

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com**SciVerse ScienceDirect**

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 77 (2013) 10 – 14

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

Selected Papers of Beijing Forum 2009

Harmony of Heaven, Earth and Man — Harmony of Civilizations

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Professor, the George Washington University

© 2013 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Beijing Forum

Anyone seriously concerned with the human condition today cannot but observe the presence of unprecedented crises and disorder on so many planes of our existence from the spiritual, philosophical and psychological to the social, economic and political to the environmental that now threatens the very web of life here on earth including our own. Instead of seeking that harmony between Heaven, Earth and Man, to use the terminology of classical Chinese tradition which has its correspondence in the other major traditions of humanity from the Hindu and Buddhist to the Christian and Islamic, so many today seek to live in disregard of this inner harmony and there are even those who go so far as to deny that such a thing is even possible or has any meaning. Ours is a world dominated by self-interest of individuals, ethnic entities, economic groupings and nations. We speak often of humanity but usually only in an abstract sense and when we do seek to be unselfish, it is usually in making our interests subservient to those of the group, organization or nation to which we belong and not to humanity as a whole, there being some exceptions that are still, however, very much a minority voice.

One can of course claim that it has always been and will therefore continue to be so, but such an assertion overlooks the radically changed situation in which we now live, one that requires our extending our view of “us” to embrace ultimately the whole of humanity. Before modern means of communication and production disrupted traditional patterns of life, brought different segments of humanity close to each other in an unprecedented manner and caused the actions of people in one part of the world to affect vitally other parts, before the radioactive clouds of Chernobyl killed people in Lapland in Sweden and the carbon emission of one country caused devastating floods in lands far away, for men and women of one segment of humanity, their world was the world. A thousand years ago for a Chinaman China was for all practical purposes the world as such and Chinese society humanity itself; the same was also true *mutatis mutandis* for a Muslim, a Christian or a Hindu. There were seers and sages who did have a global vision of humanity, but for the vast majority such a vision seemed only theoretical and did not concern their practical lives in a concrete fashion. Nor did it need to do so except in rare cases. Even religions address the particular humanity for which they have been destined as humanity as such. For members of each

civilization, their civilization was civilization pure and simple and those outside of it were often treated as uncivilized, barbarians, unbelievers, etc.

Into this natural order of things came modern Western civilization which not only sought to monopolize for itself the condition of being civilized and did so in a new totalitarian manner, but also attempted to destroy other civilizations in a fundamental way by negating the very legitimacy of any worldview other than its own. As its power spread all over the world, being civilized came to mean, for those who had become subservient to it no matter where they were living on the globe, being Europeanized (or Westernized) and modernized. This process itself made it unfashionable and redundant to speak in modern circles of civilizations in the plural. During the colonial period even opposition to this Western domination by Asians, Africans and others came usually not in the name of other civilizations and their traditions but in the form of the modern European idea of nationalism, the case of the movement of Mahatma Gandhi in India and some of the anti-colonial movements in the Islamic world being exceptions to the rule. It is therefore quite significant that during the past two decades, due partly to the otherwise flawed thesis of Samuel Huntington, discourse on civilizations in the plural has again become prevalent.

It is indeed significant that we now speak of civilizations, the importance of their harmonious existence and the dangers inherent in their possible confrontations. To speak in these terms is to realize already the truth that despite its spread world-wide, Western civilization has not been able to destroy until now nor is likely to do so in the future the other major civilizations of the world and the worldviews or “presiding Ideas” that have created various civilizations. In fact as a result of major crises within Western civilization itself, many in the West have become deeply attracted to the philosophies, religions, arts, social teachings, and even sciences and technologies of the other civilizations which were considered as being irrelevant by so many until recently. Much has been written in the West itself, on the basis of unprecedented access to the sources of the wisdom of other civilizations and driven often by the search for truths largely lost as a consequence of the triumph of modernism in the West, about the remarkable similarity in the teachings of various wisdom traditions including that of the traditional West, the wisdom to which many of us refer as the *sophia perennis* or *philosophia perennis*.

Furthermore, on the basis of these teachings many have come to understand the deeper reasons for the crises of modernism, chief among them being what can be called the rebellion against Heaven and consequently loss of harmony with the Earth. They have come to realize how the spread of the modern worldview has resulted in unprecedented conflicts on so many levels, in the rise of individualism resulting in the weakening of the social order, in the spread of psychological imbalance among so many members of modern society, in the unprecedented environmental crisis with terrifying consequences for the future of all of humanity if the crisis is allowed to continue, in the weakening of the moral order individually and collectively, in the unprecedented disparity between the rich and the poor, in the existence of abject material poverty amidst economic prosperity for some, in the injustice of a so-called global political order which in reality is a disorder based on the domination by force of the weak by the strong and in many other problems whose solutions are vital to humanity as a whole. It does not take a prophet to foresee that the solution to so many of our predicaments lies in the creation of harmony between and within our civilizations.

Harmony between civilizations is, however, not possible without harmony between Heaven, Earth and Man, between T'ien, Ti, and Jen within the being of each of us to the extent possible in the chaotic world in which we live. We must re-establish moral order within ourselves and on that basis in the world about us remembering what is written in the Analects of Confucius, “He who rules by moral force (tê) is like the pole-star, which remains in its place while all the lesser stars do homage to it” (Book II, Arthur Waley translation), except that now the arena of our moral actions must be humanity and in fact creation as a whole. Our vision of such a global order must, moreover, be based not on the espousal of relativism and a secularist humanism based on the ever shifting sands of terrestrial human nature and on the destruction of our own traditions in the name of the bland least common denominator between our cultures, but on the

true nature of man which is foundational to all of our traditions and as confirmed in the perennial philosophy lying at the heart of our wisdom traditions, to what we can also justly call the “unanimous tradition.” The task of those who possess this global and at the same time universal vision is to seek harmony, based on mutual respect, between different civilizations on the basis of the re-establishment at first within ourselves and then within the being of those we are able to lead to this vision of harmony with both Heaven and Earth. Without the establishment of this inner harmony, our discourses about the harmony between civilizations cannot but remain mere talk, the creation of a lot of sound and fury signifying nothing, to reformulate the famous line of Shakespeare.

Man is a thinking being and how he thinks usually determines how he acts. Let us then mention a few concrete ideas that can play a crucial role in how we can act in trying to achieve that harmony between civilizations that we all seek.

The present-day de facto interconnectedness between different individuals, societies and civilizations requires us to go beyond all parochialism. We must re-examine what we consider to be our ethnic, national, cultural and even civilizational interests in light of the inevitable role that the interests of the “other” can and does have for our own ultimate interests. We must realize that every other civilization also considers itself as the “Middle Kingdom,” to use the classical Chinese concept, and that “center” where Heaven and Earth meet exists in one form or another for the “other” as it does for us. We must respect the integrity of other civilizations and the precious truths and realities they bear within themselves no matter how different they might be on the outward plane from what we consider to be “ours.” In this context one should recall the wise words of the ancient sage of China Confucius. In his *Analects* he says, “The man of perfect virtue [jen], wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks to enlarge others” (Book VI; James Legge translation). In light and on the basis of this mutual respect, all of those who seek harmony between civilizations must oppose the establishment of a global order based on purely material factors and bent on destroying the precious diversity of human civilizations and cultures. Harmony after all presumes the existence of diversity whose destruction results not in harmony but in a deadening uniformity that can only impoverish humanity and be most destructive for the rich spiritual heritage that we have received from our traditions.

We must seek to revive the idea of what the eminent Chinese Confucian scholar and philosopher Tu Weiming has called anthropocosmic man. This idea is profoundly Chinese but it is not only Chinese. Rather, it has its correspondence in other cultures. According to this thesis taught by all of our wisdom traditions, man is not just an island unto himself, a subject who creates his own objective reality. Rather, his true nature binds him to an objective world that has its ontological reality independent of his subjectivism and his being includes an organic link to both the society in which he lives, an idea so much emphasized in classical Chinese thought, and also to humanity as a whole. It also includes the profoundest relations with the world of nature and in fact the whole of cosmic reality, with both Heaven and Earth of classical Chinese cosmology.

The revival of awareness within us of the reality of the anthropocosmic man as our true nature should have direct consequences for how we act on every level in our lives. It means the recreation of balance between ourselves and the natural world that surrounds us. It means the regaining of that state of “naturalness” of which classical Far Eastern schools such as Ch’an or Zen in Japanese have spoken so eloquently. It means a new understanding of the boundaries with which we define ourselves as individuals, societies, nations and even civilizations and of how we see ourselves in relation to all those we consider as “others.” On the basis of the inner harmony attained through the realization of this “naturalness,” which is the antipode of giving free reign to what we call our natural instincts, we can then seek harmony with the society in which we live and create an economic and political order based not simply on selfishness, greed, aggression and domination, but on harmony in relation to the “other” based on integrity and the preservation of wholeness.

Let us not forget that harmony is based on the existence of plurality. One cannot create musical harmony if one can play only a single note. Uniformity that destroys all pluralism does not result in a life

of harmony but leads to the monotony of death. The harmony between civilizations and also with the world of nature of which we speak so often these days and whose realization has now become not only a far-fetched ideal but a matter of life and death for humanity, implies forming a new attitude towards pluralism whether it be concerned with the ethnic, the religious, the cultural, the social or the civilizational and ultimately with even non-human forms of life.

Moreover, this pluralism must be understood not as what those philosophers who defend modernism consider as a so-called “universalism” that is based on sheer relativism and denial of all truth claims. This is but a pseudo-universalism that cannot but lead to intellectual suicide. The pluralism of which I speak is itself based on the truth and means clinging to the truths of our own tradition while respecting the “other” and without denying that there is such a thing as error. If there is no truth, there is no error and if there is no goodness, there is no evil.

As far as civilizations are concerned, authentic pluralism means cultivating respect for other civilizations and honoring the way of life, thought, culture and actions of others even if they be different from our own. It requires cultivation of the attitude of cooperation rather than aggression and domination. Surely there cannot be harmony between those who are aggressors and who seek to dominate by force and those who are the subjects of aggression and domination.

In speaking of harmony between civilizations it is necessary to mention also the significance of harmony within civilizations. Rarely in history have there been civilizational wars and confrontations. Most discord has come between nations, tribes, and ethnic groups within a single civilization and even between the alliance of elements belonging to two different civilizations against other alliances of groups also belonging to the two civilizations in question. Our histories are replete with such occurrences as for example when the Ottomans and the Safavids, both belonging to Islamic civilization, made alliances with different European powers such as the French, British and the Austro-Hungarians all belonging to Western civilization with the aim of gaining the upper hand in the confrontation with each other. Some in fact have criticized the whole thesis of the “clash of civilizations” on the basis of this historical and also present-day reality. But they are wrong as far as this particular criticism is concerned for civilizations remain powerful realities even if there does not exist harmony among various nations and diverse groupings within them. If we do not exert our efforts to create that harmony, conditions are such that the world could in fact move towards confrontations of colossal dimensions between civilizations themselves. Already those who speak of “the West and the rest” are propagating civilizational confrontation. We must, therefore, seek both inter- and intra-civilizational harmony here and now.

To achieve this harmony both among ourselves and with “others”, we must cultivate a holistic view of life, a vision that is deeply embedded in our wisdom traditions no matter to which civilization we belong. Each of our traditions must in fact bring all its spiritual resources to bear upon the solution of the unprecedented crisis that humanity now faces, and each of our civilizations has a particular contribution to making possible the realization of this goal that concerns us all. We must also strengthen our organic bond with not only our own social group, not only with minorities living among us, whether they be of an ethnic, racial, linguistic or religious nature, not only with the rest of our own civilization with whom we share profound commonalities, but also with people belonging to other civilizations, with the whole of humanity. We must be ever mindful that the Heaven with which man must be in harmony is symbolized by the sky that covers over us all and the Earth with which man must seek to live harmoniously is one upon which we all walk. A situation has been created in these times in which awareness of this holistic vision is no longer only an ideal of a few seers and visionaries, as it has always been, but an imperative reality without whose realization we shall face impending disaster collectively. Nowhere is this more evident than in the global environmental crisis where we see so clearly that discord rather than harmony with the world of nature affects not only those who have created, live and act on the basis of this discord, but humanity as a whole.

Being the first Muslim to be given the honor of delivering a key-note speech at this prestigious Forum, I find it necessary to say in conclusion a few words about the possibility of harmony between Islamic and

Chinese civilizations which have had such a long historical relation with each other and which possess geographical contiguity. Already during the Sassanid period the Persian Empire, which later became a major center of Islamic civilization, had profound relations with the Chinese. The Silk Road was even then not only a route on which goods from silk and jade to carpets were transported back and forth, but also a means of communication of ideas and cultural elements, of arts and sciences and even of religions. Let us not forget that Buddhism first came to China from the eastern provinces of the Persian Empire. And this exchange in so many domains became more accentuated with the establishment of Islamic civilization.

The city of Kashghar in China was a thriving center of Islamic civilization in its Persianate form. Over the centuries Chinese painting began to influence the Persian miniature. Chinese astronomers were to be found in Tabriz and Persian ones in Beijing. Works on Chinese medicine were translated and paraphrased in Persian. Stories from China appeared in Persian literature including some of its masterpieces such as the works of Nizami. Islamic science had some influence on the development of Chinese science. A technology as central as the production of paper, the word for which in Persian, that is, *kāghaz*, comes from Chinese, reached the Islamic world from China and it was from the Islamic world that it reached Europe. And then there is the whole question of the presence of Muslims in China and the transformation brought about in classical Islamic learning in China in the 17th century through the translation of a number of seminal Persian texts by Jāmī and others into the language of classical neo-Confucianism.

The full account of the historical contact on numerous levels from technology to astronomy to philosophy between Islam and China has yet to be written. It is one about which much needs to be said for many reasons not least of which is that it is one of the most fascinating inter-civilizational contacts in world history. Moreover, this long history can play a fundamental role today in the creation of harmony between these two civilizations on the basis of more than expediency. Huntington considers the alliance between Islamic and Chinese civilizations to be of the greatest danger to the West. But is this really true? Such an alliance might be against certain interests of the West in Asia and Africa, but surely if we understand the value of harmony of civilizations in the sense noted above, surely such an accord does not need to be at the expense of the destruction of harmonious existence of either civilization with the West itself. In fact the creation of harmony between any two civilizations cannot but be of benefit to the whole of humanity as long as it is not created simply for the sake of political or economic interest and in order to strengthen the hands of those in accord to confront and combat another civilization seen as the common enemy.

In light of the reality of the dire situation existing in the world today resulting from consideration of only selfish interests and the domination of the weak by the strong, the vision of intra- and inter-civilizational harmony appears to many as simply an illusion and at best a dream. But in fact it is our only hope for the avoidance of global disaster. To live a life of harmony with both Heaven and Earth, to realize the organic nexus that binds us to all of creation, to seek harmony and peace among ourselves, between our civilizations and with the natural world, these are our only means of survival as a species, our only means of salvation as real human beings. They are not simply niceties to be spoken of and then forgotten without being put into action in our everyday lives as individuals, societies and civilizations.

As the famous Chinese proverb states, “The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” As far as the journey to create harmony between civilizations and prosperity in both its spiritual and economic sense are concerned, that single step must of necessity be the creation of harmony within ourselves, harmony with both Heaven and Earth. Only after having taken that first step can we take the other steps necessary to create harmony both within our own civilization and with other civilizations. Upon the success of our endeavor in this task depends the future of the life of humanity in this world. Let us take this first step and then strive to complete with hope and determination the difficult journey of a thousand miles that lies ahead, bringing the caravan of our civilizations safely home to the terminal point of our journey wherein is to be found the abode of peace and harmony.