too early to judge the impact of the French revolution, perhaps it is still too early to be pessimistic about China, especially at such an epochal watershed when no change is no option. China will remain a work in progress for years to come. So, Shambaugh may be accurate when he says that China remains a "Partial Power." At any rate, the jury is still out.

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PAPERS

The New Polytheism: Updating the Dialogue between East and West

It is time to sort out the possible contributions of our various traditions to a new spirituality that does not bend to the reductionism of the new atheists

Jay Ogilvy

About a third of the way into his remarkable book, An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World, Pankaj Mishra includes a long speech by one of his friends, Vinod. Pankaj and Vinod have retired to the roof of Vinod's family home. Pankaj asks him about a picture he'd seen downstairs that turns out to be a photo of Vinod's sister, Sujata, whose in-laws, disappointed with her dowry, had poured kerosene over her and burned her alive. Vinod's impassioned speech takes up fully eight pages of Mishra's book. It has the feel of a turning point in the book, and in Mishra's own development as an author, as a thinker, and as an Indian.

One paragraph of that long speech:

> It is people like Gautama Buddha and Gandhi who have misled us. They have taught us to be passive and resigned. They have told us of the virtuous life; they have told us to deny ourselves in order to be content. But they haven't told us how to live in the real world—the world that grows bigger and bigger and more complex all the time. This is why Vivekananda is important. He could see why the old habits of fatalism and resignation—the habits of village people—wouldn't work any more.

> He saw that they had made us the slaves of the Muslims and then the British, why these people coming from outside could rule over India for so long. He was totally unsentimental, and he was brutally frank. He told us that we were sunk in tamas, darkness. There was no point in trumpeting our spiritual success, our philosophical wisdom. All that was in the past. It was meant for primitive people. This was now the age of big nations. India was one such nation but it was way behind Europe and America. The West had technology, it had mastered nature, it had exploded nuclear bombs, it had sent people to the moon. When someone asked Gandhi what he thought of western civilization, he made a joke. He said that western civilization would be a good idea. But Vivekananda knew that the West had much to teach us. The first lesson was that we have to be materialists first. We have to learn to love wealth and comfort; we have to grow strong, know how to take pleasure in things, and recognize that there is no virtue in poverty and weakness. We have to know real manhood first. Spirituality comes later, or not at all. Perhaps we don't need it. (Mishra, 2004, 129f.)

These are not Pankaj Mishra's beliefs. He remains steadfastly respectful of the Buddha. But he quotes his friend Vinod's words at such length because they provide a vivid statement of views that have become important. If, as many believe, power is shifting from West to East, Vinod's words are worrisome, for the "East," at least the India that Vinod has in mind, will not be the India of Buddha or Gandhi. It will instead be a westernized, materialistic Asia, a giant awoken to pave the earth and pollute the skies.

The East/West dialogue is not what it used to be. It is no longer a matter of comparing cultures and traditions to find the common ground for some universal belief system. That was the work of philosophers like F.S.C. Northrop (1946) and religious historians like Huston Smith (1958). Nor is it a matter of fleeing one set of customs for another, forsaking the fallen gods of ones elders and seeking elsewhere in a kind of grass-is-greener syndrome. Think of the procession of journeyers to the east, from Lawrence of Arabia to the Beatles. Where the old universalism asserted that, deep down, we are all One, a more postmodern phase of the dialogue acknowledges real differences, othernesses, to the point of risking immersion in the exotic—"going native."
But now we're well beyond all that. With figures like Pankaj Mishra from India, and Nobel Prize winning author Orhan Pamuk from Turkey, we are

witnessing a new generation of writers who are integrating East and West in ways that take the dialectic of sameness and otherness through new and different cycles of shock and recognition. As we move into the future, trying to find a path that balances sustainable material wealth on the one hand and some measure of spiritual well-being on the other, it is important, I will argue, that we listen to these new voices and not get caught up in old clichés.

From the Ruins of Empire

Modernization, colonialism, westernization, industrialization, globalization—these are huge forces and dynamics that have shaken Asian cultures to their ancient foundations. As Mishra (2012) puts it in his more recent book, From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals who Remade Asia:

> The much-heralded shift of economic power from the West to the East may or may not happen, but new perspectives have certainly opened up on world history. For most people in Europe and America, the history of the twentieth century is still largely defined by the two world wars and the long nuclear stand-off with Soviet Communism. But it is now clearer that the central event of the last century for the majority of the world's population was the intellectual and political awakening of Asia and its emergence from the ruins of both Asian and European empires. To acknowledge this is to understand the world not only as it exists today but also how it is continuing to be remade not so much in the image of the West as in accordance with the aspirations and longings of former subject peoples. (Mishra, 2012, 8f.)

This shift of perspectives—from that of the rulers to that of the ruled—reveals a history—past, present, and future—quite different from those histories written by western scholars. And the picture is not pretty.

Now that many of us in the West think of colonialism as ancient history, as an idea so out of favor that even the term "post-colonial" sounds obsolete, it's too easy to forget just how brutally the nations of the West subjugated and oppressed Asian peoples. Mishra helps us to remember: How, "In 1824 the British, ensconced in eastern India, began their long subjugation of Burma. In the same year an Anglo-Dutch treaty confirmed British control of Singapore and the Malay states," (Mishra, 2012, p22) while the Netherlands took Java and the French dominated Vietnam. Mishra quotes

Bengali novelist, Bankim Chandra Chatterji (1838–1894): "The world has never seen men as tyrannical and powerful as the people who first founded the Britannic empire in India . . . The English who came to India in those days were affected by an epidemic—stealing other people's wealth. The word morality had disappeared from their vocabulary." This is not Winston Churchill's way of writing England's history.

Vinod's hero, Vivekananda, is equally critical:

> Intoxicated by the heady wine of newly acquired power, fearsome like wild animals who see no difference between good and evil, slaves to women, insane in their lust, drenched in alcohol from head to foot, without any norms of ritual conduct, unclean, materialistic, dependent on material things, grabbing other people's land and wealth by hook or crook . . . the body their self, its appetites their only concern—such is the image of the western demon in Indian eyes.
> (Vivekananda quoted in Mishra, 2012, p36)

From the suppression of the Indian Mutiny in 1857, to the burning of the Chinese Summer Palace of the Chinese Emperor in 1860 during the Second Opium War, to the putdown of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, the British (with help from the French) established a reputation for brutality that set the stage for twentieth century atrocities. Nor were the Dutch or the Portuguese innocent of dark histories of imperialism.

Of course, we know that imperialism was ugly. White Americans should be ashamed of the treatment of Native Americans. What Mishra adds to the appalling history of imperialism is his sensitivity to the dilemma of Asian intellectuals, the Hobson's choice they faced between recoiling into the embrace of their ancient cultures, or adopting western ways precisely in order to gain the strength to resist the West. This was the paradox: Either accept the Trojan horse of western culture in order to master its "secrets"—technology, organization, bureaucracy and the power that accrues to a nation-state—or accept the role of underpaid extras in a movie, a very partial "universal" history, that stars the West.

> Civilization came to be represented by European forms of scientific and historical knowledge and ideas of morality, public order, crime and

> punishment, even styles of dress. Asians everywhere came up against Europe's new self-understanding in which it was everything Asia was not: non-despotic, increasingly urban and commercial, innovative and dynamic. (Mishra, 2012, p43)

Then, at the dawn of the twentieth century, things changed. There erupted an anomaly in the western imperialist paradigm. Japan defeated Russia in 1905, destroying its navy in one epic battle to which Mishra attaches such importance that the opening sentence of his Prologue runs: "The contemporary world first began to assume its decisive shape over two days in May 1905 in the narrow waters of the Tsushima Strait. . . For the first time since the Middle Ages, a non-European country had vanquished a European power in a major war" (Mishra, 2012, p1). Mishra quotes Gandhi: "so far and wide have the roots of Japanese victory spread that we cannot now visualize all the fruit it will put forth." And more: "In Damascus, Mustafa Kemal, a young Ottoman soldier later known as Ataturk, was ecstatic." Likewise Sun Yat-sen, China's future leader, who was in London at the time.

Mishra's latest book (2012), From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals who Remade Asia, follows the careers of several Asian intellectuals who wrestled with the choice of whether to westernize or not. Some of the names are familiar: Gandhi, Ataturk, Tagore. But some are not: Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, the hero of a long Chapter Two (p46–123), or China's Liang Qichao (p124–183). We need to know more about these men and others like them if Mishra's judgment is anywhere near correct: "It is impossible to imagine, for instance, that the recent protests and revolutions in the Arab world would have been possible without the intellectual and political foundation laid by al-Afghani's assimilation of Western ideas and his rethinking of Muslim traditions" (Mishra, 2012, 119f).

So what are some of those intellectual and political foundations? And how do they put a new spin on the East/West dialogue of old? The answers to these questions are not simple, in part because, "He was not a systematic thinker and seems to have developed his ideas on the run" (Mishra, 2012, p119). Consistency was not his long suit: "He advocated both nationalism and pan-Islamism; he lamented the intolerance of Islam; he evoked its great glories in the past; he called for Muslim unity; he also asked Muslims to work with Hindus, Christians and Jews, and did so himself" (Mishra, 2012,

p119). In short, the dilemmas facing al-Afghani were so deep there seemed no way of resolving them short of working both sides of several streets as each new country and each new situation demanded.

Al-Afghani got around. Though he claimed to be a Sunni Muslim born in Afghanistan, he was actually "born in 1838 in the village of Asadabad near Hamadan in north-west Persia, and educated in Tehran, the seminaries of great Shiite cities, mainly Najaf, and then in India" (Mishra, 2012, p53). He spent almost two years in Istanbul before being expelled in 1871. Why? "Indian Muslims harassed by the British, and Muslim Tatars ill-treated by the Russians, were beginning to call for the Ottoman sultan to assume leadership of the Muslim world and declare jihad (holy war) on infidels" (Mishra, 2012, p69). But pan-Islamism was in its infancy and al-Afghani's efforts in Istanbul were unsuccessful. In the late 1870s al-Afghani's career as an outside agitator took him to Egypt where he gave speeches in Cairo and Alexandria in 1878 before being expelled back to India in 1879. In 1883 he arrived in Paris, "a Mecca for various political malcontents," (p96) where he engaged in a new chapter of East/West dialogue with Ernest Renan.

> During his debate with Renan, he argued that the original teachings of Islam were in accordance with modern rationalism but since then Muslim societies had become internally weak and intolerant; they needed a Martin Luther to reconcile themselves with the modern world . . . That Islam needed a Reformation, with himself as Luther, was gradually becoming a favorite theme of al-Afghani. (p102)

Then in 1886 he returned to his native Persia, now a famous man.

How does al-Afghani's legacy, as opportunistic and inconsistent as it may be, put a new spin on the East/West dialogue of old? For one thing, al-Afghani is not a Gandhi. He did not preach non-violence: "Increasingly, al-Afghani veered towards armed struggle and violent resistance to the West" (94). For another, he was not a Tagore, not a vividly spiritual man, not a sage. As such, he upsets the stereotype that would oppose the spiritual East to the materialistic West. With his enthusiasm for an Islamic Reformation and his praise for rationalism, he holds out some hope for a moderate Islam. But don't get your hopes up too fast, gringo, for the wounds and humiliations of empire struck so deep in al-Afghani's soul that his deepest

and most abiding commitment was to anti-imperialism. Do we recognize some of these complex dynamics in the drama of the Arab Spring?

Mishra's next iconic Asian intellectual, Liang Qichao, would be shaped by his struggles with the West and would cast a similarly long shadow on contemporary history.

> Liang was to become China's first iconic modern intellectual. His lucid and prolific writings, touching on all major concerns in his own time and anticipating many in the future inspired several generations of thinkers including the much younger Mao Zedong. A restless and intellectual seeker, Liang combined his Chinese classical learning with a great sensitivity to Western ideas and trends. (p135)

An avid reader of Hobbes, Rousseau, Spinoza, and the Greeks, Liang was, like al-Afghani, deeply touched by the humiliations and resentments of imperialism. And just as al-Afghani had struggled with both the backwardness and moral promise of Islam, so Liang struggled with what was worthy and what was stultifying in Confucianism.

> Liang was certainly not going to allow the white children's version of Asian history to prevail. . . Liang described the endless subtle ways in which European merchants and mine-owners had progressively infiltrated and undermined many societies and cultures. The essay detailed these methods which included cajoling countries into spiraling debt (Egypt), territorial partition (Poland), exploiting internal divisions (India), or simply overwhelming adversaries with military superiority (the Philippines and the Transvaal). (159)

And like al-Afghani, Liang also got around: not just around China, but also Japan, and a whirlwind tour "through Vancouver, Ottawa, Montana, Boston, New York, Washington, New Orleans, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Seattle, Los Angeles and San Francisco" (Mishra, 2012, p170).

Globalization and Getting Around

Here it's worth taking a little detour to observe Mishra observing these Asian intellectuals, when Mishra writes of, "melting-pots of intellectual culture in such far-flung places as Chicago, Berlin, Johannesburg and

Yokohama. These broadened horizons of enquiry, reflection and polemic and committed many men and women to a restless nomadism, to ceaseless exploration and analysis of self and world" (Mishra, 2012, p166f), he is writing as much about himself as about these older Asian intellectuals. Throughout his several books, one gets the picture of precisely the sort of restless nomad on a "ceaseless exploration and analysis of self and world." Part of the charm of his writing lies in the portrait he paints of his own quest, which takes him from a remote village in the foothills of the Himalayas, Mashobra, where he reads ceaselessly, to London, New York, California, Pakistan, Afghanistan, etc. He, too, gets around.

And this is part of the meaning of globalization: We are all in each other's faces now. The Other is no longer remote, no longer quite so exotic. But the domestication of the exotic leaves us living in a kind of spiritual and ideological zoo . . . which can be confusing. This "ceaseless exploration and analysis of self and world" is bound to be challenging to the self when the world is as it is, so filled with tragedy and promise, complexity and diversity. And Mishra (2006) is appropriately humbled. In a book not yet mentioned, *Temptations of the West: How to be Modern in India, Pakistan, Tibet, and Beyond*, he speaks of "the many stages of drift and futility I was encountering and was yet to encounter in my own life" (p14).

Temptations of the West is a book of essays. Much of the material has been previously published in The New York Review of Books where Mishra has been a featured author for the past decade. Despite his elevation to such a lofty platform, however, Mishra retains an impressive blend of personal humility and public caution. Thus, he ends his essay on Pakistan:

> But I was confused. I had thought Jamal an ally. His fate, however, was tied to the faceless people on the other side, people who were persecutors as much as victims. I couldn't see how things, given the way they were now, could work out for them. But the thought of their failure was painful. I wanted these people to flourish. I wanted them to have as much dignity and freedom as I had been allowed in recent years, even though I couldn't but feel the absurdity of my wish and increasingly doubted whether the kind of life I lived was what these apparently deprived people longed for or could be content with. (Mishra, 2006, p252)

When Mishra refers to "the kind of life I lived," he is acknowledging having been bitten by the bug of western individualism with all of its impatience with tradition and ambition for something better. Part of what makes *An End to Suffering* so engaging is the way he's woven three books into one: it is, first, a kind of introduction to Buddhism; second, it presents a new chapter in the dialogue between East and West; but third, it is a very personal story. The word "autobiography" doesn't quite apply given Mishra's relative youth, but the German term, "*Bildungsroman*," fits perfectly. Like Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), Mishra's *An End to Suffering* moves its hero from a remote village (Mashobra = Goethe's Walheim) where life is simple into a more cosmopolitan world. The German word "*Bildung*" is ill translated as "education," though Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* (1869) was a paradigm case of the genre. "Cultivation" would be a better translation, as in the cultivation of character or the cultivation of the soul. It's not just a cognitive or academic thing. It's closer to the Greek *Paideia*, the shaping of the Greek character and culture as described in Werner Jaeger's (1939) classic three volume work of the same title. It's about what it takes to live the good life, and on that question, Mishra is acutely aware that there are different ideas, East and West. This is why he worries about whether the kind of life he lived "was what these apparently deprived people longed for or could be content with." Maybe they didn't want to be *individuals* of the sort discovered by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. Maybe they didn't want careers of the sort Mishra was pursuing.

> There was, it seemed to me, no going back to the spiritually whole Indian past for people like me, even if that past existed somewhere, ready to be possessed. I had to look ahead, and, in some ways, my desire to be a writer had clarified my way. That ambition was inseparable from the modern bourgeois civilization of the West; and from my earliest days as a reader I had sought, consciously or not, my guides and inspirations and the polemics of Kierkegaard and Marx. It was clear from the works of these men that to be a writer was to engage rationally with, rather than retreat from, the world; it was to concern oneself particularly with the fate of the individual in society. (Mishra, 2004, p149)

Part of Mishra's interest in Rabindranath Tagore, to whom he devotes one of the six chapters of *From the Ruins of Empire*, lies in Tagore's sensitivity to these issues. He quotes Tagore:

The conflict between the individual and the state, labor and capital, the man and the woman; the conflict between the greed of material gain and the spiritual life of man, the organized selfishness of nations and the higher ideals of humanity; the conflict between all the ugly complexities inseparable from giant organizations of commerce and state and the natural instincts of man crying for simplicity and beauty and fullness of leisure. (Tagore, quoted in Mishra, 2004, p309)

These conflicts are evoked by the frictions between East and West, which cast the conflict between individual and society in a different light, a light that also bathes the work of Nobel Prize winning Turkish author, Orhan Pamuk.

The Melancholy of Orhan Pamuk

Like An End to Suffering, Pamuk's Istanbul (2004) is something of a mash-up of different genres. It, too, is a Bildungsroman that records Pamuk's coming of age; it, too, offers a fascinating chapter in the dialogue between East and West; and it, too, has a third dimension: in place of an introduction to Buddhism, Pamuk gives us an introduction to the city of Istanbul—a kind of dreamy, reflective, contemplative travelogue.

Like Mishra, Pamuk is a very literate man caught between East and West, and correspondingly confused. He begins his chapter, "Under Western Eyes:"

To some degree, we all worry about what foreigners and strangers think of us. But if anxiety brings us pain or clouds our relationship with reality, becoming more important than reality itself, this is a problem. My interest in how my city looks to western eyes is—as for most İstanbullus—very troubled; like all other Istanbul writers with one eye always on the West, I sometimes suffer in confusion. (Pamuk, 2004, p234)

But even more important than confusion is a deeply held, pervasive melancholy, or *hüzün*, that hangs over and infuses all of Pamuk's work. He devotes an entire chapter of *Istanbul* to *hüzün*, a chapter followed by another on "Four lonely melancholic writers."

His argument distinguishes two types of *hüzün*: the first is experienced,

"when we have invested too much in worldly pleasures;" the second, "the spiritual anguish we feel because we cannot be close enough to Allah."

Istanbul's melancholy, Pamuk argues, is unique to Istanbul is several respects. *Hüzün* may stem from the same "black passion" described in Robert Burton's early seventeenth century tome, *An Anatomy of Melancholy*, but unlike Burton's European melancholy that attached to individuals, *hüzün* casts its pall over the collective. Pamuk draws a further comparison and contrast with *tristesse*, the sadness of the savage as described by Lévi-Strauss. "*Tristesse* is not a pain that affects a solitary individual; *hüzün* and *tristesse* both suggest a communal feeling, an atmosphere and a culture shared by millions" (Pamuk 2005, p101). But unlike the *tristesse* that Lévi-Strauss finds in primitive societies, *hüzün* is not just post-primitive; it is postmodern. "The difference lies in the fact that in Istanbul the remains of a glorious past civilization are everywhere visible."

Because Istanbul's hüzün is so uniquely Istanbul's, the best way for Pamuk to describe it is through an elegy that is Nabokovian in its attention to detail:

But what I am trying to describe now is not the melancholy of Istanbul but the *hüzün* in which we see ourselves reflected, the *hüzün* we absorb with pride and share as a community. To feel this *hüzün* is to see the scenes, evoke the memories, in which the city itself becomes the very illustration, the very essence, of *hüzün*. I am speaking of the evenings when the sun sets early, of the fathers under the streetlamps in the back streets returning home carrying plastic bags. Of the old Bosphorus ferries moored to deserted stations in the middle of winter, where sleepy sailors scrub the decks, pail in hand and one eye on the black-and-white television in the distance; of the old booksellers who lurch from one financial crisis to the next and then wait shivering all day for a customer to appear; of the barbers who complain that men don't shave as much after an economic crisis; . . .

This sentence, this ode to *hüzün*, extends to a length of five pages and contains, by my count, no less than 54 semicolons, and concludes: "of the crowds of men smoking cigarettes after the national soccer matches, which during my childhood never failed to end in abject defeat: I speak of them all" (Pamuk, 2005, p99).

Pamuk's is a located voice, and its location, Istanbul, is poised on a razor's edge between East and West, between Europe and Asia, between Christianity and Islam, between democracy and theocracy. Pamuk's voice is different from Mishra's: less tuned to the politics of anti-imperialism, more preoccupied with the minutiae of subjective feelings. But even from a perspective that is different from Mishra's, Pamuk, like Mishra, calls out to a West he knows very well, and in a way that beckons toward shared human bonds, even across the gulfs that separate us. Without fatuous appeals to some universal human nature—appeals well buried under the "thick descriptions" of different cultures in the writings of Clifford Geertz—both Pamuk and Mishra tell tales of love and cruelty and kindness and humiliation that are instantly recognizable to any western reader.

In his novel, *The Museum of Innocence*, Pamuk (2009) paints a picture of grief at lost love to rival any in the tradition of western literature. If not quite as intensely, romantic love runs like a steady current through Pamuk's other novels: *My Name is Red* (2001), *Snow* (2004), and *The Black Book* (2006), but rarely unshrouded by *hüzün* and the memories of lost empire. From Snow:

"We're poor and insignificant," said Fazul, with a strange fury in his voice. "Our wretched lives have no place in human history. One day all of us living now in Kars will be dead and gone. No one will remember us; no one will care what happened to us. We'll spend the rest of our days arguing about what sort of scarf women should wrap around their heads, and no one will care in the slightest because we're eaten up by our own petty, idiotic quarrels. When I see so many people around me leading such stupid lives and then vanishing without a trace, an anger runs through me because I know then that nothing really matters more in life than love." (Pamuk, 2004, p287)

Pamuk's character, Fazul, recalls Mishra's character, Vinod, whose anger about his torched sister began this essay. The intervening quotations and details will have hopefully relocated the East/West dialogue from the saffron-and-incense-tinged chambers of old, with their syncretistic mixes of sitar music and Gregorian chants, to a newer, more politically realistic and economically acute confrontation between imperial powers and their former colonies. While the rhetoric of post-colonialism may seem obsolete to those of us in the West, we dare not forget it when making our latter day journeys to the East to reclaim some of its spiritual bounty. This is Mishra's main message.

If we listen only to the Fazuls and Vinods, we might recoil from what they seem all too willing to leave behind forever. Perhaps history is at an end as Fukuyama, following Hegel, famously proclaimed, and that end marks not only the triumph of democratic capitalism over communism, but also the triumph of Christianity over the rest of the world's great religions. But this is absurd. Religions are not like ideologies . . . or are they? If Mishra's quest is "to concern oneself particularly with the fate of the individual in society" (Mishra, 2004, p149), doesn't that concern fall under the dual influences of both religions and ideologies?

Once again, we are in one another's faces today, not just those of us who get around and count ourselves citizens of the globe, but also the billions who live on little, but pull down TV signals from the countless satellite dishes perched on the roofs of the poorest shanties. *De facto* globalization is in tension with the failure of a *de jure* universalism of the sort that Huston Smith, among others, once sought. Whether or not we are all climbing the same spiritual mountain, albeit by different paths, we are competing in the same global economy. And the lack of consensus over the fate of the individual in society, derived in part from our religious differences, makes trade under the rule of law a challenge.

There's a lot at stake in this East/West dialogue, old or new. In trying to update the dialogue by listening to voices like Mishra's and Pamuk's, I'm not just interested in finding a form of spirituality that could undergird a fair and just global economy. As noble as that aspiration might be, it begs the question about the relationship between the sacred and the profane, the religious and the secular, the spiritual and the mundane. In short, it's a very western aspiration that puts the productive economy first: as Vinod posited, materialism prior to spirituality.

If we are truly to listen to these newer voices from the East, we cannot help but hear an anguish, a melancholy, a *hüzün* that stems from a profound ambivalence over whether to embrace the cornucopia of western wealth at the cost of ancient wisdom and soul, or to shun the Trojan Horse of western modernity, even at the cost of economic misery.

A New Polytheism

Perhaps there is a way out of this Hobson's choice, both for our brothers

and sisters in the East, and for our own lost souls. Allow me to paint a picture that is absurdly simple in its outline and impossibly complex in its ultimate execution. Imagine a series of just three stages:

1. First: Innocence of the Other. For centuries, the lack of travel and communications left each great civilization and each of the world's great religions pre-eminent and largely uncontested in its own domain. Confucianism, for example, could survive for millennia in a Middle Kingdom that burned its own ships rather than suffer intercourse with barbarians.
2. Second: The contest of empires. From the first voyages of Vasco da Gama, through Admiral Perry's "dark ships" off the coast of Japan, through the purported end of colonialism in the twentieth century, there was a contest for control of the seas and all the landmasses between. This contest of empires was a contest of competing universalisms, not just for political and economic power, but also for religious dominion. "Thou shalt have no other god before me . . ." quoth various scriptures in their own ways. Competing monotheisms mirrored competing ideologies with truth claims as purportedly universal as those of mathematics.
3. Third, and ever so simplistically: A new pluralism, but not one based on a retreat to the innocence of Stage One via some new isolationism; nor a pluralism that settles for an evisceration of spirituality, carving out so many little niches that are off limits to Caesar or the Emperor or the Pasha. No, the new pluralism has to be one that grants the infinite reach of many spirits into all corners of life in a way that pre-dates the Reformation, even as it allows for different spiritual imperiums. How can that be?

Here I can do no better than follow both Mishra and Pamuk by recalling my own crooked path toward spirituality, even as I draw on global travels and recorded histories that extend far beyond my own experience. Early on, at age 15, I fell in with a precocious group of friends who were reading Nietzsche and celebrating the death of God. For most of my life I've been pretty much an atheist. The Bible, at least, was a closed book.

In my twenties, back in the 1970s, I yielded to peer group pressure and dabbled in meditation. Despite a fair amount of reading on mysticism and

Zen, I knew that I didn't know what I was getting into. For one thing, I didn't have a guru or master to guide me on my way, and the books told me that without one I was lost. I remember reading Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* and thinking, somewhat wistfully, "I sure wish I could experience some of the extraordinary *sidhis* that Yogananda describes."

And then one day I had an experience that came close. I was in the middle of a lake in a small sailboat. The wind went altogether calm, and in that stillness, and still under the influence of my recent reading of Yogananda, I "heard" what seemed like the voice of an old man. Somehow I knew that it was my own voice speaking as if to a memory of that very moment, and in a tone that was both bemused and compassionate: "Didn't he know that there would be time." With a touch of paradox characteristic of such moments, I was undergoing a quasi-mystical experience that was telling me to drop my anxiety about not having mystical experiences. There would be time for all that. Have patience.

For the following decades, despite a move to northern California into a community where Buddhism ran rampant, I took this counsel to patience quite literally. I abjured any consistent spiritual practice. I found myself for the most part critical of those who wore their prayer beads quite literally on their sleeves. But in recent years, throughout the decade of my sixties, I couldn't help noticing that time, future time, was less plentiful than it had been on that afternoon in the middle of the lake.

Then I stumbled across a book that changed my life: Jorge Ferrer (2002), *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*. This is a very bad title for a very good book. It is the revision of a dissertation written for the California Institute of Integral Studies where transpersonal theory and the works of Ken Wilber exercise considerable influence. The first half of the book is a carefully annotated deconstruction of the universalism to be found not only in Wilber's work, but also in Huston Smith's. To paraphrase this universalism: There may be many ways up the mountain (comparable to the world's great religions), and many elevations on the path (charted not only in the literatures of various mystical traditions, but also in the several segmentation systems to be found in the texts of various developmental psychologists), *but there is only one mountain with one peak*. This is the kind of universalism that can prevail uncontested in Stage One where an

innocence of other cultures leaves a dominant religion uncontested. But it is precisely the sort of universalism that makes for so much trouble in Stage Two where competing universalisms meet in mortal combat over whose god will be king of that single mountain.

The last half of Ferrer's book offers a way out that was new to me to the point of being revelatory. I've reduced his argument to a dense bumper sticker whose economy I'll have to unpack: "According to Jorge Ferrer, the grammar of religion is hortatory, not declarative." In grammar, the declarative voice is for truth claims, e.g., the cat is on the mat, or the cat is not on the mat. True or false. The hortatory voice, on the other hand, amounts to what Wittgenstein would call a different language game. An exhortation (note the root, "hort") is not true or false. You obey it or you reject it. An invitation is not true or false. You accept, or you decline. Sounds simple; so simple that I was almost surprised when, over tea one afternoon in Berkeley, Jorge nodded his head in agreement with my harsh compression of his fairly elaborate argument. Its implications are enormous.

I had lived most of my life believing that the great religions of the world consist in a series of truth claims that just happen to be false: "Mary, mother of Jesus, was a virgin." "God exists." Blah, blah. If these were truth claims that happened to be false, who needs them?

If, on the other hand, as Ferrer tells it, the great religions of the world are a series of stories so designed that they exhort us away from evil and invite us to be a little less narcissistic, a little kinder, a little more compassionate . . . well then, I've got time for that.

Further, if Ferrer is right about the grammar of religion, then the pluralism of Stage Three can be a *strong* pluralism and not the *weak* pluralism of a wishy-washy, Californian *whatevah*. Indeed, while Ferrer doesn't put it quite this way, I take his argument as a splendid rationale for polytheism, an approach to divinity that has always appealed to me as a way of indulging a temptation toward the sacred even in the face of my staunch atheism. During the 1970s, I was much taken with James Hillman's (1975) "polytheistic psychology" according to which the Greek gods and goddesses stand in for the various drives and complexes of the more mechanistic and monotheistic ego-psychologies of Freud and Adler.

Even Nietzsche could be enlisted as an advocate to this new polytheism. Hadn't he written in his *Joyful Wisdom* (1971 [1882], p180), "In polytheism the free-spiriting and many-spiriting of man attained its first preliminary form—the strength to create for ourselves our own new eyes—and ever again new eyes that are even more our own: hence man alone among all the animals has no eternal horizons and perspectives"? And somewhere else (from memory): "The Greeks had the only satisfactory theodicy ever invented because their gods justify human life by living it themselves." Nietzsche was ever suspicious of the *Normalgott* of "monotono-theism," but it was more the monotony than the theism that bothered him.

I find in Ferrer's and Nietzsche's insights a newer, stronger pluralism that gives to the gods their sacred due, even as it widens the field for possible reverence. I can learn from stories about Shiva and Vishnu, even as I can accept the Christ's invitation to love my neighbor. I can hear the Buddha's exhortations against unruly attachments, even as I am humbled by the authority of the God of Abraham who, let us recall, binds Judaism, Islam, and Christianity in what could be an Abrahamic family reunion.

Polytheism is different from a wishy-washy pluralism that trends toward abject relativism. It doesn't say *anything goes*. Instead it says, *some things excel. Not one, not all, but some*. There are *some* paths to holiness, not just one. There are *some* forms of enlightenment or salvation, not just one.

There are *some* spiritual practices that pry us loose from the precious self, not just one. Polytheism, especially with Ferrer's grammatical twist, is at once aspirational *and* generous with respect to the possibilities for excellence.

Despite spending most of my life as an atheist, my reading of "the new atheists"—as they were officially dubbed by *WIRED* magazine after that flurry of publications 2005–2007: Richard Dawkins (2006), Dan Dennett (2006), Sam Harris (2005, 2006), and Christopher Hitchens (2007)—convinced me that I was not much of an atheist after all. Reading the new atheists, I found myself uncomfortable with their reductionism and their materialism. The world we live in contains more than matter in motion in space and time; more than mere physics. Aspiration, meaning, value, beauty, goodness—these are not just the fictions of folk psychology to be

eliminated under the withering rhetoric of an all-knowing and cynical nothing-but-ism. These new atheists don't get it. They, like too many theologians of old, are making a series of truth claims: most emphatically, that God does *not* exist. But if Ferrer is right, truth claims, whether for or against god's existence, miss the point. Wrong language game. Declarative rather than hortatory.

In place of a new atheism, aren't we instead witnessing a new polytheism? Not one of the several polytheisms of old, Greek or Hindu. They tended to be culture bound on the one hand, and every bit as declarative in their voices as the old monotheisms. Many Greeks, not all, really did believe in the existence of Zeus, Athena, Ares, and the rest, gamboling away on Mt. Olympus. Many Hindus, though probably not all, really did believe in the existence of Shiva and Vishnu and Kali and any number of Hindu gods and goddesses. Like children who believe that there really is a Santa Claus with a workshop somewhere near the North Pole, many people take the stories about the gods and goddesses quite literally. So has it always been, and so will it probably always be.

The religious impulse is not about to wither away. Despite a marked decline in church attendance in Europe, and the expectations of some that modernity would witness a maturation of the species beyond child-like religious beliefs, such limited pockets of secularism should not give comfort to the new atheists. Religiosity worldwide is alive and all too well. All too often we still see the clash of competing monotheisms: the legacies of economic and cultural imperialism that are then met with the terror of jihad. Samuel Huntington (1996) was not altogether wrong to warn us of the danger.

But I would rather suggest that Huntington's fears stem from a perception of today's world very much in keeping with what I described as Stage Two competing monotheisms, and that a new polytheism could find room for many gods and goddesses. The real clash we see today is not so much among competing monotheisms from different cultures. The more important clash is the one taking place within each of the world's great cultures: The clash between those who have in some sense *made it*, and those who have been *left behind*. It is a clash between the new polytheists who get around and experience much of what the globe has to offer, and

those who remain trapped in pockets of poverty and then turn to very simple, fundamentalist answers to the complex questions posed by globalization. The former are more sophisticated, more cosmopolitan, more global; the latter are often victims of the legacies of imperialism, and they have little reason to listen to the blandishments of alien faiths.

So what is one to do? In the space of this essay I can hardly begin to describe the choreography of engagement and practice that we postmodern polytheists can bring to a distinctly multi-cultural spirituality. How hesitantly we approach rituals that are unfamiliar! Whether to pray? How to meditate? The postures. The *asanas*. I cannot begin to claim any expertise in these matters.

But I am gaining increasing confidence in the following five propositions, with which I conclude:

1. The new atheists are mistaken; they are confused about religion's voice.
2. Fundamentalists of all faiths are equally mistaken; they, too, mistake their respective religions' *stories* for literal *truth claims*.
3. The Tao that can be spoken is not the Tao.
4. The religious impulse will not go away; the arrival of secular modernity is a myth. See the work of Bruno Latour (2010).
5. If we are to embrace some form of spirituality that does justice to the multi-cultural condition of a globalized world, a new polytheism is the way to go.

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