MATTHEW ARNOLD AND
ORIENTAL THOUGHT

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by

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Abstract

by

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Arnold's predilection for the East is a continuation of early nineteenth century interest in the Orient—which is what the first chapter of this study treats. Reacting to the fragmentation of reality by eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophers, nineteenth century thinkers (especially the Romantics) affirmed the power of the mind to intuit the spirit that underlies the objective world. Oriental (mainly Indian) thought with its emphasis upon unity between subject (the Atman) and object (the Brahman) provided them with an intellectual base to break with eighteenth century separation or the spirit from the objective world.

What gives greater depth and originality to Arnold's understanding of the East is his vision of it as the spiritual and archetypal source of paradigmatic means for moral deliverance of the individual and society alike. The succeeding three chapters discuss Arnold's concept of moral deliverance defined as unity of being and the way it
reflects the paradigms of the spiritual liberation of the Bhagavad Gita in particular and Hindu philosophy in general. Analyzing the primary sources such as his poetry and prose—and the oriental texts especially Charles Wilkins's and A.G. Schlegel's translations of the Gita and its interpretations by Victor Cousin and Wilhelm Von Humboldt, I conclude that moral deliverance for Arnold is the same as the discovery of the buried self. The discovery of the buried self leads to an identity with the ultimate reality of the objective world or the All. This unity between the self and the impersonal Absolute or the All calls to mind the Vedantic equation of the Atman-Brahman of Indian thought.

Both in his prose and poetry, Arnold points out that detachment is the moral condition for deliverance. Arnold's concept of detachment is oriental in nature which consists mainly of liberation from (1) the world of the senses, (2) the sphere of activities, and (3) the fruits of action. All through Arnold's poetry one notes the process of moving towards the ideal of such a detachment, which is deliverance proper.