditions. If such studies of each other's civilisation are undertaken in West and East alike this may indeed contribute towards the building up of a new universal order.