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## **‘O Our India!’: Towards a Reassessment of Sir Edwin Arnold<sup>1</sup>**

Dedicating *The Song Celestial* to India in Sanskrit verse and English translation, Sir Edwin Arnold (1832-1904) referred to his rendering of the dialogue of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna as imparting India’s insights to England in terms suggestive both of imperial possessiveness and personal affection:

*So have I writ its wisdom here, - its hidden mystery,  
For England; O our India! As dear to me as She!*  
(Arnold 1885; italics in original)

Accordingly, this paper’s primary concern is with the part Arnold played in presenting Indian religions to a wider Western public and the consequences that this had in and for the ‘East’ as well as in and for the ‘West’. This involves examining Arnold’s role and its implications in the context of Victorian norms and values and, in so doing, to cast some light on the ideas and legacy of a man who, alternately idealised and vilified, emerges as a complex, even paradoxical, character.

A popular and prolific author, though disappointed in his ambition to become poet laureate, Arnold enjoyed an enviable reputation at home and abroad, Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society and Royal Geographical Society, guest lecturer at Harvard University and holder of numerous honours, Companion of the Star of India, Knight Commander of the Indian Empire and member of the Siamese Order of the White Elephant. However, in striking contrast to his once extraordinary success and celebrity status, he is now largely forgotten, a fall from fame that invites comment and requires explanation. If there is evidence to suggest that Arnold’s high public profile had been lost by the time of his death (*The Times* 1904) and reason to suppose that little of his writing will have an enduring appeal (Phelan 2004), Arnold’s decline into obscurity may be attributed, perhaps speculatively, to changes in social attitudes and literary styles that made

what had previously seemed so timely and attractive outdated and old-fashioned (cf. Clausen 1976: 189; Wright 1957: 157).

Born at Gravesend in Kent in 1832, Arnold was educated at the King's School, Rochester, before continuing his studies at King's College, London, and University College, Oxford, where he won the Newdigate prize for poetry. After being employed as an assistant master at the King Edward VI School, Birmingham, he became principal of Deccan Sanskrit College, Poona, becoming become proficient in the languages of India and beyond. Resigning in 1861, he returned to Britain where he answered an advertisement for a leader writer on the *Daily Telegraph* and, on appointment, embarked upon a near forty-year association with the paper that saw him become a chief editor in 1873 and from 1889 onwards hold a roving commission. In addition to numerous editorials and a wealth of travel writing, among Arnold's publications on Indian subjects are a history of the governor-generalship of the Marquis of Dalhousie and various works of translation and adaptation both cultural and religious of which the most famous is *The Light of Asia*. He continued to work until 1899 when failing health compelled him to retire. He died at home in London in 1904, his reputation fast waning (Burnham 1955:43, Clausen 1976: 189, Graham 1998: 126, 140-2, Hatton 1998: 112-22, Lopez 2002: 6, Lucas 2000: 287-8, Phelan 2004 and *The Times* 1904).

### **Arnold and Said's 'Orientalism'**

An examination of Edwin Arnold's life and work offers an opportunity to reflect on the cultural and historical issues raised by the relationship between Britain and India and, given its prominence, it is obvious to use Said's theory of 'Orientalism' to do so. However, Said's focus is upon Islamic culture, including material on other 'Oriental' societies, such as India, only when necessary to elucidate his main theme (Said 1995: 17). Despite this, Said's analysis has proven influential

in prompting a wider reappraisal that has encompassed reflection on the representation of Indic beliefs and practices.

Said's threefold definition specifies the academic study of the 'East' as one meaning of 'Orientalism' but, beyond this, identifies both an opposition between 'East' and 'West' – 'a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and ... "the Occident" ' – and the exercise of the 'West's' power over the 'East' – 'the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient' (Said 1995: 2-3). Many criticisms have been made of this approach, arguing, for instance, that aspects of what Said regards as 'Orientalism' also appear in Western discussions of other Western topics (Halbfass 2005: 24) and that Said's treatment of Western attitudes is itself essentialist constituting an 'Orientalism' in reverse or 'Occidentalism' (Hart 2000: 73). Fundamental to numerous criticisms of Said's 'Orientalism' is the allegation that Said ignored significant variation and resorted to sweeping generalisation, asserting the applicability of a theory formulated in terms of the Middle East and Islam to other regions and religions without regard to their diversity and distinctiveness (e.g. Rocher 1993: 215). In addition, Said has been criticised for turning 'Orientalism', previously used to denote an area of academic expertise, into a term with wholly negative connotations (Smith 2003: 86), concentrating on the identification of contrasts between 'East' and 'West' at the expense of comparisons (Tuck 1990: 8) and stressing complicity with imperialism but not the capacity to challenge this ideology (Clarke 1997: 9). Indeed, using Said's theory of 'Orientalism' to analyse Arnold's life story and literary output reveals both the strengths and weaknesses of Said's threefold definition, each meaning of which will be considered in turn.

### The Scholarly and the Popular

Arnold's writings were often dedicated to translating, sometimes to imaginatively reconceiving and reconceptualizing, religious and moral texts. Scholars like Sir

William Jones (1746-1794) and Charles Wilkins (1749-1836) had embarked upon works of translation, both translating the *Hitopadeśa*, the former the *Gītagovinda* and the latter the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, all three being texts of which Arnold produced versions. Most prominent of these scholarly projects was the series *The Sacred Books of the East* (1879-1910) edited by Prof. F. Max Müller, the rationale for which was 'to have a solid foundation for a comparative study of the religions of the East' (Müller 1879: xi).

Clearly, Arnold was at great pains to demonstrate that, in addition to his facility with Western ideas and thinkers, he was cognisant with recent scholarship and could use it as appropriate. Arnold cited such scholarship to provide dating evidence for the *Hitopadeśa* (Arnold 1861: x). Similarly, when introducing the *Gītagovinda*, he quoted from both William Jones and Lassen, acknowledging a debt to Lassen (Arnold 1875: vi-ix, xiii). In the case of the *Māhābhārata*, he pointed to the lack of a complete translation and stressed the novelty of his collection of epic extracts (Arnold 1883: vii, x), quite plausibly given that these poems predated the first full English version of the text published by P.C. Roy between 1884 and 1896 (Winternitz 1981: 305 n.3). Further, Arnold justified his reading of the key Buddhist concepts of *nirvāṇa*, *dharma* and *karma* by appeal to his study of the subject alongside his understanding of human nature as unmoved by abstract notions and negative goals (Arnold 1903: xi).

When it came to the text of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, the object of considerable literary-critical work by scholars, Arnold provided notes and technical apparatus to justify his decisions to revise the text's scope, content and meaning. He defended the omission of particular verses on the grounds of repetition (Arnold 1885: 20; *Bhagavad-Gītā* 1, 43-4) interpolation (p. 84; *Bhagavad-Gītā* 8, 23-7) or unreliability (p. 167; *Bhagavad-Gītā* 17, 23-8). Further, he appealed to his own convictions when amending the text by transposing Sāṃkhya and Yoga so that Sāṃkhya, the path of knowledge, was defined in terms of action and Yoga, the path of action, in terms of knowledge (p. 37; *Bhagavad-Gītā* 3, 3 cf. Edgerton

1972: 166). Moreover, he rejected a quoted though unattributed statement describing the image of the inverted tree with Vedic hymns for leaves as critical of the Veda (p. 150 n.1; *Bhagavad-Gītā* 15, 1-3). Certainly, as far as the specific image is concerned, the text offers a rather negative interpretation where the *Aśvattha* represents the created order and conditioned existence and where it must be felled with the axe of detachment (p. 150; *Bhagavad-Gītā* 15, 1-4 cf. Malinar 2007: 202-3). In contrast to this and, more generally, to the text's devaluing of the Veda (transformed by Arnold into an attack upon the 'priestcraft' of the Brāhmans (e.g. p. 30; *Bhagavad-Gītā* 2, 46)), Arnold found another parable of the fig tree (p. 150 n. 1 cf. cf. Mt 24, 32; Mk 13, 28; Lk 21, 29-30) but this biblical allusion is hardly helpful in interpreting the image of the *Aśvattha*, suggesting instead a spurious sense of connection between the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and the Gospels.

With such claims to Sanskrit scholarship, there can be no doubt of the pride and pleasure Arnold took in being invited to lecture at Harvard University despite, on this occasion as on others, routinely if not entirely convincingly, protesting his own lack of expertise (Arnold 1891c: 106-7, 109). Speaking there on the *Upaniṣads* and the *Mahābhārata*, he offered a philosophical and textual analysis respectively (p. 107) that must have conveyed the impression of a lecturer who was both well informed and highly skilled. Notwithstanding sometimes dubious judgments, this was quite clearly the impression he intended to convey. However, as his publishing ventures themselves attest, interest in the East and its culture and civilisation was not the sole preserve and prerogative of scholars. There was now a wider readership providing a market for popular publishing ventures on Eastern subjects in accordance with the observation made by a contemporary critic that '[a] knowledge of the commonplace, at least, of Oriental literature, philosophy, and religion is as necessary to the general reader of the present day as an acquaintance with the Latin and Greek classics was a generation or so ago' (cited in Clarke 1997: 74). It was in meeting this demand that Arnold established his own credentials, often exercising some freedom, if not taking

some liberties, in how literally and fully he translated and, indeed, understood and explained the original text.

Arnold's *The Book of Good Counsels* was a translation of the *Hitopadeśa*, a didactic treatise in which the sage Viṣṇuśarman educates princes by using stories whose protagonists, usually animals, provide lessons in wisdom. Arnold justified his translation on the basis of the *Hitopadeśa*'s popularity in India where, according to him, it 'retains the delighted attention of young and old' but, in making this case, he made some dubious claims about its being translated into Persian, Arabic, Hebrew and Greek and also being the origin of European fables (Arnold 1861: ix-xi). These claims, in fact, relate to the translation history and cross-cultural impact of the *Pañcatantra* of which the *Hitopadeśa* is an abridged and variant form (Maurer 1987: 162-3; Olivelle 1997: xliii-xliv). Alternatively, Arnold's partial translation of the *Katha Upaniṣad*, where Yama, ruler and judge of the dead, bestows three boons on Naciketas, the third being to know about the life to come, is given a popular setting. Entitled 'The Secret of Death', the dialogue of Yama and Naciketas is presented as a dialogue between 'a Brahman Priest and an English "Saheb" ' in which the former answers the latter's questions, providing commentary and explanation drawing on other *Upaniṣads* in the course of teaching the immortality of the true self (Arnold 1885a: 7).

More explicitly, the claim that Arnold's goal was 'to popularise Indian classics' was made in the 'Preface' to his version of the *Gītagovinda* (Arnold 1875: xiii), a sensual poem portraying Kṛṣṇa as lover and centred on his relationship with Rādhā. Quite how this was to be accomplished Arnold did not say, presumably by casting Rādhā in the role of Kṛṣṇa's redeemer in a manner reminiscent of Victorian romance where the love of a good woman transforms her wayward lover (pp. v-vi). Arnold sought thereby to exploit the *Gītagovinda*'s exotic allure while making concessions to the morality of his peers even while admitting that 'English dress cannot – alas! – fail to destroy something of the Asiatic grace of Radha' (pp. xiii-xiv). Arnold's populist case is, though, explained in relation to his

translation of passages from the *Mahābhārata*, a vast collection of lore and legend centred on the disputed succession to the throne of the Kurus. Despite commenting favourably on previous scholarly work by Dean Milman and Monier Williams on the story of Nala and Damayantī, Arnold drew a distinction between the scholarly and the popular, suggesting that the academic approach 'seems better adapted to aid the student than adequately to reproduce the swift march of narrative and old-world charm of the Indian tale' (Arnold 1883: x-xi). This is echoed in Arnold's translation of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, published a hundred years after Wilkins's first translation into English in 1785 and in the wake of a number of other translations of various kinds (Arnold 1885b: 9). While acknowledging his debt to scholars, his own translation of this text, where Kṛṣṇa's spiritual insights and self-revelation convince a despairing Arjuna to fight, was rationalised by reference to the general reader, declaring that 'English literature would certainly be incomplete without possessing in popular form a poetical and philosophical work so dear to India' (pp. 9-10). Clearly, Arnold's translations with their avowedly popular character were intended to appeal to the non-specialist and it is surely on these grounds that his use of familiar Western concepts and vocabulary can best be defended as necessary to his task of communication.

### 'East' and 'West'

There was, in addition, a broad artistic and creative response to the Orient, reflecting the Romantic recourse to the spiritual and mystical holism of the 'East' as a means to effect the renewal and revitalisation of the 'West'. This, so the Romantics believed, was necessitated by the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the materialism of the Industrial Revolution which had entailed a denial of feeling and an alienation from nature. Oriental influence, more specifically Indian influence, was evident, for example, in architecture and music as well as in literature where Arnold had numerous forerunners (Clarke 1997: 59). How far such influence was merely superficial or truly substantial can be debated (Christy 1942: 39) but, while Arnold was by no means the first to compose works



on Oriental themes, he has been hailed as a pioneering populariser of Eastern thought rather than confining himself to the literary conventions often associated with Eastern topics (Clausen 1976: 176).

Arnold's poetry both on general Indian and particular religious subjects is characteristically elaborate and luxuriant with archaic language, ornate imagery and exotic detail. In the complimentary words of one review on *Indian Poetry*, 'Mr Edwin Arnold does good service by illustrating through the medium of his musical English melodies, the power of Indian poetry to stir European emotions' (*The Times* 1881). Yet, not only in his poetry but also in his prose, Arnold's taste for the beauty, glamour and mystery of the 'East' is evident. Even his discourse on the *Upaniṣads* is interrupted by a description of the charm and beauty of the Indian countryside, its flora and fauna, where ancient sages withdrew from the world and contemplated the true and the real (Arnold 1896: 152-4). More importantly, in the 'Preface' to *The Light of Asia*, Arnold indicated that, 'to appreciate the spirit of Asiatic thoughts, they should be regarded from the Oriental point of view' since this made it easier to present the material complete with its supernatural elements and age-old system of thought (Arnold 1903: x). However, if difference lent allure and required a change in perspective, some similarities presented themselves nevertheless. For instance, in *The Song Celestial*, Arnold commented on parallels with the *New Testament* and, by dating the *Bhagavad-Gītā* to the third century CE, allowed of the possibility at least that 'there are really echoes in the Brahmanic poem of the lessons of Galilee, and of the Syrian incarnation' (Arnold 1885b: 8-9).

This combination of difference that made his role of interpretation and explanation necessary and similarity that made it possible was perhaps most obvious in the comparisons he drew between more familiar classical and biblical texts, on the hand, and Indian texts, on the other, notably by calling the epics '[t]he Iliad and Odyssey of India' (Arnold 1883: vii) and the *Gītāgovinda* '[t]he Indian Song of Songs' (Arnold 1873). The domestication of Indian texts by aligning them with literary genres well known in the 'West' was also evident in the

title given to his translation of a series of stories taken from the *Mahābhārata*. By calling this collection *Indian Idylls*, Arnold alluded to his hero Tennyson's Arthurian poems, collectively known as *Idylls of the King*, which served as models, structurally, thematically and stylistically for his own work (Graham 1998: 158-65). Hence Arnold's view of 'East' and 'West' seems simultaneously to have sustained this distinction and subtly undermined it.

### British Raj and Indian Antiquity

Arnold's fellow Victorians evinced much enthusiasm for Empire, especially India. In the series of great exhibitions where India occupied pride of place, visitors numbered in the millions (Greenhalgh 1988: 59; MacKenzie 1984: 101). Arnold himself, in concluding his history of *The Marquis of Dalhousie's Administration of British India*, combined respect for the 'East', noting 'the heavy debt due to it from the West, in religion, art, philosophy, language', with support for the imperial project, here expressed in terms of a responsibility to serve the people of India (Arnold 1865: 389). Given Arnold's own political convictions, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that his writings for the *Daily Telegraph* contributed towards popular imperial sentiment as he communicated his own familiarity with and professed love of India. As his obituary in *The Times* stated when suggesting Arnold's suitability for a journalistic career, he had 'a subject of his own [India] on which most of his countrymen and countrywomen were sadly ignorant, and of which they were quite willing to learn so much as could be presented to them in an attractive form' (*The Times* 1904). In this way, Arnold played his part in increasing interest in India and, consequently, in strengthening the sense of Britain's imperial destiny.

Clearly, much of Arnold's work received an imperial rationale, though shaped by a particular ideology of empire and self-image. His history of the Marquis of Dalhousie's governor-generalship gives some insight into his view of empire as providential to the 'East' and of his own commitment to the betterment of India

(Arnold 1865: 388-90). Both these themes were echoed in prefaces to his translations, insisting that '[t]he hope of Hindostan lies in the intelligent interest of England' (Arnold 1861: ix) and presenting himself as 'one who loved India and the Indian peoples' (Arnold 1903: xi). Consistent with this, he recognized the value of bringing India and Britain closer together, something to which he saw his own translations as contributing (Arnold 1875: xiii), and expressed the hope that his translations would inspire British interest in India and enhance British awareness of its duty towards her (Arnold 1861: xii). However, aspects of Arnold's approach, his stated intention being to promote 'the better mutual knowledge of East and West' (Arnold 1903: xi), could be regarded as questioning Britain's imperial superiority, at least in terms of the achievements of ancient India. For example, in describing the *Mahābhārata* as a composite work with some ancient sections, he suggested that these sections could be dated 'to an origin anterior to writing, anterior to Purānic theology, anterior to Homer, perhaps even to Moses' (Arnold 1883: xi-xii). Or again, he assigned the Buddha to the seventh to sixth centuries BCE and, on that basis, said of Buddhism that 'most other creeds are youthful compared with this venerable religion' (Arnold 1903: ix). Admittedly, it could be argued that such an emphasis on the age of Indian culture and religion conforms with the stereotype of the changeless 'East' contrasted with the progressive 'West' (cf. Said 1995: 205) or, failing that, locates India's greatness in the comparatively safe and unthreatening context of a distant antiquity that only Western scholars are able to reveal (cf. p. 79). Nevertheless, given the significance vested in ancient origins, Arnold's obvious respect for India's history at least qualified the logic of imperialism.

It is for reasons such as these that Graham, who raises issues such as the tensions between the scholarly and the popular, the bridging of the divide between 'East' and 'West' and the consequences of the great age attributed to India's heritage, suggests that, despite Arnold's publications displaying characteristics of 'Orientalist' discourse, the reality was not that simple or straightforward (Graham 1998: 124, 134, 150, 155). Rather, drawing upon

Bakhtin's work on the national dimensions of epic, Graham argues that Arnold's publications possessed the potential to attack the imperial agenda and permit of the presentation of India as a nation (pp. 136, 144). Discussing Arnold's reflections on the role of epic whereby 'it replaces patriotism with ... race and stands in stead of nationality' (Arnold 1883: ix), Graham points to the ambiguous status accorded patriotism and nationality in imperial India since the importance of the Indian epic for the imperial power was increased by its national properties but so too was the threat it posed (Graham 1998: 149-50). It is Graham's view, then, that Arnold's translations belonged to an imperial tradition though they also conveyed to readers the concept of India as a nation based on its cultural coherence and continuity (p. 165). Even if this was not Arnold's intention, it did not preclude his portrayal of Indian texts having some effect on Indian national consciousness, and indeed Graham evidences nationalist appeal to the epic (pp. 150, 168). Concluding, Graham notes Arnold's 'use of an Orientalist mode of thought..., delighting in cataloguing, listing, collecting and knowing' while emphasising that 'Orientalism, ... cannot help but "uncover" and "discover" a culture which then insists upon being classified as a nation' (p. 168). Undoubtedly, such an analysis problematizes the overt imperial message in much of Arnold's writing and thus a Saidian reading of 'Orientalism'.

### **A Two-Way Process**

Arnold's combination of a popularizing approach with appeal to scholarly knowledge, ambivalent response to the relationship between 'East' and 'West' and complex view of the location of India in the context of empire illustrates Said's insights into 'Orientalism' as an academic, oppositional and imperial phenomenon as well as the limitations of his model in respect of popular interests, common features and subversive possibilities. Moreover, Said can be criticised for underestimating how the 'East' has inspired the fascination of and offered a challenge to the 'West'. This is the interpretation offered by J.J. Clarke who stresses 'how in the Enlightenment and Romantic periods the "East" was a

central theme of intellectual debates, and that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries ideas from the Orient have played an increasingly serious role in a wide variety of contexts' (Clarke 1997: 6). Certainly, Arnold saw himself as facilitating Western understanding of the 'East' even if his vision of the 'East' was refracted through a distorting lens. Clearly, also, his publications stimulated discussion and provided material for a deeper encounter and engagement with the 'East'. Indeed, insofar as Arnold is regarded as meriting some consideration, it is generally in terms of the impact of *The Light of Asia* on Western attitudes towards Buddhism (e.g. Phelan 2004). Yet, arguably, his impact was wider still, reaching across the Buddhist world.

#### Liberal Christian or Buddhist Convert?

The Victorian era was an age of doubt and religious exploration when some abandoned Christianity as no longer credible or convincing in the face of philosophical challenge, scientific discovery and new spiritual possibilities while others struggled with how to reconcile the truth of Christianity with the truths affirmed by adherents of other religions. In this highly charged atmosphere, Arnold's own religious beliefs have been the subject of controversy. It has been claimed that he was a convert to Buddhism (Burnham 1955: 43; Phelan 2004; Wright 1957: 152), presumably because it was difficult to conceive of Arnold portraying the Buddha as positively as he did in *The Light of Asia* if he were not and easy to account for the positive reception this poem received from Buddhists if he were. Certainly, Arnold's descriptions of the Buddha are nothing if not complimentary and can not be written off merely as attributable to his decision to assume the role of a Buddhist in composing *The Light of Asia*; according to his 'Preface', the Buddha 'united the truest princely qualities with the intellect of a sage and the passionate devotion of a martyr' (Arnold 1903: viii). However, it is a moot point whether his obvious admiration for the Buddha does suggest he became a Buddhist. A close reading of the 'Preface' reveals a significant rider where the Buddha's personality is referred to as 'the highest, gentlest, holiest,

and most beneficent, with one exception in the history of Thought' (p. viii); that 'one exception' must surely be Jesus. Indeed, one of the reasons cited for *The Light of Asia's* success is that it presented the Buddha as Christ-like, for example, in his miraculous conception and birth and in the honorifics by which he is addressed including 'Saviour' and 'Lord', an approach that attracted some criticism though others identified such similarities between the stories told of the Buddha and Jesus and also deployed Christian terminology for Buddhist concepts (Clausen 1976: 181). Perhaps, though, such continuities between Buddhism and Christianity struck Arnold as more substantial, suggesting that Buddhism was a precursor to and preparation for Christianity.

Whatever conclusion is reached concerning the vexed question of Arnold's personal convictions, there can be no doubt that *The Light of the World* proclaims the superiority of Christianity. It treats the life of Jesus through the reflections of those who knew him, including one of the Magi who long ago had paid reverence and brought gifts to the baby Jesus and, having heard reports, journeys far to seek knowledge of Jesus' life, death and resurrection (Arnold 1891b: 89-93; 'The Magus'). Thus he comes to recognize similarities between the Buddha and Jesus but also to acknowledge the latter as extending the teaching and excelling the ministry of the former (p. 225; 'The Love of God and Man'; p. 241; 'The Great Consummation'). For a poem that affirms the primacy of Jesus, the choice of title at least was apposite – Jesus referred to himself as 'the light of the world' (Jn 8,12) and Samuel Kellogg's Christian-inspired attack on *The Light of Asia* was called *The Light of Asia and the Light of the World* (Kellogg 1885). In other respects, the poem was less successful. Critics were divided but reviews tended to be lukewarm at best and vitriolic at worst while sales were low with only two or three editions issued (Clausen 1976: 189; Wright 1957: 157). In addition to introducing a comparative dimension that juxtaposed Buddhism with Christianity to the advantage of Christianity, Arnold gave his reworking of the Gospels an explicitly Hebrew character but techniques that had served him so well in *The Light of Asia*, to which they had imparted an air of originality and authenticity,

here failed to impress when applied to source material both known and revered (Wright 1957: 156-7). Moreover, while *The Light of the World* has been seen as an attempt to soothe outraged Christian sensibilities and, by so doing, improve Arnold's chances of being considered for the laureateship, in practice it provoked considerable Christian ire (Clausen 1976: 189; Wright 1957: 157).

However, instead of regarding *The Light of the World* as representing Arnold's return to Christianity, whether sincere or strategic, it is possible that he may simply have been a Christian of the liberal persuasion. If this made his understanding of Christianity as evinced in *The Light of the World* unorthodox in some respects (Wright 1957: 158-9), it allowed him to recognise truth in other religions while reserving for Christianity a special status (Clarke 1999: 88). On this line of interpretation, *The Light of the World* did not entail a rejection of other religions nor did it involve a re-espousal of Christianity after having explored and endorsed Eastern religions, especially Buddhism (Sharpe 1985: 61-2). Rather, it enabled him to express a theology of fulfilment that could combine appreciation of the insights of diverse religions as valuable in their own right with assertion of the ascendancy of Christianity as their culmination and completion.

### *The Light of Asia*

In this connection, it is easy to see why Arnold's historic significance has been located in the role of *The Light of Asia* in Western Buddhism. *The Light of Asia*, a poetic rendering of the life of the Buddha based mainly on Beal's *The Romantic Legend of Sakya-Buddha* (Clausen 1976: 183), was, after all, a best-seller with numerous editions. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* gives figures of 60 editions in Britain and 80 in America (Phelan 2004) though the accuracy of any such figures is dubious. To give some sense of its popularity, in 1885, six years after the poem was first published, Trübner, Arnold's British publisher, produced eight editions or more, while sales in America have been reckoned at between half a million and a million copies, bearing comparison with works such

as *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and even *Huckleberry Finn* (Tweed 1992, 29 cf. Wright 1957: 75). *The Light of Asia* has been hailed as 'a household classic' (Wright 1957: 79), once familiar to any British and American readers interested in Buddhism (Lopez 2002: 6) and its impact judged to be disproportionate in comparison even to its remarkable sales (Clausen 1976: 174). A measure of its impact can be gained from its being translated into various other languages including German, French and Italian and adapted, among other things, into an opera, a play and a film (Wright 1957: 79). Its impact can also be gauged by the controversy that surrounded its publication, receiving as it did much praise from critics and reviewers as well as some antipathy from Christian commentators concerned that the poem increased the appeal and attraction of Buddhism and that it questioned claims to Christian uniqueness (Almond 1988: 2-3; Clarke 1997: 88; Clausen 1976: 183-8; Hatton 1998: 119; Lopez 2002: 6; Phelan 2004; Tweed 1992: 29; Wright 1957: 78-9, 105-7).

Certainly, *The Light of Asia's* success depended in no small part on a pre-existing fascination for Buddhism that Arnold was able to exploit, and in so doing extend, by treating his theme in a manner that made the Buddha's teaching resonate with the interests that characterized and issues that concerned his contemporaries (Almond 1988: 1-3; Clarke 1997: 88; Clausen 1976: 177; Wright 1957: 96-7). Assessing the impact of the poem, Christmas Humphreys, the famous British Buddhist, declared that '[i]t is little exaggeration to say of this great work that it obtained for the Dhamma a hearing which half a century of scholarship could never have obtained' (cited in Almond 1988: 1). Besides this, *The Light of Asia* had an impact on Eastern Buddhists while Arnold's travel writing on Buddhist subjects proved instrumental in inspiring efforts to save Bodhgaya.

In describing the positive reception Buddhists gave to *The Light of Asia*, Arnold's biographer calls him 'a kind of patron saint of Buddhism' whose poem was acclaimed for its sympathetic treatment of the Buddha and whose presence was



sought and feted in due measure (Wright 1957: 111, 115). This is evident in Arnold's report of the enthusiastic welcome he received at the Maligha Kanda College in Colombo from a large audience of Buddhists. Introduced by the President of the College, he was lauded in the most exalted terms for the effect *The Light of Asia* had had upon Western attitudes towards Buddhism, praised for having made 'the revered name and sublime doctrines of our Lord Buddha ... respected and valued by crores of people of various Western nations' (excerpted in Arnold 1891a: 274-5). The decision to hold this meeting and present Arnold with a congratulatory address showed that this portrayal of the Buddha was regarded as significant by Eastern Buddhists. Thus Arnold's work formed part of a complex pattern of cultural exchange and interaction that encompassed his Western reading of the 'East' but also the Eastern assessment and, in many cases, acceptance of this reading.

Something of the reason for the enthusiasm with which *The Light of Asia* was greeted by Buddhists themselves becomes clear from the letter written by the King of Siam in 1879 when bestowing upon Arnold the Order of the White Elephant. This letter expressed anxiety about missionary views of Buddhism as having a detrimental effect on perceptions of Buddhists, hence the king's appreciation of *The Light of Asia* as 'the most eloquent defence of Buddhism that has yet appeared' (excerpted in Hatton 1998: 120). While this defence might not have been wholly orthodox, it was to be welcomed for promoting a positive view of Buddhism in the West and Arnold honoured for 'the service ... done to all Buddhists' (excerpted in p. 120). Further, it was when making a tour of India in the wake of the success of *The Light of Asia* that Arnold came to visit Bodhgaya and, shocked at its state, propose a scheme for its rescue that was to win Buddhist backing. Notably such backing came from Anagarika Dharmapala whose own visit to Bodhgaya was inspired by Arnold and led to an alliance among Buddhists evident in the creation of the Mahabodhi Society at Dharmapala's instigation. In this way, Arnold's contribution was significant to the history of 'modern Buddhism' outwith the 'West'.

## The Campaign for Bodhgaya

In January 1886, Arnold visited Bodhgaya (Wright 1957: 11, 114), the site where, according to Buddhist tradition, the Buddha gained enlightenment while meditating in the shade of the *Bodhi* tree (Arnold 1891a: 232). Referring to the temple as ‘the great central shrine of the Gentle Faith; the Mecca of Buddhism’ when describing this visit, Arnold deplored the fact that Bodhgaya was under the control of Brahman priests whom he accused of committing sacrilege and that it had fallen into a state of neglect with damaged statues and carvings strewn about the site (pp. 233-5). Notwithstanding India’s abundant historical and spiritual heritage, he stressed the importance of Bodhgaya given the influence of the Buddha over Asian culture and civilization, insisting upon the innate holiness of Bodhgaya irrespective of the success of his efforts to have what he regarded as the most sacred of Buddhist sites ceded to Buddhist custody (pp. 235-6). Throughout he stressed the importance of Buddhism, if only by emphasising its influence on Hinduism and thereby according it primacy. Asserting, however problematically, that ‘[m]odern Brahmanism is really Buddhism in a Shastri’s robe and sacred thread’, he vested the sanctity of Benares, the holy city of the Hindus on the banks of the Ganges, not in the mythology of Hindu gods and goddesses, but in the life and ministry of the Buddha (p. 223).

Some years later Arnold wrote about the progress (or, more accurately, the lack thereof) of the campaign to restore Bodhgaya by returning it to Buddhist protection. Giving an historical account of Bodhgaya that established the Buddhist origins and ownership of the site, he demonstrated a much shorter and more recent period of Hindu occupation amounting to only 300 years down to his own day (Arnold 1896: 310 cf. Graham 1998: 131). Not only did this account leave little, if any doubt, of his own view of the priority of the Buddhist claim, even if not in the first instance pressed by Buddhists themselves, but it also reflected confidence in his ability to offer an authoritative interpretation of Indian history

and to take the initiative in so controversial a matter. On the basis of this history and in typically positive terms, he looked towards the revival of Buddhism in the land that had seen its rise whereby Bodhgaya would act as 'the natural centre of Buddhistic Asia' and serve 'to elevate, to spiritualise, to help, and enrich the population' (pp. 319, 321). Recalling that, at the time of his visit, Bodhgaya's true significance was largely overlooked by Buddhists and ignored by Hindu visitors, he contrasted the careless manner in which the Hindu priest acceded to his request to pick a leaf from the *Bodhi* tree with the gratitude shown by Sri Lankan Buddhists to his gift of inscribed leaves (pp. 310-11). Further, he explained that it was in conversation with Sri Lankan Buddhists that he had conceived the idea of transferring Bodhgaya to the care of the Buddhist community and embarked upon a campaign to persuade the British authorities of the justice of the cause, stressing the comparative ease and lack of expense involved and also the potential benefit of winning over the Buddhist peoples of Asia (pp. 311-13). Thus, whatever his personal motivation in this instance, he located what he called an 'important question ... for the future of religion and civilisation' in the context of Empire both in terms of the power to act and the benefit to accrue (p. 305 cf. Graham 1998: 131). Yet while his plans 'to make the temple ... the living and learned centre of purified Bhuddism [*sic*]' were thwarted (Bodhgaya only passing into Buddhist hands in 1953 (Wright 1957: 118)), they nevertheless gained much support from Asian Buddhists (Arnold 1896: 313-15).

Crucially, among them was Anagarika Dharmapala who had been motivated by an account Arnold had given to visit Bodhgaya himself. Writing in his diary, his reflections leave no doubt of the profound impression that Bodhgaya had upon him, here described as 'so sacred that nothing in the world is equal to this place where Prince Sakya Sinha gained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree' (cited in Fields 1986: 114-116). Indeed, for forty years, the fate of Bodhgaya was to be his over-riding concern (p. 116). It was in an attempt to secure the future of Bodhgaya by entrusting it to the care of the Buddhist community that in 1892 he founded the Mahabodhi Society (p. 117). The Society's objective to restore

Bodhgaya as a place of pilgrimage for all Buddhists and a monastic site housing monks from many Buddhist countries (incidentally set forth with a short excerpt from *The Light of Asia* eulogising the *Bodhi* tree) was from the outset envisaged as an international undertaking (Arnold 1896: 316-17), something that was exemplified in the formation of branches of the Society throughout the world (Tweed 1992: 31) and the selection for the masthead of its journal of the Buddha's instruction to his *bhikkhus* to preach the *dharma* for the welfare of the world (Fields 1986: 117). The campaign for Bodhgaya that Arnold instigated was thus significant for creating common cause among Buddhists and forging a unity that transcended doctrinal and other differences (Fields 1986: 115). Such unity was conducive to Buddhism acquiring the status of a 'world religion', at least along the lines that have become familiar since the rise of 'modern Buddhism'. A number of other features of 'modern Buddhism' (cf. McMahan 2008: 6) are also evident in the campaign for Bodhgaya and its offshoots.

The focus on pilgrimage and monasticism central to the campaign for Bodhgaya may seem to run counter to Buddhist modernism's antipathy towards ritual and its emphasis on lay involvement (e.g. Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988: 215-16, 221; Lopez 2002: xix, xxxix). Nevertheless, the campaign bears the hallmarks of the reforming agenda in the plan to establish a young men's college modelled on an ancient Buddhist university and the goal to bring about a revival of Buddhism in India after hundreds of years of absence (Arnold 1896: 317). These aspects of the campaign clearly evince the modernist concern with education as a means of strengthening Buddhism and ideology of an authentic and authoritative past contrasted with a degenerate and dissolute present (e.g. Bechert 1984: 275-7; Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988: 220-1, 235). Further, the attempt to found Buddhist organizations with members from many schools and traditions, typified, indeed pioneered, by the Mahabodhi Society, was modern in its nature and inspiration (e.g. Bechert 1984: 274-5; Lopez 2002: xxxvii). Moreover, this informed the presentation of Buddhism as a religion comparable with, even superior to Christianity, to the extent that Buddhism was both identified with its

ostensibly original form in antiquity and deemed consistent with modern norms and values such as reason and science (e.g. Bechert 1984: 276; Lopez 2002: pp. xiii, xxxviii-xxxix). Not only was Arnold to give his continued support to the endeavour to return Bodhgaya to Buddhist management but, by providing the initial impetus for the campaign (Wright 1957: 116-19), he was responsible for setting in train a series of events that were closely connected with the emergence and development of 'modern Buddhism'. Hence Arnold's efforts did not simply bring Buddhism to a wider Western readership but also, albeit indirectly (and, in all likelihood, inadvertently), prompted important changes in Buddhist ideology and organization.

## **Conclusion**

It is all too easy to see why Arnold is now so little known though perhaps his present obscurity can be exaggerated as much as his past celebrity. However, without attempting to rehabilitate his literary reputation, he merits reassessment as a pivotal figure in the history of ideas who typified many of the trends that marked his era and moved his contemporaries. Something of a puzzle, his experience of India and publications on Indian themes challenging the accuracy and adequacy of a Saidian analysis, Arnold's life and work made a powerful impression both at home and abroad. A popularizer with scholarly ambitions who saw similarities as well as dissimilarities between 'East' and 'West' and upheld, though he also undermined, imperial claims, in many respects it was Arnold who brought Buddhism to the 'West' and his work, acclaimed by Eastern Buddhists, was important for convincing Eastern Buddhists of the need for change. Accordingly, he should be recognized, not simply as a leading author of his day who reflected the beliefs and aspirations of the Victorian age, but as an opinion former whose role, at least in religious terms, has proven far more significant than that of many nominally greater writers.

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