

Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality:
The Humanistic Spirit in the 21st Century

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Enlightenment can be perceived as a cultural movement, as an ideal for the human community yet to be fully realized, or as a mentality characteristic of the modernistic *modus operandi* throughout the world. The focus of my presentation is the Enlightenment mentality, arguably the most powerful ideology in world history. Both socialism and capitalism grew out of the Enlightenment, so did market economy, democratic polity, and civil society. As the advanced economies move into “knowledge society,” the dominance of science, especially information and communication technologies will be even more pronounced. Max Weber’s prophetic view that modern society will be controlled by experts and managers seems self-evident and the rise of technocracy in the military, governments, multi-national corporations, social institutions, and even non-governmental organizations seems inevitable. Furthermore, the underlying values, such as liberty, rationality, human rights, due process of law and the dignity, independence, and autonomy of the individual, are widely recognized as universal values. The rhetoric of the Enlightenment mentality, suggesting that there is only one option for the future of the human community, seems persuasive.

However, the Enlightenment mentality is also seriously flawed. Rooted in anthropocentrism, dictated by instrumental rationality, and driven by aggressive individualism, it is a form of secularism which suffers from inattention to religion and destructiveness of nature. With a view toward the future, without a fundamental restructuring of its worldview, the Enlightenment can hardly provide guidance for human survival, let alone for human flourishing. A comprehensive reflection on and critique of the Enlightenment, especially the pervasive mentality it has engendered throughout the world, is in order. Building upon the insights already accumulated by the feminists, environmentalists, postmodernists, communitarianists, and religionists, I intend to offer a humanistic vision, both as a sympathetic understanding of the contemporary significance of “the age of reason” and as a judicious assessment of the blind spots of

this de-natured and de-spirited mentality. The purpose is to explore the authentic possibility of a new world order based on a continuous and sustained dialogue among civilizations.

It is vitally important to note that in the **cultural tradition** of the modern intellectual, Enlightenment mentality is so much ingrained in the life of the mind that **traditional culture** has been relegated to the background, as merely a distant echo, in the habits of the heart. Since the struggle to develop a full-fledged market economy, a publicly accountable democratic polity, and a vibrant civil society is far from complete, the political and culture elite in societies such as China is committed to the Enlightenment project. It is hardly ready to go beyond the Enlightenment mentality. Indeed, in its developmental strategy, it takes the traditional Western model as the point of departure. As the widely accepted rhetoric goes, for a developing society it is too much of a luxury to hark back to the cultural legacy for inspiration. Yet, ironically, the spirit of the time demands that, for the survival and flourishing of the global community, it is imperative for intellectuals, including Chinese intellectuals, to go beyond the Enlightenment mentality. In a historical and comparative civilizational perspective, the surest and soundest way to accomplish this challenging enterprise is to tap all the spiritual resources available to the global community in order to formulate a humanistic vision which can transcend anthropocentrism, instrumental rationality, and aggressive individualism without losing sight of the liberating ideas and practices of the Enlightenment, as a movement, an ideal, and a mentality.

The upsurge of interest in the Axial-age civilizations symbolizes a “spiritual turn” in philosophy. The “epistemological” and “linguistic” turns have been successful in making the academic study of philosophy in the English-speaking world a truly respectable professional discipline. However, by consigning aesthetics, ethics, and philosophy of religion to the marginal position of analytical concerns, professional academic philosophers consciously and inadvertently confined themselves to the cocoons of technical competence for decades. Not surprisingly, their style of philosophizing does not have much relevance to issues defining the human condition. As a result, very few philosophers became public intellectuals and for those who had the aspiration to perform public service their voice was often overwhelmed by theologians, cultural commentators, social critics, and political economists. The time is ripe for a fundamental philosophical re-orientation. Comparative philosophy can play a significant role in this critical moment.

Historically, none of the major Axial-age civilizations in Asia—Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism made a clear distinction between philosophy and religion. Virtually all philosophical contemplation is embedded in religious insight and cultivation. Indeed, without spiritual disciplines, sophisticated intellectual reflection is impossible. The interplay between philosophy and religion, or more precisely the confluence of disinterested analysis and experiential understanding, is a defining characteristic of the Axial modes of thinking. Actually, as philosophically seasoned historians, such as the French academician, Pierre Hadot, have convincingly demonstrated that, to the Greeks, philosophy is a way of life exemplified by spiritual exercises. This is also how the Harvard professor, Hilary Putnam, approaches Maimonides, Rosenweig, Buber, and Levinas in his lecture course on the “Four Jewish Thinkers.” This is obviously true with major Islamic philosophers since Avicenna and Al-Ghazzali. Professor H. Nasr is a contemporary exemplar. It seems obvious that the revival and flourishing of philosophy as a humanities subject in the liberal arts education is in part predicated on its renewed attention to spiritual traditions. Philosophers in close collaboration or friendly competition with colleagues in religion can be a highly productive way of thinking in the 21st century. Needless to say, this is also a wholesome practice of returning to the core and source of the philosophical enterprise: self-knowledge.

The New Humanism rooted in self-knowledge, beyond the secular humanism of the Enlightenment mentality, is historically significant as the spirit of our time. It addresses the ideal of universal ethic in the context of cultural diversity. At least eight general principles are involved:

(1) As a comprehensive and integrated anthropocosmic vision it encompasses nature and religion in its humanistic concerns.

(2) It assumes that a concrete, living person is a center of relationships. As a **center**, the dignity, independence, and autonomy of the individual is an essential feature of the person; as **relationships**, sociality is indispensable for personal identity.

(3) The concrete living person is rooted in body, home, community, world, and cosmos and yet it seeks to transcend egoism, nepotism, parochialism, racism, and anthropocentrism to reach the highest level of self-awareness. This interplay between rootedness and public-spiritedness characterizes the richness and complexity of the human condition.

(4) Nature is, in Thomas Berry’s felicitous phrase, “not a collection of objects” but a “communion of subjects.” We cultivate a sense of reverence for all beings without

imposing the exclusive dichotomies of body/mind and spirit/matter on our lifeworld. There is continuity and consanguinity among all people and all things

(5) Our life in its lived concreteness embodies self, community, nature, and Heaven in an ethic of care and responsibility.

(6) Humanity as the core value “embodies Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things” in its sensitivity and consciousness.

(7) Although cultural diversity is taken for granted, our quest for “harmony without uniformity” enable us to be an integral part of the “great unity” (the human community) in which all people are recognized as global citizens.

(8) Global citizenship signifies primarily a political idea but it is suffused with spiritual values and grounded in nature. The humanism that sustains the world order is informed by spiritual and naturalistic values.

Global citizenship, predicated on the anthropocosmic vision, is neither utopian idea nor wishful thinking but a common aspiration, indeed a practicable idea with profound ecological, ethical, and religious implications. In this vision, all four dimensions of the human experience: self, community, nature, and Heaven are incorporated in a holistic approach to the lifeworld. Integration of the body, heart, mind, soul, and spirit of the person, fruitful interaction between self and community, sustainable and harmonious relationship between the human species and nature, and mutuality and mutual responsiveness between the human heart-and mind and the Way of Heaven are standards of inspiration for the human community as a whole. They are not abstract ideas but defining characteristics of the necessary path for human survival and human flourishing. This path is diametrically opposed to closed particularism. It also rejects abstract universalism.

The belief that there is a single way to establish a world order is impractical and dangerous. It is likely to generate tension and conflict detrimental to international peace. Unilateralism is ill-conceived in both theory and practice. It fails to understand that economic globalization enhances as well as homogenizes cultural diversity. The imposition of secular humanistic ideas on the rest of the world, without understanding and appreciation of other core values equally desirable and necessary for cultivating global citizenship is short-sighted and misinformed. Liberty without justice, rationality without sympathy, legality without civility, rights without responsibility, and individual dignity without social solidarity cannot bring about an enduring world order nurtured by a richly textured culture of peace. All five core values in the Confucian tradition--humanity,

righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trust are relevant as reference for universal ethics. Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and other spiritual traditions, especially indigenous religions, also offer rich resources for global citizenship. Only through “dialogue among civilizations” can a thick description of universal ethics emerge. Dialogue as mutual learning is the best practice.

Ordinary human experience tells us that genuine dialogue is an art that requires careful nurturing. Unless we are intellectually, psychologically, mentally, and spiritually well prepared, we are not in a position to engage ourselves fully in a dialogue. Actually, we can relish the joy of real communication only with true friends and like-minded souls. How is it possible for strangers to leap across the civilizational divide to take part in genuine dialogue, especially the “partner” is perceived as the radical other, the advisory, the enemy? It seems simple-minded to believe that civilizational dialogue is not only possible but also practicable. Surely, it may take years or generations to attain the maximum realization of the fruits of dialogue. Yet, as a minimum condition, the benefits of dialogical relationships at personal, local, national, or inter-civilizational level are readily available and fully recognized in our ordinary daily existence.

If these common experiences are conscientiously cultivated and universally shared, we can learn to transform common sense into good sense of guardianship for global public goods. Ecological consciousness is an obvious example. Our sense of urgency, dictated by our concerns for and anxieties over the sustainability of the environment and the life prospects of future generations enables us to take not only an anthropological but also a cosmological attitude toward all our resources—mineral, soil, water, and air. Through education, this ecological sensitivity, can encourage the positive forces of globalization to enhance material, moral, aesthetic, and spiritual well-being of those, perhaps in the beginning a tiny minority, to take special care of those underprivileged, disadvantaged, marginalized, and silenced by current trends of economic development. Dialogue among civilizations also encourages wholesome quests for personal knowledge, self-understanding, individual identity, group solidarity, and communal trust.

We have learned from a variety of inter-religious dialogues that **tolerance** of difference is a prerequisite for any fruitful communication. Yet, merely being tolerant is too passive to go beyond the self-indulged egoism. We need to be acutely aware of the presence of the other before we can actually begin communicating. **Awareness** of the presence of the other as a potential conversation partner compels us to accept our co-existence, with an ever-expanding network of human relationships as an undeniable

fact. This leads to the **recognition** that the other's role (belief, attitude, and behavior) is relevant and significant to us. In other words, there is an intersection where the two of us are likely to meet to resolve divisive tension or to explore a joint venture. As the two sides have built enough trust to see each other face-to-face with **reciprocal respect**, a meeting of the hearts and minds becomes possible. Only then can a productive **dialogue** begin. Through dialogue, we can appreciate the value of learning from the other in the spirit of **mutual reference**. We may even **celebrate the difference** between us as the reason for expanding both of our horizons.

Dialogue, so conceived, is neither a tactic of persuasion nor a strategy of conversion but a way of generating mutual understanding through sharing common values and creating a new meaning of life together. As we approach civilizational dialogues, we need to suspend our desires to sell our ideas, to persuade others to accept our beliefs, to seek their approval of our opinions, to evaluate our course of action in order to gain agreement on what we cherish as true, or to justify our deeply held convictions. Rather, the purpose is to learn what we do not know, to listen to different voices, to open ourselves up to multiple perspectives, to reflect on our own assumptions, to share insights, to discover tacit agreements, and to explore best practices for human flourishing. A salient feature of civilizational dialogue is inter-religious communication.

The advent of modernity has fundamentally transformed virtually all religions. Max Weber defines modernization as rationalization. A distinctive marker of rationalization is secularization. Unlike premodern, the overwhelming majority of contemporary societies are managed by secular governments. In the political process of the modern West, religion is perceived of as a matter of the heart and therefore as a private affair inappropriate for public debate. Educational institutions are wary about religious advocacy and they jealously protect their neutrality in religious disputes. But this situation is undergoing a fundamental transformation with substantial consequences for politics and the civil society at large.

In this new situation, religious leaders are obligated to become bilingual. It is natural that they be proficient in the language of their respective faith communities. In addition, they must also learn to be proficient in the language of global citizenship. In other words, they cannot abandon their responsibility to assume the role of a public intellectual. Ideally, bilingualism enables them to bring their own spiritual resources to bear on the vital issues of the global village: protecting the environment, alleviating poverty, eliminating gender inequalities, and abolishing torture, just to mention a few. In

the information age, even if religious leaders choose to concentrate on the spiritual well-being of their respective communities, they cannot be immune to the urgent events confronting the world.

Indeed, religious leaders are confronted with a major challenge. The new human condition dictates that religious leaders become proficient in two languages: one specific to their faith fellowships and one for global citizenship. Similarly, experts and professionals should also feel obligated to become bilingual. One is the expert language relevant to their profession and the other is the language of the public intellectual. They must be able to address themselves to two overlapping communities. Unless they are capable of rising beyond their own interest groups, they cannot properly situate their expertise or professionalism in a knowledge economy and society. The comparative advantage of religious leaders is that, having been seasoned in the language of global citizenship, they can bring the ecumenical language of the heart to public discourses. In so doing, they can help to create a new ethos of communication, networking, and negotiation, with profound significance for market economy, democratic polity, and civil society.

One of the necessary conditions for shaping a world order through dialogue among civilizations is the demand that religious leaders assume their responsibility as public intellectuals. The term "intellectual" first appears during nineteenth-century Russia. On the surface, it does not seem to have any antecedent in the Hindu, Buddhist, Judaic, Greek, Christian, or Islamic traditions. The Hindu quest for union of the real self with the cosmic reality, the Buddhist salvation as delivery from worldly attachments, the Jewish covenant with God as the source of all values, the Greek search for truth through the contemplative life of the mind, the Islamic devotion to Allah, and the Christian faith in the Lord in Heaven presuppose the existence of a spiritual sanctuary essentially different from, if not diametrically opposed to, the world here and now. The engagement in and management of worldly affairs had been until recently often either by choice or by default relegated to the background.

Actually the intellectual, as we understand it today, is not the functional equivalent of the guru, monk, rabbi, philosopher, priest, or mullah. The minimum requirement for an intellectual—politically concerned, socially engaged, and culturally sensitive—is fundamentally at odds with a person passionately devoted to the service of a higher reality beyond the mundane concerns of the secular world. Surely, all spiritual traditions are inevitably intertwined with the ordinary lives of their devotees. But in all of the aforementioned religions the rupture of the chain of being by privileging the "Pure

Land” or the “Kingdom of God” outside of the daily routine of human existence is undeniable.

The return of the study of religion to liberal arts education has significantly enriched the humanities and social sciences in modern universities. The continuous presence of spiritual sensitivity in economic, political, and social discourses can also be immensely meaningful for human flourishing. However, religious leaders must be able to address the global community as concerned global citizens. The UN Millennium Conference of religious leaders in the year 2000 was a disappointment because the overwhelming majority of the participants used the forum to preach the superiority of their distinctive approaches to life and salvation rather than to articulate a shared vision of spirituality indispensable for peace on earth. The time is ripe for religious leaders to become engaged in a joint venture to bring the spiritual dimension to economic, political, and social discourses. Public intellectuals should be sensitized to become religiously musical in their consideration of critical global issues. Today, major international organizations have already become more sensitive to religious matters. For example, religion has featured prominently in the recent annual meetings of the World Economic Forum at Davos. Even the World Bank is not immune to religious inputs in their regular programs. The preparatory work of the UN Secretariat for the 1995 Social Summit initiated a process whereby ethical and religious dimensions are integrated into discussions of development. This good practice features prominently in the final report of the Copenhagen Seminars devoted to a multidisciplinary inquiry on social progress. Obviously, by becoming public intellectuals, religious leaders can help bring religious concerns to bear on policy discussions of economic, political, and social issues. Furthermore, they can sensitize other public intellectuals to become musical to religious voices. UNESCO’s decade-long commitment to inter-religious, comparative philosophical and cross-cultural dialogues is promising in fostering a new humanism inspired by an anthropocosmic vision.

Decades before the rhetoric of the coming of the clash of civilizations became prevalent in international politics, religious scholars and leaders had already been involved in inter-religious dialogues. Those seasoned in religious discourse are acutely aware of the great potential for peace or violence in virtually all religious traditions. As sites of contestation of powerful forces, religions are never neutral. They are confluences of dynamic processes of human self-realization and concentrations of creative energies for human self-transcendence, but they are also instruments of mass destruction and vehicles of persistent violence. Without harmony among religions, the chances for a culture of peace are slim. Our quest for universal ethics, a common

ground for peaceful existence among divergent cultures, must take inter-religious dialogue as a point of departure.

The world order evolving from dialogue among civilizations is time-consuming and painfully difficult. Yet, as the politics of domination is replaced by the diplomacy of communication, interaction, negotiation, and conversation, a dialogical civilization based on tolerance, recognition, respect, mutual reference, and mutual learning is emerging. The anthropocosmic vision underlying this new humanism is a way of life and a worldview indispensable in our troubled and promising age.

(An earlier version of the paper, under the title “Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality: An Anthropocosmic Vision,” was presented at an international symposium on Civilizations and World Orders organized by the Foundation for Sciences and Arts in Istanbul, June 12, 2006. It serves as a background reading for my presentation)