

EASTERN FAITHS IN BRITAIN

From Our Special Correspondent

A remarkable array of oriental religions can be found—and be found to be flourishing—to-day in Britain. The venerable history of British Jewry is well known. But less so is the fact that, for example, it is 50 years since the arrival in London of Ananda Metteya, the first European to lead a Buddhist mission to this country, after taking the robe in Burma.

Metteya, born Allan Bennett (and a Londoner and Roman Catholic), had been drawn to the study of Buddhist scriptures by Sir Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* (1879). It was only through dedicated orientalist like Max Müller, the Rhys Davidses, and the Pali Text Society (founded in 1881) that these became gradually accessible in Roman letters and in English.

The present Buddhist Society, like much else from the East, evolved out of theosophy. To-day they have several hundred members, their quarterly—*The Middle Way*—is the oldest Buddhist journal in Europe, and the Penguin by Christmas Humphreys, their founder and president, has sold 150,000 copies. At their headquarters in Eccleston Square you can take classes in Zen and Theravada, and at the summer school in Hertfordshire ("Open to all who seek to find the Cause and Cure of Suffering") some 100 students gather to study "the ancient teaching that appeals to the modern mind."

TALKS TO CHILDREN

Talks are also given by invitation to schoolchildren. The general secretary reports that the intensification of interest seen in the past few years has been particularly marked among young people—a phenomenon about which a conference of British missionary societies expressed considerable concern in 1957. In 12 months six young men had gone out to Siam to become monks.

There is now a separate order of English *bhikkus* near Swiss Cottage, as well as the *vihara* off the Brompton Road—the only public temple in Britain, according to its head, the Venerable Saddhatissa. With several *bhikkus* in residence (from Ceylon and Thailand), shaven-headed, sandalled and saffron-robed monks have become a common sight around Knightsbridge. As many as 50 Buddhists, the majority European, attend the evening services there. A British branch of the parent Maha Bodi Society has existed here since 1926.

The roots of Islam in the West also go deep. At Woking the Shah Jehan Mosque, now centrally heated, was built in 1889, though it was not until 1913 that Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din became its first *imam*, a year after he founded the *Islamic Review*. Ghulam Rabbani Khan, until recently the incumbent there, thinks that the Islamic population of Britain may now be as great as 100,000, and the European element, though smallish still, has been steadily mounting: about 500 converts since the war, he suggests, some of them men who have seen service in the East, and 13 in two months alone last year. Up to 2,500 Muslims congregate at Woking for the Id festivals.

Places of worship for the faithful (including the Aga Khan's Ismaili sect) are also to be found at Kensington and Putney, for instance, as well as in most big provincial cities. In 1954 the foundation stone of the London Central Mosque was ceremonially laid at the Islamic Cultural Centre in Regent's Park, but the building has failed to materialize, partly, I gather, because Egyptian funds dried up after Suez.

SUFI SOCIETY

There is also, in the Muslim tradition, a small but active Sufi Society in London, while at Rutland Gate stands the Haziratu'l-Quds (sacred fold) of the Bahá'ís. They describe theirs as the "youngest of the great religions of the world." It was founded by Bahá'ulláh in Persia in 1863, and in 1908 his eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, visited England, though their origins here go back at least a decade farther. To-day, with a following of some hundreds, their faith is established in 140 places in the country. The world headquarters of the Bahá'ís is on Mount Carmel and they claim to have spread "a great deal

farther than Christianity at a similar stage of its development."

Vedanta was given its first big impetus in Britain by the visits in 1895 and 1896 of Swami Vivekananda, founder of the Ramakrishna Mission, now world-wide. At the Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, a quiet house up near Alexandra Palace, *Vedanta for East and West* is published bi-monthly and booklets like *Thus spake Sri Ramakrishna* can be bought. It is run by Swami Ghanananda with an English disciple, both wearing brown habits, and has a regular following of perhaps 350 people, some of them Catholics and other Christians. Their annual three-day festival brings to Muswell Hill 1,000 or so.

SHANTI SADAN

At Notting Hill Gate a smaller group, Shanti Sadan, offer public lectures on yoga—a magic word in publicity, though here the philosophic sort is meant. Brahma Samaj, whose founder died at Bristol in 1833, is also active in Britain, and a branch of the Arya Samaj (World Reform Movement) was launched in 1954 at a meeting in Caxton Hall. Converts from Christianity are claimed by their honorary secretary. World government is one of their aims, their prospectus observing that "this great campaign having six million members all over India and overseas is now knocking at the door of the West in order to revive humanity from the deep coma of materialism."

Twenty years earlier the Vedanta Movement was launched by Swami Avyaktananda. After the war he severed formal links with the Ramakrishna Mission in order to devote himself to "spiritual communism . . . Vedanta in its intrinsic purity without metaphysical dogmas." His community headquarters are at Bath, with a branch at Southfields.

In Shepherd's Bush, not far from Olympia, there is a Sikh temple—in a terraced house distinguished only by the Sikh flag and steel emblem aloft outside. A pioneering patron in this case was Sir Bhupindar Singh, Maharaja of Patiala, who acquired the building in 1916. Every Sunday the priest, K. F. Gyani (formerly of the Golden Temple at Amritsar and earlier still a political journalist), conducts services attended by about 200 Sikhs; at their April celebration they muster 700. Apart from the temple where holy book and sword are arranged together under strip lighting free shelter for students and other visitors is provided.

ZOROASTRIAN HOUSE

Not far from here, finally, Zoroastrian House comprises a centre for another minute community—London's 600-odd Parsees. Here services are conducted by lay priests on Sundays and feast days. Mr. J. D. Moos, president of the Incorporated Parsee Association of Europe (and a stamp dealer in Bloomsbury), claims his is "the oldest of all the Indian and Iranian religious bodies in England." It was founded by, among others, Dadabhai Naoroji, the first Indian to sit in the House of Commons. The association, in spite of the common origin in Persian sun worship, has no connexion with the European Mazdaznan movement.

These, then, are some of the eastern faiths that have found their way to the West during the last century. Between them and the Christian and Jewish communities the World Congress of Faiths (founded by Sir Francis Younghusband in 1936) has helped to maintain a deal of goodwill. But each group has its own problems. Swami Ghanananda complains that people here who seek his spiritual guidance presume to question it. Muslims find our divorce laws stringent and, even when not practising polygamy, have not always fitted smoothly into our welfare services. *Bhikkus*, strictly speaking, may not even carry a bus fare.

None has yet found a firm formula for moving European masses. All, in spite of inflation from oversea students, represent modest minorities here; some spurn proselytizing altogether and, with the help of embassies, cater primarily for expatriates. But nationalism has certainly given them a fillip.