

Spiritual Humanism

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A comprehensive and integrated vision for the survival and flourishing of humanity in the 21st century must take into consideration self, community, nature, and Heaven as four distinct but yet interconnected dimensions of human self-understanding. Conceptually, they can be analyzed as independent variables as they seem to point to discrete spheres of interest and different areas of experience. The American philosopher Richard Rorty has argued that self-realization and social service are two separable approaches to meaningful existence. But they are at significant odds with one another. Indeed, they are opposite life orientations. Peter Berger has also remarked that in the classical liberal sense of freedom, as manifested in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, a feeling of alienation from society is a precondition for a sense of personal liberty. Under the influence of modernity, we perceive of nature as "a collection of objects." Nature is out there, whereas the human species as subjects are by definition separate from nature. In Christian theology, God is the creator and creativity is the source of all created things. As the "wholly other," the Creator is diametrically

opposed to humanity. In other words, we take for granted that self, community, nature, and Heaven are four radically different things.

Secular humanism, a defining characteristic of the Enlightenment mentality of the modern West, is informed by some of the most powerful trends of thought in modern times. (1) It is a form of anthropocentrism that takes the centrality of human interest as a point of departure for understanding the evolutionary process. The underlying assumption is that there is no need for any further justification if the well-being of the human is evoked. It should be noted that some eminent theologians, such as Wolfhart Pannenberg, insist that anthropocentrism is an underlying foundational thesis of Christianity. (2) It is a form of rationalism. Although there are a variety of rationalities implicit in rationalism, instrumental rationality features most prominently in the Enlightenment mentality. Francis Bacon's dictum "knowledge is power" should not be perceived purely in utilitarian terms, but it is often applied as a clear manifestation of human instrumentality. As a result, the quality of meaning is often subsumed under the demand for quantitative calculation. (3) It is charged by a strong desire to know, to dominate, and to conquer. This Faustian drive, derived from Goethe's literary imagination, is a demonstration of the insatiable demand of the human spirit to extend its epistemological horizons and to deepen its sensuous gratification. Obsessed by a sort of unbound Prometheus' zest for expansive human experience, we are willing, indeed obligated, to

deal with the devil for authentic demonstrations of the power of humanity, at all costs, even that of the human soul. (4) It has been buttressed by social Darwinism and influenced by its attendant modes of thought, such as a belief in historical inevitability and advocacy of progressivism. August Comte's assertion that human history progresses from religion, metaphysics, and science has exerted a profound impact on the five Marxist modes of production. A variation of the same thesis consists of the idea that economic growth is a linear progression and that all human societies can be classified according to an empirical verifiable pattern of development. (5) It suffers from all sorts of limited and limiting structures of thought and action, such as Eurocentrism and male chauvinism. As a result, it has also been an important ideological and ideational factor in the development of imperialism and colonialism.

The Enlightenment mentality, the justification for secular humanism, is arguably the most powerful ideological force in human history and, apparently, the most pervasive and dominant mode of thinking in Cultural China. Its outcomes are both capitalism and socialism, including the market economy, democratic polity, and civil society. Actually, science and technology, in particular informatics and communication technologies, the military-industrial complex, multinational corporations, and research universities are all direct and indirect results of the Enlightenment mentality. As I have already alluded to, scientism, as an obvious manifestation of the Enlightenment

mentality, is by far the most influential ideology in the shaping of the developmental process in the People's Republic of China. Labeled as "scientific development," this highly ideological and politicized principle is promoted as the Chinese worldview, sanctioned by the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, to guide Chinese policies in economics, politics, society, culture, and ideology for the 21st century.

However, it is vitally important to note that during the last decades, or since the 1960s, virtually all major intellectual movements with profound implications for culture, society, politics, and the economy in North America and Western and Northern Europe have had an "anti-Enlightenment mentality." By far the most consequential of these, notably feminism and environmentalism, have been directed at the anthropocentrism, instrumental rationality, Faustian drive, male-orientated aggression, Eurocentrism, imperialism, and colonialism of the modern West. If we had to identify a single most devastating aspect of the Enlightenment mentality, it would be, as referred to by Robert Bellah, the term "possessive individualism." Understandably, other forms of modern (or some would prefer post-modern) consciousness, notably multiculturalism, religious pluralism, and communitarianism, are explicit or implicit critiques of the negative features of the modern West as expressed in the Enlightenment mentality.

In the last decade or so, mainly due to the seminal work by Charles Taylor, reflections on the "secular age" have attracted a great deal of

attention among global thinkers. As result of Westernization, modernization, and globalization, a concerted effort has been made to address the process of secularization. Max Weber's classical definition of modernization as "rationalization" is indicative of a massive process of transformation, unprecedented in human history since the advent of the Axial-Age and the emergence of Greek philosophy and THE Judaic, Confucian, Daoist, Hindu, and Buddhist spiritualities. We are undeniably the beneficiaries of the Enlightenment even though as a cultural movement it contains many tension-ridden, conflicting, and contradictory value-orientations. As a mentality, it is pervasive throughout the world, especially in the developing societies, and EVEN THOUGH according to Habermas' interpretation it is a project yet to be completed, it is still a viable aspiration for the global community. Lamentably, we are also victims of the unintended negative consequences of the Enlightenment: the pollution of the good earth, the marginalization of virtually all traditional forms of life, the invention of weapons of mass destruction, the disintegration of the international order, and the exploitation of indigenous cultures. Even the viability of the human species has become problematical.

It seems that the time is ripe to cultivate the idea of spiritual humanism as a fundamental reconfiguration of the basic life and value orientation of the secular age. Because I have been working for decades on the authentic possibility of envisioning such an ecumenical

worldview based on Confucian roots, I would like to share my still evolving thoughts on this significant and important matter with like-minded global thinkers. I must first acknowledge that I am deeply indebted to the eminent Indian philosopher R. Balasubramanian for his coinage of the term “spiritual humanism” to define the nature of Confucianism. This expression, in my considered opinion, captures most appropriately the spirit of Confucian humanism in a timely manner. This reminds me that on the occasion of my receiving the lifetime achievement award from the American Humanist Association sponsored by the Harvard Humanist Chaplaincy at the Cambridge Hyatt in 2007, to the surprise of many of my fellow “humanists,” I made it explicit that Confucian humanism is not at all a form of secular humanism and that only by underscoring the “religious” and “spiritual” dimensions can we develop, beyond the Enlightenment mentality with its attendant negative connotations, a comprehensive and integrated humanist vision, such as anthropocentrism, to be embraced by the global community in the 21st century.

Indeed, I deliberately crafted the word “anthropocosmic” to designate a kind of humanism that is compatible with and sympathetic to an ecological consciousness. From an anthropocosmic perspective, in the inspiring words of Zhang Zai, “Heaven is my father, Earth is my mother, all people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.” In such a cosmic as well as anthropological vision, nature

is an integral part of our human communion that must be appreciated, admired, revered, and cherished. It should never be treated merely as a collection of objects that can be dominated or abused. In Christian spirituality, despite the tenacious adherence to the dogma of anthropocentrism in the story of Genesis and the humanity of Christ, there is also the imagined possibility, if not the established claim, that nature is not merely a creature but also the embodiment of creativity. Similarly, in humanist Buddhism the other shore of Pure Land is not radically different from this defiled “red dust,” but it resides right here and now as our sacred home in our ordinary daily existence. Confucian engagement in the world by transforming it from within is, strictly speaking, not a form of “inner-worldly asceticism” in Weberian terms but an ethic of responsibility, a virtual ethic, and a care ethic that the global community, especially Cultural China, must learn to cultivate for the sake of human survival and flourishing.

As an agenda for further exploration, spiritual humanism seeks an integration of body and mind, a fruitful interaction of self and community, a sustainable and harmonious relationship between the human species and nature, and a mutuality between the human heart and the Way of Heaven. The following issues must be addressed: the theory and practice of self-cultivation, a fiduciary community, the human-earth

relationship, and the omnipresent and omniscient but definitely not omnipotent Heaven.