

## **The Decline of Western Civilization Seen through the Lens of the East: The Orientalism of Vicente Risco**

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### **Abstract**

This article underlines the importance that the knowledge of Eastern civilizations had in the critique of European modernity that conservative intellectuals developed during the first decades of the twentieth century. The article focuses on the figure of the Galician thinker Vicente Risco (1884–1963), who tried to find in the traditional religions of India possible solutions to overcome the spiritual shortcomings of a rationalism excessively focused on scientific and material progress.

Although Risco is a much-studied figure as one of the main ideologists of Galician nationalism, his importance as a researcher of the Orient has been neglected. However, his position as an Orientalist from a corner of the European continent provides a vision of Asia very different from that of the great British, German and French Orientalists. His Orientalism cannot be interpreted as a Said-like discourse of power. Rather, his figure represents a large group of thinkers critical of the imperialism of the Western powers and the model of modernity they embodied. In this “war against modernity,” they found in the East an ally from whom much could be learned and with whom it was necessary to dialogue. From this perspective, the article attempts to overcome Manichean views of East and West as opposing entities with conflicting values, pointing instead to the commonalities that united thinkers from different cultures in their struggle against an idea of progress that was considered immoral, empty and constricting.

**Keywords:** Vicente Risco, decadence of the West, Theosophical Society, Galician nationalism, orientalism

### **Introduction: Progress in Crisis**

There have probably been three tenets in the idea of Western modernity since the age of Enlightenment: the belief in the power of reason, the idea of the progress of humankind, and a materialistic view of history and the universe. This idea of modernity was the ideological driving force behind imperialism. However, for some in Europe, new inventions, scientific advances, and the expansion of capitalism were not proofs of superiority. Rather, it meant the opposite: the decadence of Western civilization. At the end of the eighteenth century the Romantics started to ring the bell against the negation of the emotions and demeaning of the spirit that ensued from the spread of rationalism. Then, at the end of the nineteenth century, the modernists challenged again the excesses of materialism. They were not happy with the course of events that caused Europe to forget its cultural and religious roots. For them, the most significant aspect of modernity was the deep spiritual crisis that it had brought about. They felt that Europe was heading for self-destruction, and their predictions seemed to be true when the First World War erupted.

Those who opposed this type of Western modernity were however a tiny minority. The public, the politicians, the administrators, the traders, and the industrialists embraced or sympathized with modern values and welcomed its obvious benefits, such as the rise in living standards as well as the possession of new empires overseas. The practical attitude of the bourgeoisie defined the ethos of the Western man, while the men of spirit who felt alienated found refuge in the arts and in literature, many of them joining the ranks of bohemians, dandies, occultists, and other decadents. There were also those who turned eastward for cure and consolation, seeking in India and China a world of spirit and authenticity more in accord with human nature.<sup>1</sup> Among them was Galicia-born Vicente Risco (1884–1963), who had been a dandy and theosophist in his youth but turned into a Galician nationalist and Orientalist in his later years. A figure full of contrasts and contradictions, he remains one of

the greatest Galician intellectuals of all time, and one of the few Spanish thinkers who fully embraced Oriental philosophies and applied them to develop his own system of thought. In the next pages I will sketch an intellectual biography of Risco, focusing on his interest in the Orient and his understanding of the decline of the West in the context of the crisis of modern culture during the first half of the twentieth century.

### Vicente Risco's Life and World

Risco was born in Ourense, a small provincial city in Galicia noted for its cultural life.<sup>2</sup> He was the son of a government employee of the city treasury and was raised as a child of the middle class in a traditional Catholic family. Risco enrolled in the Faculty of Law at the University of Santiago de Compostela but, unhappy about becoming a civil servant like his father, subsequently went to Madrid to train as a teacher. In 1916 he gained a post as a professor at the provincial Normal School of Ourense, teaching history and geography, a position that he held for the rest of his life. In 1910 he began to write articles for the culture and art sections of local newspapers until he launched his own literary magazine in 1917, *The Century* [*La Centuria*] (1920), which bore the ambitious subtitle of "Neosophical Magazine [Revista Neosófica]". Then in 1920, with some other Galician intellectuals, he started what would become the greatest cultural enterprise of the Galician nationalist movement to date: *We* [*Nós*]. Risco served as the editor-in-chief of this monthly review, which was written in the Galician language, and which lasted until the outbreak of the Civil War. Along with translations and literary essays, it included political articles related to the emerging nationalism. Its aim, as stated in the foreword of the first issue, was twofold: to highlight Galician traditional values that could become universal values, and to link, without intermediaries, Galician thought to the more learned thought of the advanced societies.<sup>3</sup>

During the decades preceding the Spanish Civil War, Risco was committed to the nationalist movement and even wrote the first Galician nationalist manifesto (*Teoría do nacionalismo galego*, 1920), along with many other works in prose, including essays written in the Galician

language. Risco, who was deeply Catholic and politically conservative, felt at odds with the Segunda República of the thirties and its drift towards the political left. When the Civil War broke out in 1936, Risco gave up his nationalist activities for the restoration of the traditional values that he saw endangered by the materialistic outlook of modernity, exemplified by communism. He aligned himself with the military-fascist-Catholic camp led by General Franco. Nevertheless, he continued to promote and defend the Galician language and culture during the years following the war, albeit in more discreet ways, until his death in 1963.

Risco is best remembered as a Galician *littérateur* and intellectual, although his support of Franco's regime has made him a controversial figure. While there is little doubt that his major achievements were related to the revival of Galician culture during the first half of the twentieth century, there is another constant in his thought that remains hidden: a very unusual interest in the Orient.

### **Orientalism and the Call of the East**

Since the seminal work of Edward Said, "Orientalism" has become a taboo term and a pejorative label for a stereotypical way of thinking that posits the absolute superiority of the West over the East, inextricably connected with imperialism.<sup>4</sup> However, it has been noted that the role of colonialism in the birth of Orientalism, understood as a scholarly field, was insignificant compared to the role of religion or philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Although Orientalists were the first to challenge the reductionism of Said's approach, criticizing his selection of sources and his claim of an inherent and automatic connection between colonial policies and Orientalist scholarship, it is now a commonplace to believe that the European Orientalist scholars of earlier centuries were full of prejudices, confident of their superiority, supportive of imperialism, and wrong in their conclusions.<sup>6</sup> It is unfortunate that this view, only half true, has come to overshadow the works of many scholars who were opposed to imperialism and who, in very difficult conditions, studied far-off cultures with a deep sense of reverence and admiration, guided by the honest aim of learning and understanding. Vicente Risco was one of them.

It is necessary to remember that, as John James Clarke has beautifully argued, Orientalism represents in the Western context “a counter-movement, a subversive entelechy” or “a corrective mirror,” which has often tended to subvert rather than to confirm the modern Western intellectual tradition.<sup>7</sup> This is clear in the case of the Romantic interest in India, inseparable from a radical critique of the European present. Schopenhauer, who later would become a source of inspiration for Risco, was one of the first to openly engage with Indian philosophy in order to rethink the Western philosophical tradition. He expected that the impact of the discovery of ancient Sanskrit texts would be to bring about a spiritual transformation of Europe.<sup>8</sup> The Romantic “Oriental Renaissance” of the first quarter of the nineteenth century was followed by a “second Oriental Renaissance” between 1880 and 1920 which was led by the modernists.<sup>9</sup> They looked to the East for a wisdom that seemed to have been lost in the West, using at times a mystified image of the Orient as a weapon to criticize bourgeois conformism, utilitarianism, mechanization, and the ugliness of Western modern society.

Risco, a brilliant young man with a keen sense for aesthetics, grew up during the height of modernism and shared with the modernists the feeling of disillusionment about the modern world. His readings of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche during his early years reinforced a vital pessimism that accompanied him all his life. As he pointed out in *Nós, os inadaptados*, the text that became the manifesto of a generation of Galician nationalists, he felt himself to be a nonconformist and a social misfit along the lines of Des Esseintes, the alter ego of French author Karl-Joris Huysmans.<sup>10</sup> Never a man of action, during his youth Risco behaved like a dandy, adopting any eccentricity he could find in the little town of Ourense to protest the vulgarity of society. It was this sharp feeling of dissatisfaction with his lot of being born into a soulless and mechanistic society that drove him to the exotic, more precisely to the Orient, which he understood as a huge container that encompassed everything from ancient Egypt to modern Japan.<sup>11</sup> He concentrated on the study of the traditional religions and philosophies of the East, especially Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. He was also very interested in the arts and literature of China and Japan.

It is worth saying that Risco was self-taught and learnt by himself the Devanagari script and the basics of Sanskrit. He never set foot in Asia and his interest in the East was not a way of fulfilling his academic ambitions. He himself took a stand against the excesses of academicism that sacrificed true knowledge for unenthusiastic and sterile scholarship. Even if he spent many of his later years doing serious research on Hinduism, he was not a professional scholar working at the university and publishing in academic journals. He was more the type of what Said calls the “Oriental enthusiast” than an academic Orientalist.<sup>12</sup> In this regard it is possible to say that many of his insights about the Orient lacked scientific rigor. In fact, his gateway to the Orient was theosophy, certainly something that was anathema to most scholars. Despite the recent surge in studies of Western esotericism, assessments on the teachings of the Theosophical Society founded by Helena Blavatsky in 1875 are very unfavorable, since they offered a distorted interpretation of Eastern cultures.<sup>13</sup> But his choice was in consonance with the spirit of the times. Europe saw an “occult revival” during the period encompassing the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, which included trends like esoterism, hermeticism, spiritualism, or primitivism.<sup>14</sup> Many Hindu-Buddhist elements were subsumed under this revival thanks to the public efforts of the Theosophical Society, and they also became constitutive parts of modernist aesthetics. So, for the young Risco, who was closer to the figure of the artist or the poet than to that of the scholar, it was natural to reach the Orient through theosophy, although he repudiated this some years later.<sup>15</sup>

During the 1910s, Risco started working on translating passages from classics like the *Mahābhārata* and the *Shakuntala*, and also from modern authors like Tagore, among others. He became acquainted with Mario Roso de Luna, a translator of the works of Helena Blavatsky and a leader of the Spanish theosophists. Although not a member of the Society, Risco was in touch with the *Grupo Marco Aurelio*, a small theosophical circle in the neighboring city of Pontevedra. He had discovered the Orient, and was thrilled by its ways of seeing, as he openly stated around 1910 in a local newspaper:<sup>16</sup>

The time has come to sow in the West the seed from the East. From the countries of the light, the truth cannot ever stop to reach; nowadays, the Buddhist flock spreads, above all in Germany and England; Brahmanists and Theosophists make active propaganda; maybe the Aryan-Indo Renaissance prophesied by Schopenhauer is approaching. The word of the East is going to strike; pay attention. . . .

In 1912 he published a remarkable article in *Sophia*, the bulletin of the Spanish section of the Theosophical Society, about the question of the absence of the Self in Buddhist doctrine.<sup>17</sup> In a typically theosophical move, he tried to reconcile this Indian theory with the findings of Western modern psychology, which proposed that the Self was an illusion produced either by a combination of sensations and perceptions or by social and linguistic conventions. He also tackled the contradiction that many Europeans felt about Buddhism regarding the seeming absence of the individual Self within the doctrines of reincarnation. At this point, he did not hesitate to criticize what he regarded as the problematic view of Helena Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, the founding members of the Theosophical Society, who affirmed the existence of an individual soul that experienced reincarnation.<sup>18</sup> Risco, who later would become a pious Catholic and an ardent defender of the Church, ended the article affirming the everlasting validity of the Buddhist truth and predicting its triumph over all other doctrines.

Between 1910 and 1918, before he became committed to the cause of Galician nationalism, Risco's public image was more connected to the Orientalist vogue. At the same time, he started to take a critical stance against Western civilization. During his stay in Madrid between 1914 and 1916, he came to be known as "Tagore" in the cafes and literary circles of the city by reason of his Orientalist outfit and love for the Indian poet. In fact, he introduced the author of *Gitanjali* to the Spanish public for the first time, giving a lecture about him in the Ateneo of Madrid in 1914.<sup>19</sup> In this lecture, he argued that the awarding of the Nobel prize to Tagore was a sign that India was well awake and that Europe was waiting for a religious or spiritual revelation that could illuminate its skepticism. This

was clearly seen in the wave of mysticism that swept over the continent, from modernist Catholics to liberal Protestants, including the works of heterodox writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Leo Tolstoy, and Maurice Maeterlinck. For Risco, Tagore wrote from a deep spirituality grounded in nature, and his poetry evoked “feeling, peace, heroism and love,” in contrast to the “darkness of the West,” a recurrent subject in later works. Risco showed his dissatisfaction with the modernization of India carried out by the *babus*, those Westernized Indian elites that despised their own tradition. Following Nietzsche’s characterization of English culture as “philistine,” he was deeply worried the decadence of the Western bourgeoisie would undermine and destroy the traditional Indian culture. Risco was gradually becoming more critical of the West, and the disasters of the First World War did nothing more than reinforce this attitude.

### The Decadence of the West

Risco would spend the rest of his years with a very pessimistic outlook about the prospects of Western civilization, a trend in his thinking that is usually explained by the influence of Nietzsche, of whom he was an avowed follower.<sup>20</sup> A feeling of spiritual crisis was widespread among the intellectuals of the time, and also reflecting on that crisis was another follower of Nietzsche, Oswald Spengler, who published the first volume of *The Decline of the West* in 1918. In this time, Risco was preparing for the press his own work about the decadence of the West, but the publication of the book by the German philosopher prompted him to abandon the project. In any case, his manuscript was rediscovered years later and finally published in 1990 with the title that Risco had originally given it: *The Darkness of the West* [*Las tinieblas de Occidente*].<sup>21</sup>

This work mounts a complete rejection of Western civilization, excluding only the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages. What is important for us is that in this work he makes constant use of the Orient to frame his examinations of the flaws of the West. He sets the time and form of the decadence of the West using the idea of the Kali-Yuga, borrowing the term from the Indian scriptures. It is interesting to note that Risco used this word to refer to the Dark Ages of the West years



before René Guénon made the same use of it in *The Crisis of the Modern World* [*La Crise du monde modern*] (1927). For Risco, the unmistakable symptoms of the Kali-Yuga were the catastrophic war, the ubiquitous exploitation of labor by industry, and above all, the expansion of the philistine bourgeois as the typical European.<sup>22</sup> Then, quoting his beloved Tagore, he challenged the core values of Western civilization, attacking the idea of the domination of man over nature, an idea that took root with the founding of walled cities by the Greeks.<sup>23</sup> It was in this *civitas* that Western civilization was born, and its error has followed the West to the present. The book continued with a fierce critique of urban life with all its ugliness and miseries. Risco echoed the millennialist theories of Nostradamus and the predictions of the Theosophists about the imminent end of the Kali-Yuga.<sup>24</sup> The similarities between the Guénon and Risco do not end here. As the French author noted in the preface to *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines* (1921), the biggest obstacle to understanding the Orient was in the mentality of the Westerners themselves. Risco warned against the prejudice of approaching the Orient from the point of view of the progress and the rationalism inherited from the Greeks.<sup>25</sup> They both recommended a more open mind and called for taking up the task of putting ourselves in the position of those who are not Western.

Like Guénon and many other intellectuals interested in the Orient, Risco condemned Western imperialism, not only for the injustices it committed, but above all because it entailed the expansion of the decadent values of the West.<sup>26</sup> He warned the Eastern countries about the dangers of adopting them and forgetting one's own tradition in the same fashion that the babus did. For this reason, he censured the Westernized China of Sun Yat-sen while praising those who confronted the Westerners like the boxers or Toyotomi Hideyoshi.<sup>27</sup> Risco was against modernity and rejected progress, so he wished that both the East and the West could retain their original forms. It is true that Orientalists for the most part were only interested in the classical period of the Eastern civilizations and criticized their modern societies, but while Risco rejected their attempts to modernize, many Orientalists decried their staticism and incapacity to develop. Nevertheless, contrary to Risco's

wishes, the modernization process was unstoppable. During the interwar period he, longing for tradition, would fight a losing battle against the political and social upheavals that the world was confronting.

### **The Influence of the East on Galician Nationalism During the Interwar Period**

Risco suddenly converted to the cause of Galician nationalism at the end of 1917 with his friends Ramón Otero Pedrayo and Florentino López Cuevillas. The three of them would be central members of the Galician nationalist movement, leading the *Nós* group. Around the same time, he reconverted definitely to Catholicism, publicly casting aside his dalliance with Buddhism as youthful folly.<sup>28</sup> His activities as a nationalist ideologist and propagandist as well as his literary accomplishments in the Galician language would make him one of the most influential intellectuals in Galician history, overshadowing his other achievements in the fields of philosophy and Orientalism. Be that as it may, his landing in the Galician nationalist movement and his evolution within it were not unrelated to his Orientalist explorations. During his youth, the feeling of being separated from a world that he considered ordinary and ugly led him to the exotic East. He felt the decadence of his society and wanted to discover a place where the spirit reigned over reason, tradition was not overwhelmed by modernity, and man lived in consonance with nature. In the end, he found it not in the unknown and faraway lands of the Orient but in his native Galicia. As he explained in the manifesto *Nós, os inadaptados*, after many metaphysical and aesthetical travels in time and space, he and his friends realized that Galicia was the solution for their yearnings; they had only to change their gaze to discover a new world in it, in the same way that G. K. Chesterton found Britain after travelling all around the world.

Many people were surprised about Risco's sudden change but, as one of his biographers has pointed out, he maintained the inner structures of his mind untouched while replacing only his garments: Catholicism instead of Theosophy; Celtic civilizations instead of Oriental; Druidism instead of Buddhism; Atlantis instead of Ancient Egypt; the West instead

of the East.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, during the next decades his works, mostly essays and newspaper articles, would be more concerned with the tradition, the literature, and the political situation in Galicia. In any case, his nationalism was very much influenced by the figures of Tagore and Gandhi. He admired them because in his view they opposed the West's imperialism using their own tradition. One of the traits that characterizes Risco's nationalism is his defense of the "*enxebre*," a word that could be translated as the traditional but also as the pure and unaltered. He found in the rural areas of Galicia that pure and spiritual world that previously he had searched for in India. Risco, who was becoming more and more conservative, detested those nationalist leaders of colonized countries who tried to adopt Western manners and sociopolitical innovations (not to mention socialism) to reach independence.

His nationalism has also been labeled "karmic," because he borrowed the idea of karma from Indian philosophy and applied it to his theory of nation.<sup>30</sup> Risco's approach to the concept of nation did not follow the "civic" model proposed by Renan, but rather the "ethnic" model favored by the German Romantics, which emphasized the soil, the language, and the race as the main components of the nation. In this regard, he tied the idea of karma, which in Indian philosophy only pertains to the individual, to the nation. For him, the Galician collectivity shouldered the deeds of its ancestors and had the unavoidable responsibility to pass it on, in the best possible way, to future generations.<sup>31</sup> Through this original integration of Eastern philosophy with Western political theory, Risco provided the nationalist cause a vision imbued with spirituality that surpassed the squabbling and schemes of politics while at the same time anchoring the future in the past (meaning for him tradition), since the social karma prefigures our future, and no one can escape from it. He always was wary of politics and feared that giving priority to political objectives over spiritual needs would endanger the essence of the Galician nation.

In any case, his new position as a nationalist leader and his frenzied activity in the press meant that his studies about the Orient receded to a secondary position. Apart from quotations of Gandhi and Lao Tzu, references to the haiku, the Japanese legend of the 47 ronin, and

some reflections on the history of India and China in the 1920s, he only wrote one long article devoted to the Austrian Rudolf Steiner that fully acknowledged Risco's Orientalist proclivities.<sup>32</sup> During these years, Risco moved from Theosophy to Anthroposophy, an offshoot of the Theosophical Society founded by the Austrian philosopher. He started this article by defending his motives for writing about Theosophy in a magazine of nationalist thought dealing with Galician culture and society, noting that though Theosophy was viewed with suspicion by many, the writings of Steiner were of great worth. He also gave another reason: there were already many believers in the occultist and spiritualist trends of Theosophy in the towns of Galicia; they should read the more serious and learned works of Steiner and give up superstitious nonsense. He then sketched the history of the Theosophical Society, blaming Annie Besant, the second-generation leader, for the splits in the Society. Next, he provided an overview of the history of occultism and of the hermetic teachings in Europe which profoundly influenced Steiner. Finally, he gave a summary of Steiner's life and works, concluding his remarks with a word of praise to the Theosophists for having introduced yoga to Europe.

Risco would engage again with the Oriental world during a hiatus of five months in his nationalist activity. This happened in 1930 when, awarded a grant by the *Junta de Ampliación de Estudios* (a public institution that provided funds for research), he traveled to Germany with the aim of learning about ethnological research under professor Richard Thurnwald. He could not meet the professor, who was conducting fieldwork in East Africa, but instead he spent long days in Berlin enjoying the Orientalist vogue that had taken hold in all the big cities of Europe. He also met the Sanskrit scholar José Canedo in Berlin, whose book *Summary of Sanskrit Literature* [*Resumen de literatura sánscrita*] (1942) would be a big influence on his later works about Hinduism.

Risco documented his observations of Europe in *Mitteleuropa*, a mix of diary and travelogue in which Oriental themes occupy a substantial share of his reflections. He could experience the Orient in daily life in Berlin in ways that at the time were not possible in Galicia. He attended

Theosophical conferences, went into Chinese restaurants and bookstores specializing in Oriental art and literature, walked the neighborhoods of Charlottenburg which had Japanese and Chinese shops, and visited the *Buddhistische Haus*, a Buddhist temple in Berlin. But what made the strongest impression on him was the contemplation of the extensive collections of Oriental art in the *Museum für Völkerkunde* and the *Altes Museum*. He was delighted to spend several days there from morning to evening, although in the end he felt overwhelmed by the sheer number of Asian works of art. This experience made him doubt how well Westerners actually understood the Oriental mind.<sup>33</sup>

One important event during this trip that linked the dreamer of the young days to the more pessimistic and disenchanting Risco of his middle years was his attendance at a conference by Tagore. The result could not have been worse. The Indian poet gave him the impression that he was a real poser, full of Orientalism in the bad sense of the word. Risco came away thinking that Tagore only said what his European audience wanted to hear and that he lacked naturalness, being overly theatrical in his gestures and manner of speaking.<sup>34</sup> It must have been a painful experience for the once-youthful dreamer for whom Tagore had been a cultural hero. But he did not depart from his original view of India. Actually, he realized that the genuine representative of the Eastern spirit was Gandhi who, unlike the flexible and celebrated Tagore, directly confronted Western civilization.

From 1931, Risco returned again to working as a full-time nationalist intellectual. The political turmoil of the 1930s that ended with the Spanish Civil War prevented him from looking beyond the world immediately around him. He would pick up the thread of Orientalism in his later years.

### **Works on the Orient in His Old Age**

During the Spanish Civil War, Risco took a hardline stance against the communists and socialists while defending the new order of the nationalist Franco regime from an ultra-Catholic, almost messianic standpoint, in accordance with his religious views and in reaction to

the strained, hate-filled times of the war.<sup>35</sup> But after 1940, he abandoned writing about political topics and took up again his old interests: ethnology, literature, history, albeit stripped of any Galician nationalist outlook.

It was during the 1950s that Risco revisited the spiritual and intellectual pleasures he had taken in the Orient and started to write again about them. His only work that treats the Orient as an independent subject, *The History of the Orient Explained in a Simple Way* [*La historia de Oriente contada con sencillez*] (1955), a popular handbook on the history of the Orient that covers the period from ancient Sumer to the processes of decolonization in India and Indochina, dates from this period. In it, he starts with a genealogical approach to the term “Orient” and a historical appraisal of the image of the Orient in the West, from the attitude of respect in classical times to the disdain in modern times. Risco acknowledges that there is a difference of mentality between the West and the East, but he advocates the union of the Eastern and Western spirits in order to reach a “type of upright and perfect man.”<sup>36</sup> The first sentence of the second chapter clearly shows his commitment to the subject: “In the Orient starts the history of mankind,” he writes referring not only to the earliest civilization of Sumer but above all to the Biblical events from Adam to Noah that he treats as historical occurrences.<sup>37</sup> In addition to treating Biblical stories as history, he conducts throughout the essay a passionate defense of the historical depth of the Orient and warns about the habit of despising it in the name of progress.

But Risco was no longer romantic about the East. He devoted the twelfth chapter to the question of the decadence of the Orient, a process that started later than in the West but that was developing more rapidly. He was well aware that Europeanization and modernization entailed the disappearance of their traditions, a process that he called the “dis-Orientalization,” and blamed Western imperialism for having pushed the East to economic exploitation and cultural decadence, evidenced in the adoption of ideologies like nationalism, communism, and so on.<sup>38</sup> He even predicted that the East would strike back after being released from the yoke of imperialism in what could only be “just punishment.”<sup>39</sup> The encounter between the East and the West would have been fruitful if “we

would not have tried to make Westerners from Orientals,” he concludes.<sup>40</sup> His pessimism towards the future of Western civilization in previous years had finally taken on a global character.

Risco continued to work on the Orient, particularly in Indian religions, for the next few years until his death, but strangely enough, he kept his research activities secret and practically never spoke of them.<sup>41</sup> It is possible that he could not find a partner with whom to share his interests in the tiny city of Ourense or that he was worried that his Catholic belief would be doubted by his fellow citizens. The *Fundación Vicente Risco* keeps stored several unpublished manuscripts comprising hundreds of pages about Hinduism, which bear witness to his effort, in what looks like the research notes for a book that was never published. We know that he was writing these manuscripts in 1951 because in discussing the *kalpas* and the cycles of *yugas* (ages), he states that at present we are in year 5052 of the Kali-Yuga, effectively corresponding to 1951.

The main manuscripts about Hinduism are written in two account books and extend more than 600 pages. The first of the books starts with a general explanation of Hinduism. Then, he tackles the doctrine following the formal classification of the revealed sacred books, from the Vedas to the Brahmanas and the Upanishads. Next, he examines the seven schools of Hindu philosophy or *darshanas*, paying special attention to the yoga and the *vedanta*. Finally, he deals with other texts of the tradition, like the Dharmasastras, Puranas and Tantras. In the second one, he examines the concepts of the Indian tradition that are particularly crucial to the correct understanding of Hinduism, such as *brahman*, *pranava*, or the veil of Maya. He also produces a catalogue of some of the most important gods, goddesses, and celestial beings of the pantheon like Brahma, Visnu, Agni, Varuna, Yama, the *devas*, *apsaras*, *yaksas* and many more. The structure of the manuscripts is clear, but they are rather descriptive and use a very technical language. It is probable that he was collecting information as a preliminary stage for a new book. It is regrettable that the manuscripts have not yet been made public. For this reason, his standing as an Orientalist has not been given a fair appraisal, even by his biographers.<sup>42</sup>

Many fragments of the manuscripts are direct translations from other studies, supplemented with his own commentaries. He relies especially on two books: *Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines* [*Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues*] (1921) by René Guénon, and *The World's Eternal Religion* (1920) by the Hindu association Sri Bharat Dharma Mahamandal, but the number of authors and sources cited is vast. He uses the works of the Orientalists, some renowned like Max Müller, Sylvain Lévi, Paul Deussen, Richard Garbe, and Hermann Jacobi and others less well-known, such as the Spaniard Henry Heras or his friend José Canedo, among many others. He also refers to the opinion of numerous Indian intellectuals of the 19th and 20th centuries, such as Radhakrishnan, Tilak, Dasgupta or Vivekananda. In other cases, he comments on intellectuals interested in the Orient but who were not Orientalists themselves, like Hermann von Keyserling, Carl Jung, or Max Weber. It is indeed interesting to emphasize that Risco was critical of those shortsighted positivist scholars who were unable to go beyond the surface of scientific knowledge in fields like philosophy or religion. "Reading them," he says, "we can even believe that science cools the brains and sterilizes it by freezing,"<sup>43</sup> echoing Blavatsky and Guénon's similar critiques of the narrowness of the Orientalists.<sup>44</sup> Risco and Guénon were coevals and through individual paths they came to hold the same awe for the tradition and contempt for the modern world, which for them naturally led them into Orientalism. Risco admitted that no one had done more than the French intellectual to stimulate curiosity for the Oriental doctrines.<sup>45</sup>

Another major influence in Risco's later years was the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, one of the Western intellectuals of his age more sympathetic to the Orient. Jung and Risco share many key concerns, namely, the necessity of widening the mind beyond the narrow confines of the intellect and reason, the desire to build bridges between East and West, the desire to reach a compromise with the Christian heritage, distrust of "modern man," an appreciation of yoga, opposition to socialism, and so on. We can say that they both were conservative intellectuals, although Risco was an orthodox Catholic and rejected the Jungian view that religious experience was a psychological phenomenon.



I suspect that one of the reasons that Jung was so dear to Risco is that even if Jung had devoted his life to research into Eastern doctrines and regarded the “spiritual achievement of the East as one of the greatest things the human mind has ever created,”<sup>46</sup> he was totally against imitating or adopting them (for example, converting to Buddhism), because the West could not afford to renounce its own history and traditions. The Orient could help to develop the Western mind but he concluded that “only by standing firmly on our own soil”—the ground represented by Christianity—“can we assimilate the spirit of the East.”<sup>47</sup> Risco was also very fond of the Orient and throughout his life followed the latest intellectual trends and artistic avant-gardes. At the same time, he kept repeating that Galicia should find an original path of innovation that could not be found anywhere but in its own tradition. In a more personal fashion, he stated, “I look for the tradition through the newest paths, and I will be glad if only it is interpreted from the point of view of the future.”<sup>48</sup>

Another point of contact between these two thinkers was their appraisal of the myth as a symbolic system that contained deep truths about the human being. Risco wrote two books on mythology in the last stage of his life, *Christian Mythology* [*Mitología Cristiana*] (1963) and *Order and Chaos* [*Orden y caos*] (1968), both published posthumously, in which he adopted the Jungian idea of the “archetype” to interpret Christian, classical, and Babylonian myths.<sup>49</sup> For Jung, the myths, along with dreams, were one of the gateways to the collective unconscious, and the motifs that recur in myths worldwide point to some shared patterns of thinking and behavior, archetypes that can provide fundamental explanations of human being.<sup>50</sup> Risco did not carry out a systematic study of the Indian myths in these works, but he showed that the praxis of yoga was a process that draws us back to the unconscious, pointing out that it was something comparable to Jung’s analytical psychology, with which he basically agreed.<sup>51</sup> Both Jung and Risco were aware that in terms of psychological insights, the East was ahead of the West, and they used that knowledge, in different ways, to help the modern man retrieve his lost humanity.

Risco led a peaceful life in Ourense during his old age, free from

political compromises and spiritually independent, as he affirmed in a short autobiography published four years before his death. This calm was not unrelated to what he has learnt from the East. “Lao Tzu has taught me not to have projects. It is also true that I’m old enough not to have them,” he commented.<sup>52</sup> He liked, as always, the idea of being compared to Gandhi (a cartoon of Risco dressed with loincloth attire had appeared in a local newspaper), and he professed a new admiration for Lanza del Vasto, the Italian philosopher who had become a disciple of the Mahatma.<sup>53</sup> Risco was a self-confessed orthodox Catholic believer, but I suspect that Buddhism, which he thought to be a “good final religion” to spend time with and find peace through in one’s last days, also helped to ease his mind.<sup>54</sup> The aura of the occultist accompanied him until his deathbed. His obituary appeared in *La Vanguardia* newspaper, with the story of seven “oriental knights” from whom Risco was waiting to receive an important message.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

The world changed immensely between the beginning of the twentieth century, when Risco was lured by the Orient thanks to his readings on Schopenhauer, and the 1960s, when he was writing about myths from a comparative perspective. During those sixty years, while living in a tiny corner of the European continent, he never lost that primal fascination with the East. However, his ways of engaging with the Orient changed as his attitude toward the world around him evolved. First, as a fashionable dandy he found, in a distorted image of the East, a place to find both aesthetic enjoyment and an escape from the society with which he had become disenchanted. Then, through the Theosophical Society and his encounter with the works of Tagore, he realized the potentialities of the Orient as an instrument with which to criticize the West and to overcome the crisis of modern civilization. Next, he discovered in the Galician tradition the spirit that he had been looking for in the East, and for twenty years he fought to uphold that spirit as a nationalist intellectual. Finally, he retreated to his desk to study Indian doctrines as an Orientalist, reading and researching for love of the subject, keeping in

private the pleasures of that knowledge.

These attitudes of Risco illustrate the different approaches that many European writers, intellectuals, and scholars sympathetic to the East had adopted. Risco at times shared with them the prejudice of looking to it in an essentialist way, totally convinced of its otherness, but he also was ahead of his time, holding to an anti-ethnocentric and anti-colonialist position. He believed in the possibilities of learning from the East to enrich the individual and the society. Risco's project reminds us, now that Westernization has become global, that the traditional philosophies underpinning the East must be again appraised to critically confront the consumerism, materialism, and artificialism of modern society.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John James Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (London: Routledge, 1997), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Jesús de Juana López, *Aproximación ao pensamento e ideoloxía de Vicente Risco (1884–1963)* (Ourense: Deputación Provincial de Ourense, 2013), 34–36. For authoritative studies on the life and works of Risco, see Carlos Casares, *Vicente Risco* (Vigo: Galaxia, 1981); and Olivia Rodríguez González, *Estética e teoría da cultura en Vicente Risco* (Vigo: Galaxia, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> All issues of *Nós* can be consulted at Galiciana, the digital library of Galicia, which can be accessed at <https://biblioteca.galiciana.gal/en/inicio/inicio.do>.

<sup>4</sup> For an introduction to the debate on Orientalism, see Dietrich Jung, *Orientalists, Islamists and the Global Public Sphere: A Genealogy of the Modern Essentialist Image of Islam* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2011), 17–37.

<sup>5</sup> Urs App, *The Cult of Emptiness: The Western Discovery of Buddhist Thought and the Invention of Oriental Philosophy* (Rorschach: UniversityMedia, 2012), xi.

<sup>6</sup> For a critical review of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, see Bernard Lewis, "The Question of Orientalism," *The New York Review of Books*, June 24, 1982; and Robert Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and Their Enemies* (London: Allen Lane, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 9, 28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 67–70.

<sup>9</sup> John Bramble, *Modernism and the Occult* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 20.

<sup>10</sup> Vicente Risco, "Nós os inadaptados," *Nós*, no. 115 (1933): 115–23.

<sup>11</sup> For the relation between modernism and exoticism see Lily Litvak, *El sendero del tigre: Exotismo en la literatura española de finales del siglo XIX, 1880–1913* (Madrid: Taurus, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1979).

<sup>13</sup> For an up-to-date appraisal of theosophy, see *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, eds. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Boston: Brill, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Leigh Wilson, *Modernism and Magic: Experiments with Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Occult* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ramón Otero Pedrayo, "Lembranza do mestre Vicente Risco," *Boletín da Real Academia Galega* 29, no. 351 (1969): 266–70.

<sup>16</sup> González, *Estética*, 65.

<sup>17</sup> Vicente Risco, "Ensayo sobre la herejía de la individualidad," *Sophia*, no. 1 (1912): 32–39.

<sup>18</sup> For a theosophical interpretation of the Buddhist doctrine of "not-Self," see Julie Chajes, "Orientalist Aggregates: Theosophical Buddhism between Innovation and Tradition," in *Innovation in Esotericism from the Renaissance to the Present*, eds.

Georgiana D. Hedesan and Tim Rudbøg (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Vicente Risco, “Rabindranath Tagore (Premio Nobel de Literatura),” *La Palabra* 1 (1913): 17–18 (Presented at the conference in the Ateneo de Madrid on July 3, 1914).

<sup>20</sup> As attested in Risco, *Nós, os Inadaptados*.

<sup>21</sup> Vicente Risco, *Las tinieblas de occidente* (Santiago de Compostela: Sotelo Blanco, 1990).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 37–40.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 41

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 127–28.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 118–19.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>28</sup> Casares, *Vicente Risco*, 54.

<sup>29</sup> Justo G. Beramendi, *Vicente Risco no nacionalismo galego, volumen 1: Das orixes á afirmación plena* (Santiago: Edicións do Cerne, 1981), 128–29.

<sup>30</sup> Joaquim Ventura. *O nacionalismo kármico de Vicente Risco* (Santiago de Compostela: Edicións Laiovento, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> Vicente Risco, “Do futurismo e mais do karma,” *Nós*, no. 34, October 15, 1926.

<sup>32</sup> Vicente Risco, “O teósofo alemán Rudolf Steiner,” *Nós* no. 15, January 1, 1923; no. 17, March 1, 1923; and no. 18, July 1, 1923.

<sup>33</sup> Vicente Risco, *Mitteleuropa* (Vigo: Galaxia, 1984), 190–91.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 172–73.

<sup>35</sup> Casares, *Vicente Risco*, 116.

<sup>36</sup> Vicente Risco, *La historia de Oriente contada con sencillez* (Cádiz: Escelicer, 1955), 9.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>41</sup> See the following testimonies. Manuel Casado Nieto, “Vicente Risco, O Home,” *Grial* 86 (1984): 504; and Antón Risco, “Vicente Risco e os Orientes,” in *Vicente Risco: Arredor de Nós* (Vigo: A Nosa Terra, 1993), 27.

<sup>42</sup> Ventura, *O nacionalismo kármico*, 32.

<sup>43</sup> Vicente Risco, *Orden y caos (exégesis de los mitos)* (Madrid: Editorial Prensa Española, 1968), 25.

<sup>44</sup> Note René Guénon, “Avant-propos,” in *Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues* (Chicoutimi: Les Classiques des Sciences Sociales, 1921).

<sup>45</sup> Vicente Risco, “René Guénon.” Unpublished manuscript, n.d., held by the Fundación Vicente Risco (Allariz, Spain).

<sup>46</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and the East* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), 85.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>48</sup> Vicente Risco, “Autobiografía confidencial,” in *Últimas páginas sobre Galicia: Artículos olvidados en Vida Gallega, 1919–1962* (Vigo: Alvarellos Editora, 2005), 127–38.

<sup>49</sup> For a summary of these works, see González, *Estética*, 183–98.

<sup>50</sup> For more information on Jung’s archetypes and collective unconscious, note Carl Gustav Jung “The Structure of the Psyche” and “The Concept of the Collective Unconscious” in *The Portable Jung*, ed. Joseph Campbell (New York: Penguin Books, 1976).

<sup>51</sup> Risco, *Orden y caos*, 80–83.

<sup>52</sup> Risco, “Autobiografía confidencial,” 130.

<sup>53</sup> Casares, *Vicente Risco*, 130.

<sup>54</sup> Risco, *Mitteleuropa*, 308.

<sup>55</sup> “Ha fallecido el gran escritor gallego don Vicente Risco,” *La Vanguardia Española*, May 1, 1963, 7. See also Nieto, “Vicente Risco, O Home,” 499.

Submitted: June 21, 2021

Reviews Completed: December 13, 2021

Accepted: December 28, 2021