

ASIA AND THE HUMANITIES*

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I

Historically, the attitudes and responses of the Western world towards the various Asian humanistic traditions have been a function of various needs. In a very important sense, the shift in these needs represents a progressive transformation from particular to relatively expanding universal ones. Significantly, such an expansion has been accompanied by a proportionate increase in its spiritual dimensions.

In the eighteenth century as well as the beginning of the nineteenth century, knowledge of Asian humanities among Westerners was confined to those interested in the exotic or hitherto unknown sources of wisdom. Some European intellectuals have even used this knowledge as a critique of what they believed constituted intellectual or moral complacency among their contemporaries. Such knowledge widened in scope later on when missionaries were led to deepen their studies of Eastern moral values and religious beliefs as part of their efforts towards more successful proselytizing. Often, unsuccessful missionaries returned to their home base to end up as experts on different sorts of oriental religions while preparing others to take their places at home and abroad. The imperialist powers, too, had their experts not so much to know the weaknesses of their subjects, who had been conquered mainly by force, as to make their rule more efficient and tolerable. Thus it is no accident that some of the most monumental compendia of Islamic Law or their translations used in India were produced under the patronage of British rulers.

After World War II, the almost universal trauma resulting from widespread destruction and immense loss of lives, the fear of a nuclear war as well as a genuine desire for world peace, the rise of many independent countries from colonial status, new political realignments

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among nations, and a new concept of international relations not entirely devoid of the expectations for a one-world in the very distant future, made imperative the knowledge of the ideologies of other countries as well as the moral and religious values which might have entered into the formulation of such ideologies. Cultural centers, exchange programs, cultural missions, scholarships etc., became the order of the day. But such programs, although allowing an increased number of Westerners to know more about Asia, had probably enabled more Asians to know more about and even imbibe Western values to the extent that many of them have come to question if not abandon, some of their own traditional values. In any case, a basic premise behind all the above programs and missions was that knowledge of the culture of another country would hopefully moderate, if not eliminate, obstacles to friendlier relations along political lines or at least avoid misunderstandings in negotiations among different statesmen.

In the last few years, problems of overpopulation, pollution, malnutrition, illiteracy, etc., have become universal in their import and implication. However, programs sponsored by developed nations or world agencies to help other nations have often met a cultural wall, generating, probably unwittingly, misunderstanding if not outright hostility. The misunderstanding as well as the resulting resentment have often been brought about by experts from the developed countries of the West whose prescriptions could not fit into the value systems and social institutions of the countries they meant to help. Conversely, suspicions about or imputation of unnecessary motives to such experts may have been the result of ignorance of other cultural values than their own. All these obviously point to the necessity for a widening and an intensification of the knowledge of other cultural values on the part of experts as well as on that of the population where problems of world import are to be resolved. The burden of knowledge ought to be everyone's concern and not be placed merely on the shoulders of the experts.

It is important to note that alongside the shifting needs of Westerners to know Asian values, there have been sincere efforts by many universities, especially those in the United States, to include courses on Asian humanities in their liberal arts curriculum. But this program was meant to enrich the lives of the students and accelerate their creative impulses while enabling them at the same time to understand more deeply and appreciate their own culture through a comparative

knowledge of other cultures. The Conference on Oriental Classics held at Columbia University in 1958 bears out this observation well. Although members of the conference spoke of the "intrinsic value" of some of the Oriental Classics while giving secondary importance to their historical value, and emphasized that the problem of the Western humanities was understanding better "humanity in Asia" or "discovering the essential humanity in various civilizations", the aim of the existing or proposed academic programs was the intellectual growth of the students. In effect, the higher institutions of learning had produced an elite which had a fair understanding and even empathy for the cultural values of other peoples. However, when some members of this elite come to occupy high positions in the state, how much of their previous education in the past facilitate their task of improving the relations between their country and another Asian one?

Undoubtedly, the enrichment of a person's intellectual life, understanding among peoples of each others' cultures, the cultural competence of experts charged with the explanation and implementation of programs of world import, and the the facilitation of channels of communication so necessary to peaceful relations between nations are all desirable and ought to be encouraged. However, it is problematical whether all of these desiderata, if realized, can radically or ultimately solve problems urging immediate solutions like the danger of a nuclear holocaust and that of dwindling raw materials and their unavailability or high cost.

Undoubtedly, the great powers do not presently desire a nuclear war, especially one where all will be the losers. But it is not idle to speculate that should one of them be absolutely sure of emerging totally victorious from such a war with negligible losses on its side that it will not restrain itself from going into it. The point here is that the fear of a nuclear war among the great powers does not result from compassion for the people of the rival power and a love for human race, but because their own nationals stand in danger of extinction. In brief, the fear of a nuclear war is a function of national interests and does not stem from humanistic considerations based on universal principles. Based therefore on pragmatic and partisan principles, the desire for a state of no-war, euphemistically called "peace", cannot endure for long should other exigencies demand otherwise. It is instructive to note that many years ago there were nations who, not yet possessing a nuclear bomb, had demanded a ban on all nuclear armaments on

the basis of peace and humanity. However, the moment they were able to produce an atomic blast, they conveniently forgot all their past moralizing. The great powers, in turn, condemned such a blasting as if only they had a monopoly to kill on a large scale.

The problem of raw materials as dramatically shown in the last energy crisis all point to the necessity for the existence in the not too far away future of a common pool of world resources and even of services for the benefit of all mankind, from which countries can draw on the basis of urgent needs and priorities. At present, most help to developing countries from rich or developed countries have been done on the basis of historical or friendly relations or with the inevitable attached strings. This is not to deny that genuine needs of a particular country are being satisfied through the aid of another friendly country; but the point here is that there is the probability that there is another country in more urgent need for the particular aid granted. The fact is that countries having much needed resources which they can spare actually manipulate them in terms of national interests and power politics. Forgetting that the recent Arab use of the oil weapon had been based on techniques learned from the West, some quarters in the West have demanded that all Arab oil should be internationalized for the benefit of mankind in general. In principle this demand is, I believe, rational and good, provided that all other nations in the world internationalize their raw materials, their technical knowledge as well as their surplus agricultural and industrial products.

At present, it is quite difficult to convince a person who is sophisticated in the knowledge of international relations that international agencies like the World Bank are not influenced by the very rich nations who have contributed to its capital. It is much harder to convince him that as the rich nations become richer, the developing countries do not become relatively poorer. For example, in the last few years, export products from the West to Asia had, in some cases, jumped up to 300% in their prices while, for many years until the October War of 1973, the prices of raw materials from Asia and Africa had remained more or less stationary. This means that the highly industrialized countries and international cartels have become richer while the developing countries exporting raw materials have become relatively poorer. In response to the demand for higher prices for their raw materials on the part of the developing countries, the industrialized countries had planned an organization of consumers to present a united front. In the face of all these,

the United Nations Secretary General reflected that there was need for agreement on certain general principles which ensure a rising standard of living for the developing countries while guaranteeing continued economic security for the developed ones. But as long as nations will adhere to their claims to their own resources and make their specific demands regarding trade and tariff arrangements and accessibility to other markets, and as long as the developed nations will, as a reaction, band themselves into an economic block to maintain their primacy in the international economic sphere, conflict between blocks of nations will be chronic in increasing proportions and with dangerous implications. However, should some form of understanding be arrived at in accordance with the view of the Secretary-General, all what this means is that only some developing countries but most industrialized countries will profit from it. Indeed this does not necessarily imply that the whole of mankind will benefit from such an arrangement.

The idea of having a world agency where the surpluses of raw materials and agricultural and industrial products are registered or deposited and from which any nation can draw in accordance with its needs under a system of priorities, will never be possible unless all the peoples of the world begin to develop a sense of common direction as well as a set of universal values transcending those of particular nations and particular cultures. In brief, no concept of a world community can be both meaningful and operative unless it is based on a set of universally held values. I take it that this is one of the possible implications of what is meant by Dr. Michael Novak to constitute a planetary humanities.

II

One possible concept of a planetary humanities is that it includes within its connotation the following elements: that the survival of the human species is a value to be cherished, that individuals as such have an intrinsic value all their own, that in human experience and historical transformation different peoples have arrived at certain values and principles worthy of mutual adoption (or adaptation) by other peoples to enrich each other's lives and institutions, and that these principles can be viewed as representing ultimately a cumulative effort on the part of the human species for a more cohesive and happier universal order where particularistic cultural elements are simply peripheral. The basic postulate in all these is that in all man's efforts to bring about what they believe constitutes order and harmony, there are common

ingredients of humanity in all of them — elements transcending the limitations of race, speech, and geography. But, indeed, of overriding importance is the survival of the human species in this earth without the sacrificing of any race or segment to achieve this end. Admittedly, this is a value. As to the question why this ought to be a value of mankind, neither logic nor empirical philosophy can give a definite answer. Attempts at an answer are found in classical moral philosophy and certainly in all of the great religions.

However, a planetary humanities as outlined above cannot come into being unless a great part of the world population or at least its intellectual leaders, moral leaders, and academicians develop a consciousness of its fundamental connotations. They must be committed to a form, or order, or cohesion of a world community and possess a sentiment for what constitutes human expectations believed to be realizable in such an order. A basic assumption here is that human life ought to have some direction or purpose if it is to be worthwhile or significant.

Moreover, as previously hinted, the evolvement of a planetary humanities if it is to have some form of universal sanction must incorporate within it, albeit transformed to a higher and more universal level — values which have characterized the great humanistic traditions all over the world, have stood the test of time, and still continue to maintain their hold on a great part of the world's population. It is here where the various Asian humanistic traditions can play an important and vital role.

The problem of a planetary humanities accommodating Asian values invites some observations. First of all, values represent reactions or responses of people to certain human and social situations; as expressed in statements, they represent both prescriptions and preferences. They do not describe facts but rather exemplify human responses to factual situations and needs. Moral, political, and aesthetic judgments pertain to the realm of values. Values represent the human urge to create ordered life both in the individual and the social level. They aim to bring about what is conceived to constitute harmony and happiness as a response to biological and other human needs within the framework of some adjustment to the physical and social environment. A generally systematized group of values accepted by a people within a historical span of time is what may constitute a humanistic tradition. As such, Asia represents a constellation of different cultural patterns and value systems. Some of them might even use similar terms, but the

connotation or operative character of such terms might differ. What Asian tradition does not value justice, peace, harmony and freedom? Yet, no different from the Western world, such concepts may not mean exactly the same thing. Moreover, Asian value systems must not be viewed as something static or expressive of a philosophy of negativism or resignation. At present, many Asian countries are manifesting a form of social dynamism, and this might be due to the influence of Western values which may have been accepted within the sanction or framework of traditional values. Certainly, in various degrees, the ideas of modernism and the need for technological change are affecting Asian traditional values.

In trying to locate certain Asian values, it would be wise to be aware that in a given society considered as possessing a particular culture, different but parallel value system may exist side by side. It is well known that a protest against certain religious forms may originate from, or be expressed through, religious outlets. Sufism is an example of this in relation to the kind of Islamic orthodoxy propounded by the legalists. Buddhism is another in relation to Hindu tradition.

In the variety of Asian cultures and humanistic traditions, some are closer to those of the West rather than to some other Asian ones. For example, the Islamic humanistic tradition (which is really not monolithic but which exemplifies historical and geographical variations and is not confined to Asia since it predominates in North Africa) has more points of historical and substantive contacts with the Western tradition than say with Confucianism or Hinduism. The well-known reason for this is that Jesus Christ and many of the other Hebrew prophets have been incorporated into the pantheon of prophets revered by Islam. The belief here is that the Prophet Muhammad, although the last, belongs to this long series of prophets. Moreover, the lands that initially fell under the sway of Islam were already exposed to the Graeco-Roman tradition and had sizeable Christian communities. Yet one must not disregard one aspect of the Islamic humanistic tradition closely associated with Sufism (or Islamic mystical philosophy) which appears to cross religious borders. It has been recently demonstrated that many of the Sufistic ideas of Ibnul 'Arabi, the Spanish-Arab mystical philosopher, have a one-to-one correspondence and even doctrinal similarity with those of Lao Tzu, the Chinese Taoist philosopher. The fact that there is no known historical contacts between these two philosophers have led some other mystically-inclined scholars to assert

that they all drew their knowledge from a common source that existed during a primordial time — a knowledge which had persisted, with accretions, up to the present. However, more empirically minded scholars would probably comment that man's response to similar situations would probably elicit similar questions and answers.

Nevertheless, in spite of the differences between, and even existence of, competing humanistic traditions, it can be stated outrightly that there is an essential humanity and commonness to all of them. Cultural borrowing, the transfer of cultural values from their places of origin to far away places, similar responses of persons belonging to different cultures to similar human or social situations, the communicability of values by persons belonging to different races, creeds, and cultures, and genuine appreciation of artists for art forms produced in another age and clime all attest to the existence of an essential humanity common to all man's traditions. Moreover, in Asian traditions, most of the humanistic values have their origin or sanction in religion or are at least based on a metaphysical system (which in many Asian cultures is not entirely devoid of moral prescriptives). Asian religions, philosophical, and mystical systems have assumed the oneness of the human race as well as the sameness of the nature of man. A deeper study of religions will reveal that a one-to-one correspondence between their major concepts is possible. All of these generally suggest that many of these values are universal in their intent. This is not to deny that different religions have their *differentia*, but this might only imply their social function in satisfying particular or local needs.

There is probably no culture that is so poor that other cultures cannot learn something from it. However, the merit of a culture in its contribution to an albeit slowly emerging world culture is, by definition, the universality, actual or potential, of its key concepts. In the same manner that ideas of modernism, increased standards of living, and a healthy life should not, in spite of their origin, be considered a monopoly of the West, so must a great deal of the humanistic traditions of the different Asian civilizations be considered universal property. Actually, the diversity of culture should be the very instrument to enrich a future world culture. Allah says in the Qur'an: "O Mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another." (Sura XLIX, v. 13). That is, that they may learn from one another.

It is difficult for any one person to talk authoritatively of all Asian humanistic traditions. But I would like to mention how certain concepts of an originally Asian humanistic tradition — that of Islam — can serve as elements of a planetary humanities. One of the basic concepts of Islam is that of *amanah* or trust, that is, Man's life, his family, his property, his intelligence and talents and so on are really not his own but qualities or objects entrusted to him by the Divine. Also, that the earth and the skies around have been given to man for his use but only in the sense of his being a vice-regent on earth. Another concept of Islam is that of *community* to which a man must sublimate his personal or selfish interests. Undoubtedly, both of these concepts have their parallels in Western political thought. The Qur'an also tries to impress us with the idea that two of the greatest sources of evil in man come from his desire to live forever on earth and to hold absolute power. The original temptation of Adam is succinctly narrated as follows: "But the Devil whispered to him, saying: O Adam! Shall I show thee the tree of immortality and power that wasteth not away?" (Sura XX, v. 120). Here can be seen immediately Islamic values of universal import: that since man's life on earth is transient, he is accountable for his actions and must show compassion in his dealings, and that all power on earth is limited and relative and must be exercised as a trust (*amanah*). (See Annex, "Notes on the concept of *Amanah* in Islam").

Also, the Islamic concept that all religions and ethical systems different from its own are likewise the result of Divine revelation and that differences in races and nations were meant to enable different peoples or communities to solve problems and enrich their lives through specific creative impulses and then learn from each other, demonstrate the supreme virtue of tolerance. Certainly, this virtue is not equivalent to what passes now as religious apathy as an element of a new concept of freedom. Just a few of the values of Islam that have a universal message have been touched upon. Certainly, Judaism, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism (in its various forms), Hinduism, etc., have corresponding or similar ideas as well as other ones.

No genuine reconstruction of the present world system regarding the solution of world problems, the sharing of world resources or raw materials, and even political adjustments along a one-world concept is really possible unless there is an *a priori* acceptance of certain universal values or at least the possibility of these; this is something beyond aca-

demic curiosity or mutual appreciation or even mere understanding of each other cultures. The awareness of such values may accelerate the expectations of a one-world in proportion to its popularization among the world population. But here a vicious circle may arise: not all human beings will have the same expectations unless they have approximately similar standards of well being. Also, many persons will be inclined to keep their loyalty confined to a nation and not go beyond it if they think that their well being is best secured within it. One tends to be loyal to a system as long as one is a beneficiary of it. Consequently, adherence or commitment to a planetary humanities will be greatly determined by its ability to satisfy expectations of the world population. The function of world education here is also crucial.

It is not gainsaying to state that there are multitudinous forces today that will eventually lead the different countries and peoples of the world to get together to solve common problems if each is to survive. But again this effort might not necessarily be guided by a common will for the good of all mankind but might only reflect the will for each to survive. Furthermore, if what will make mankind get together involves coercive elements and expedient principles, then the nature of the world's integration would at most be negative in character. What might be necessary is the development among all individuals and peoples of that kind of will that represents the will for the good of all mankind and not just the good of a particular race, nation, or segment. It is in the development of this will for the good of all mankind as such that the intellectuals, academicians, religious and moral leaders can play an important role. Obviously a key factor in this development is world education.

What might be done initially is to increase translations of the humanistic literature of the peoples of this world and widen their accessibility not only to the higher centers of learning but to other quarters as well. Curricula in the colleges and universities must offer more liberal courses that expose the young to such humanistic traditions. Philosophers or humanists with a good background in philosophy will eventually have to come out with a system demonstrating the equivalences or correspondences between the basic ideas of these traditions with special concentration on those that have direct import on the value of humanity as such and its survival. The results of their labor can then be distributed to various educational agencies in the world such that their influence can be felt in all levels of education including the

primary ones. Hopefully, a new world generation will arise that will have imbibed of such ideas and, although adhering to their own particularistic cultures, will be committed to certain values which will in effect constitute a planetary humanities. Consequently, their approaches to world problems will be based on a categorical imperative where humanity will be considered an end in itself.

All of these point to the awesome responsibility for a new breed of intellectuals, academicians, and creative thinkers to accelerate their contacts with one another and unify their vision of a universal or planetary humanities. It is a vision that will leave alone the great religions and philosophical systems to their votaries and yet testify to their validity and essential unity. It is a vision that will have as its sanction humanity as a whole as well as the survival of humanity with a new well-thought-out concept of its well-being as a major value.

ANNEX

Notes on the Concept of Amanah in Islam

Amanah (trust) is one of the most fundamental concepts in Islam. The true believer (*mumin*) is trustworthy or faithful to the trust. Since Allah is the Living and the source of all life, a person does not own his life but holds it only in trust. Since Allah is the All-Knowing and the source of all knowledge, a person's intelligence as well as all of his intellectual accomplishments are to be held in trust. All property, whether legally registered as private or otherwise, belongs to Allah and is, therefore, to be held or utilized by men as a trust. Since Allah is the Owner of All Sovereignty, political power can only be exercised by man as a loan under trust. Indeed, the concept of *Amanah* has tremendous political, economic and social implications. Knowing some of the Beautiful Names of Allah, which are, in effect, the names of his qualities, the Muslim can readily know what things ultimately belong to Allah, but which are allowed for man's use as a trust.

Clearly, in social life, the idea of *Amanah* serves as a primary safeguard against human arbitrariness while constituting a basis for the rights of persons on other persons and institutions. Its practice connotes the exercise of individual as well as group responsibility. Allah said in the Qur'an: "Lo! We offered the trust unto the heavens and the earth and the hills, but they shrank from bearing it and were afraid of it.

And man assumed it. Lo! he hath proved a tyrant and a fool.” (Sura XXXIII, v. 72). This verse strongly suggests that when a person marries, raises a family, studies for a degree, practices a profession, owns property, exercises power of different forms, etc., he has entered into certain commitments. But man, in the exercise of any such trust, has often acted irresponsibly. His tyranny results when he uses his intelligence of purely personal, family or dynastic interest; and his foolishness comes about when he believes that he knows everything or can do anything without the help of Allah. Such a tyrant or fool had broken or abused the trust. In effect, he had committed the sin of Pride and had forgotten Allah.

From the Islamic point of view, man is given access to the things of the earth and the skies to facilitate and make more effective his service to and worship of Allah. That this access must be governed by the principle of *Amanah* implies that man’s actions must be done not for selfish interests or to harm others, but for the good of the greater whole. In the practical sphere, this greater whole can refer only to the *umma*, or Muslim community. What is meant here is that the life, strength, intelligence, skills, property, etc., of the Muslim must be geared to the wider and greater interests of the *umma*. A serious study of the Covenant (*mithaq*) between Allah and the *umma* as well as a function of the latter in this world, reveal that a purpose, among others, of the Islamic community is to serve as a witness to the other religious communities of how the *Amanah* is to be made manifest and operative in social life. However, all this is not to deny the very important duties and responsibilities of the Muslim to the whole of Mankind since, according to the Qur’an, there is also a Covenant between Allah and Mankind which was implicit when He said to the sons of Adam: “Am I not your Lord?” (Sura VII, v. 172).

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