

PEACE THROUGH LITERATURE AND CULTURE--- AN ORIENTAL PERSPECTIVE

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Keywords: Peace Culture; Poetry; Literature; Arts; Occidental & Oriental Religions;
Terrorism

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Summary

This chapter presents an oriental perspective of peace through literature and culture. In the initial years of the twenty-first century, the world peace has been broken by the emergence of terrorism and new threats of conflict in various regions around the globe. Since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, there has been an ongoing incidence of violence worldwide, such as the suicide bombings in Israel and hostage seizure in September 2004 in the North Ossetian town of Beslan, in Russia, which has killed large numbers of ordinary citizens, comprising mainly of pupils studying in school. The spirit of the world peace today is in retreat and regression, almost a kind of meltdown.

The international community cannot and must not turn a blind eye to the current tendency. All should join in the search for the kind of approach that will constitute not symptomatic treatment but fundamental cure. No efforts will gain the wholehearted

support of people or succeed in bringing about lasting stability and peace without a spirit of self-mastery based on an acute awareness of the humanity of others, the very essence of civilization. More importantly, the global questions of peace must be rethought from the occidental and oriental perspectives of the reality. Undoubtedly, they endorse a golden rule of world peace: “Treat others as you want to be treated”. Any attempt to deal with these large problems should take such cultures into full consideration. We therefore strongly believe in the value of global peace education and the much needed development of a Culture of Peace, through literature and bridges of culture among nations, through television, films and videos, as well as a responsible global Peace Media, to counteract the global culture of violence.

Finally, this chapter makes such a conclusion: world peace is not something that can be realized simply by politicians signing treaties, or by business leaders creating economic co-operations. True and lasting peace will be realized through literature and culture, by establishing strong links of trust between people at the deepest level, in the depths of their lives. It is for this reason that we must focus with renewed determination on peace education and the development of a global culture of peace, through literature, poetry, music and arts in the broadest sense--all the places and occasions where young people are fostered, where their peace spirits are energized and enlivened. Such a conclusion reinforces the Mission of IFLAC: PAVE PEACE--to work for mutual respect and understanding, to foster the culture of peace by bridging between different cultures, and to denounce terrorism and violence around the world by peace education through literature and culture.

1. A Brief Analysis of Terrorism vs. Peace

In the initial years of the twenty-first century, the world peace has been broken by the emergence of terrorism and new threats of conflict in various global regions. Since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, there has been an ongoing incidence of violence worldwide, especially the suicide bombings in Israel and hostage seizure in September 2004 in the North Ossetian town of Beslan, Russia, which has killed large numbers of ordinary citizens, mainly the children studying in school.

Further to the disappearance of the Soviet Bloc, the United States is proposing to respond by unilateralism and the dangerous concept of a “war of civilizations”. Political exclusion occurs in almost every nation and creates desperate situations. Powerless groups often abandon hope of peaceful political solutions and take recourse to violent methods as their best hope of changing their future. Terrorism is an extreme act of desperation, and desperation is one of those emotions that sometimes leads to suicide or suicide bombers. To understand the problem of extremism today in Islam we must understand its modern history. Islam itself embodies rich revelations on peace. Modern Islamic extremism is a result of political exclusion starting in Egypt in the 1920's. Born as a reaction to European colonialism, political Islam, or Islamism, never achieved full representation within Islamic nations. In 1979 Islamists came to power in Iran through revolution and in Sudan in 1989 through military coup, but not through democratic process. In 1992 Algerian democratic elections were going to be won by Islamists until the Algerian military abruptly cancelled the elections and outlawed the main Islamist party.

Furthermore, the chaotic situation is being aggravated by the phenomenon of nuclear proliferation, by a constant increase in military spending, by the uninterrupted “perfection” of weaponry and by an unprecedented explosion of disparities, injustice, and humiliating situations. In 2003, on account of the anxiety over the proliferation of nuclear, chemical and other weapons of mass destruction, the United States and the United Kingdom went so far as to breach the United Nations Charter [Appendix 1] and launched a military invasion, which brought about the collapse of the Hussein regime in Iraq. However, the United States and allied forces occupying and administering Iraq have come under constant attack and the security situation there will further deteriorate. This has raised doubts about the prospects for rebuilding Iraq and bringing stability to the Middle East. The question of peace between the Israelis and Palestinians remains a paramount concern. One has to wonder what meaning the Western universal principles would have for people whose ethics and values have grown out of a quite different set of religious principles, in this case Islam. The outlook for all of these issues is clouded in uncertainty. The signal failure of military action to produce a clear prospect for peace has left many people with suffocating feelings of powerlessness and dread.

The spirit of the world peace today is in retreat and regression, almost a kind of meltdown. The international community cannot and must not turn a blind eye to the current tendency. It is vital that all parties reflect on their failings in the first years of the 21st century and find a renewed commitment to constructive dialogue. All should join in the search for the kind of approach that will constitute not symptomatic treatment but fundamental cure. Events in 2003 and 2004 make it clear that an exclusive reliance on military force will not bring about a fundamental solution. *“It’s the need of / all sides to eliminate / war tension and hostility. / Using force will lead to invasion, / and can not maintain stability. / Using force will never bring peace (Hafez AL ASSAD, President of the Syrian Arab Republic)”*. [The Poetry Anthology for World Peace, 2000:206]. It can only plant further seeds of hatred in regions already torn by strife and deepen the cycles of hatred and revenge or entrench antagonism. No efforts will gain the wholehearted support of people or succeed in bringing about lasting stability and peace without a spirit of self-mastery based on an acute awareness of the humanity of others, the very essence of civilization. *“Peace means not only no war, / But also a mission first held in our hearts./ When the peace seeds down,/ It could take root and blossom /In every place for everybody (Rainier III, Head of State of the Principality of Monaco).”* [The Poetry Anthology for World Peace, 2000:76]. More importantly, the global questions of peace must be rethought from the occidental and oriental perspectives of the reality. Undoubtedly, they endorse a golden rule of world peace: “Treat others as you want to be treated”. Any attempt to deal with these large problems should take such cultures into full consideration. We therefore believe strongly in the value of peace education through literature and culture, each of us initiating action, taking that first step, from where we are standing right now.

2. A Brief Review of Occidental Revelation on Peace

The third millennium opens onto a world fraught with wars, armed conflict and terrorism: from Afghanistan to Iraq, from Israel to Palestine, from Chechnya to Ossetia. Given these conditions, more and more people reflect on the different religions and cultures, and try to find out a constructive method to reach the destination of peace. As

viewed from Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the notion of peace is embodied in their fundamental principles of religion. One should treat others as one would want to be treated oneself. Some version of this "Golden Rule" finds explicit expression in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, and is implicit in the practices of other faiths.

2.1. Judaism and Christianity

Judaism is one of three occidental religions -- faiths which recognize Abraham as a Patriarch. The others are Christianity and Islam. Although Jews comprise only about 0.2% of the human race, Jewish influence on the world has been vast -- far more than their numbers would indicate. Traditional Jewish legal and ethical thinking is based on reading and interpreting 3 main sources, each of which is vast, varied and complex. The oldest and most authoritative is the Bible, which includes the 5 books of Moses, the Prophets and additional writings. The second source is the Talmud, which is composed of multilayered commentaries on biblical texts and oral traditions by learned rabbis of the second to fifth centuries CE. To make the voluminous Talmud more accessible, several great codifications of Jewish law emerged that attempted to summarize the Talmud's primary teachings. The third main source of Jewish legal authority is the Responsa literature, in which prominent Jewish scholars through the centuries have given opinions on contemporary matters as interpreted through the Bible and Talmud. Responsa are the continuation of a 2000-year-old interpretative tradition, which creates an intellectual link to the past, helping to keep the law relevant and vital to the present. Specifically, there are 3 main Jewish principles related to life and their revelation on peace: human life has infinite value; aging, illness and death are a natural part of life; and improvement of the quality of life is a constant commitment.

Christianity takes its bearings from the ancient stories of Holy Land, the biblical region of Palestine. Christian theological ethics finds its origins in the narratives and relies on the interpretation of the Old Testament and the New Testament, in which Jesus did not give a legal list but stories. These and the story of Jesus' life are the stuff of theological investigation. Rather, the ancient stories preserved by the ancient Hebrews are the product of long and deep thought about the nature of the world and of humanity in the context of a religious tradition. When one hears them, they are seen to be true stories and thus are the word of God. The old stories haunt us and confront us and reveal the true state of things. That is why we can call them revelation, in just the same way that a good poem can reveal something that we had not seen. The following excerpts from the Old and New Testament reveal the Golden Rule on peace. *"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD"*. (Bible, Leviticus 19:18). *"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets"*. (Bible, Matthew 7:12). *"Do to others as you would have them do to you"*. (Bible, Luke 6:31).

The creation stories at the beginning of the Old Testament set out the peaceful relationships between humankind, the world and God. Both human beings and the world are the creation of God; they owe their existence to Him. While human beings are creaturely like the other creatures, they are created in the image of God and are given dominion over the rest of creation. This peaceful ordering orients theology and

hence theological ethics or common customs. God is not the world, the world is not God, human beings are in the world but have a special relation to it and responsibility for it and human beings are not God. Any confusion of this peaceful ordering will end in the misery of human beings, the destruction of the creation and the pain of God. We may say that these texts are revelation on peace.

Science and technology flow from the command of God that human beings should have dominion and responsibility for the Earth. Human beings are responsible for their own well-being and the well-being of the Earth. Human beings were created to work to earn their bread. They should be wary of human hubris in an attempt to make themselves gods. So while technology is affirmed as legitimate activities to overdraw the civilization of human beings, there is a warning of catastrophe.

Therefore, of particular concern for a Christian, ethics on peace is the preservation of the ordering of human beings as being created in the image of God. Any human activity that blurs this image is proscribed. This obviously includes any kind of violence that diminishes the image of God in any individual. In fact, that provides a good definition of violence, that the image of God is erased. The Christian church believes that Jesus was the peace image of God among us. It is in the characteristics of his life that we see the image most clearly. He unconditionally loved the reprobate and the outcast, and he received his life and gave it up knowing that it was a gift from his Father.

Finally, let us finish this section with a famous quotation written by Sam Pascoe, an American scholar in 17th century, "*Christianity started out in Palestine as a fellowship; it moved to Greece and became a philosophy; it moved to Italy and became an institution; it moved to Europe and became a culture; it came to America and became an enterprise.*" [Sam Pascoe, 1640s]

2.2. Islam

The word Islam is an Arabic word that means "submission" to the will of God. It also means "peace" since its root *silm* has the meaning of being at peace. "Submission" to the will of Almighty God also means the acceptance of the One and Only God (Allah) as the Source of all blessings that humans enjoy as God's creatures. Peace signifies inner peace (peace with oneself) and peace with the Creator, as well as peace with all creations. It is through total submission to the will of God that one reaches this form of peace. A Muslim is a person who believes in Allah as the One and only God and in Mohammed as his last Prophet and Messenger.

It is a fundamental Islamic belief that we were created to serve God. God has entrusted us with the great responsibility of being his deputies and representatives on this earth. As he entrusted us with our lives, our physical beings, our wealth and our families, He also entrusted us with our communities, our environment and our earth.

Islam has made human life sacred and has safeguarded its preservation. According to its teachings, aggression against human life is the second greatest sin in the sight of Allah, second only to denial of Him. Whatever applies to the crime of murder likewise

applies to committing suicide. Whoever takes his own life by any means whatsoever has unjustly taken a life, which Allah has made sacred. Since he did not create himself, not even so much as a single cell of his body, the life of an individual does not belong to him; it is a trust given to him by God. He is not allowed to diminish it, let alone to harm or destroy it.

Our duration here on this Earth is not for us to determine or control. A Muslim believes that he has neither the right nor the power to determine his or anybody else's time to die. Our lives belong to the Creator, and we can neither shorten nor prolong them. Although it might appear that a person committing suicide is ending his own life, it is a basic Islamic belief that a person's life ends only when God decides for it to end.

Muslims believe that life on this Earth is only a transition period that precedes the permanent abode in the hereafter. Winning God's pleasure in this and the next life is the goal of every Muslim. For this, Islam teaches that one needs to pursue spiritual and moral development in order to put his/her entire trust in God and carry out the duties prescribed in the Holy Quran and other teachings of the Prophet. When a person fulfills these duties, then God rewards him/her with mercy and forgiveness. As for those who disobey God's laws, they are punished by being put in hell. Muslims are advised by Prophet Mohammed to work for this life as if they will live forever, and work for the hereafter life as if they will die tomorrow.

Muslims consider themselves on a mission on this Earth, and they are committed to this mission by their belief in the compassionate and merciful Creator. They have responsibilities to fulfill and trust that they must maintain at all levels of their existence. One main trust that a Muslim must take seriously is the commitment to life. It is his/her responsibility to care for life in all possible ways: physically by keeping themselves and others out of danger, and by caring for health and fitness. Spiritually by maintaining their faith and worshiping God sincerely, in order to purify the soul and to secure spiritual tranquility and satisfaction.

Islam, the youngest but the second largest **world religion**, started in Mecca in 622 CE when the angel Jibreel (Gabriel) read the first revelation to Mohammed the Prophet, who then offered its message both to individuals and communities. It came as a beacon for the whole of humanity. As a consequence, its teachings cover aspects that impact private and public domains of human existence. The Prophet of Islam was both a religious leader and a founder of his community's socio-political order. Hence, Islam does not separate religion from human affairs. Politics, economics, law, and all other aspects of human affairs are integrated into one system of service to God. This is the general meaning of "worship" in Islam. It teaches people to pray and it commands them to create a just society. To this end, Islam provides both the individual and the state with comprehensive guidelines and laws that regulate ethics, piety and governance. These and similar fundamentals are well defined to provide both cohesion and a sense of unity in the community.

3. An Oriental Perspective on Peace

The cultural heritage of China extends over five thousand years. On that fantastic land,

the treasure of traditional Chinese philosophy and religion has an extraordinary influence on Chinese culture. The social ethics and moral teachings of Confucius are blended with the Taoist communion with nature and Buddhist concepts of the afterlife, to form a set of complementary, peacefully co-existent and ecumenical religions. They are the fountain of Chinese humanist to promote peace, justice and cooperation. The Chinese concept of peace is not only a kind of philosophy, but also a kind of soul state or spiritual personality. A blend of the quintessence of the Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist traditions, the prominent value of the peace becomes the basic tropism of Chinese culture. The cultivation of its ideas and the charm of its mental horizon are still acclaimed as the height of perfection. Within five thousand years, the peace culture flows like water, its diverse tributaries gradually converging as a great river of an old civilization, surging with waves and white crests. However, this common nucleus is to be enhanced and interpreted anew in order to answer the challenges that the world confronts as it enters a new millennium. These challenges come from conflicts between man and nature, man and society, man and man, man and his own soul, as well as conflicts between civilization and civilization.

As an efficient wisdom of life, harmony, a mode of existence, is a contribution of Chinese culture to the whole of humankind. It is a central concept in China's spiritual as well as social thought. Although similar concepts and ideals can be found in the West, they might not play as decisive a role as is the case in the Chinese context. Modern interpretation and development of this wisdom starts by recognizing the importance and reality of differences, oppositions and conflicts. Be it in the cosmological sphere (the yin and the yang), the epistemological paradigm (the five agents), the social sphere (the five relationships), differences are subsumed without being annihilated, and, consequently, the process of unification is not different from the process of generating differences.

Conflict is the cause of fusion; fusion is the fruit of conflict. In the traditional Chinese philosophical vocabulary, harmony is seen as the natural fruit of the process of generation and regeneration. In this respect, harmony is not a static concept, it means to enter into the process of change, and change is transformation, communication, and fluidity. By accentuating the role of conflict, differences or fluidity, new interpretation of harmony especially emphasizes the role of mediations, of symbolism, in order to go beyond oversimplified expressions of traditional Chinese thought such as "unity of Man and Heaven" or "unity of knowledge and action." Actually the process of renewal of Chinese culture follows a process of "generation and regeneration" going from difference to unity and from unity to difference.

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