

## Religion and World Order 1994 Symposium

### A Sufi Response

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My heart is capable of every form:  
A Cluster for the monk, a fane for idols.  
A pasture for gazelles, the pilgrim's Ka 'ba  
The Tables of the Torah, the Koran.  
Love is the faith I hold: Whenever I return.

Ibn Arabi

I come from 37 years of experience as an academician that has tried to combine theory and practice. My experience has led me to think that we have to reconceptualize, rethink, refeel global politics. We are living with old stories that will not do it and we do not have a new story to tell. And we are here together working on putting together the new story.

As I look for the new story, there are certain strands that have been and are valuable, all under an umbrella I call "reinvestment of the sacred." For me this includes Ibn Arabi when he says "my heart is capable of many forms . . . and love is the faith that I hold wherever I go." That is one strand that comes to me.

Another strand of the story is from Plato, who said that while we might not be able to agree with each other, if we have open and honest conversation, we will be able to empathize with each other and the human predicament, because human life is so similar in its deeper significance and issues whatever our society and culture.

There is increasing concern about the religious fundamentalism in the Islamic world. But there is also a type of political fundamentalism in the dominant western culture, with its engineering, mechanistic, isolated approach to problem solving. Fundamentalism is a kind of pathology of culture that arises when a group takes part of the basic tenets of a tradition and, either under the pressure of insecurity (in the case of Muslims), or pursuit of hegemony (in the case of the west), uses it to either secure themselves by sealing off others, or to maintain dominance.

In all conflict situations, people under stress react by reducing their own beliefs to a small workable subset in order to fight and protect themselves. But this closes off their ability to hear, or to communicate. A return to the larger frame of the culture and its human values, always present if sought for, can open up the space for understanding, cooperation, or at the very least, deeper respect. This is the essence of spirituality.

Although the terms religion and spirituality are often used somewhat interchangeably, it is important to recognize the distinction between them. The term religion implies an institutional framework within which a specific theology or doctrine is advocated and pursued, usually among a community of like-minded believers. Spirituality, on the other hand, transcends the normal parameters of organized religion, suggesting a broader scope of human involvement that emanates from the inner essence of a being. At the level of the individual, it often implies action borne of a faith commitment which may or may not be informed or circumscribed by allegiance to a particular religious tradition.

All cultures, even the most materialistic, find their fundamental guiding values and goal commitments in some sort of religious tradition that purports to summarize what has been learned in the deep inner experience of the group over time. These diverse religious traditions -- ancient and modern; primitive and sophisticated; Eastern and Western -- have long been held to be basically antagonistic to one another.

In more recent times, an important basis for reconciliation has emerged. Comparative examination of the rich variety of religious traditions in human history has led to an important conclusion. The religious beliefs and practices of all cultures tend to fall into two parts: (a) an exoteric or public version, and (b) an esoteric, spiritual version. Although the many exoteric versions differ markedly one from another, the esoteric versions appear to be essentially the same for all religious traditions, suggesting that all these traditions are rooted in the same kind of deep, inner experience.

Politics is spiritual because our public life reflects our social values. Politics is a process of maximizing deeply held convictions about values. The reconnection of politics to our best values is now the most important tool of political life. The dominant Western view of politics as an objective reality does little to

explain the present global system. It is an outlook that delegitimizes values and culture. Politics devoid of values becomes reduced to brokerage of destructive power. The dominant view of world politics sees values and culture as restraints; it assumes that values and culture are not based on human needs, and that values and culture are easily changed. Only institutions, processes, and events are important.

In contrast to this dominant view, I assert that:

1. Politics is a cultural activity, and world politics is cultural communication in disguise.
2. All persons' views of reality are deeply and unconsciously affected by "their" culture regarding "their" view of reality.
3. No objective reality can be known except from a particular cultural point of view.

Culture is that complex whole which includes beliefs, patterns of behavior, and values. Culture is deeply rooted in society; it is a resource. Culture strongly influences human needs and motivations, and cultural forms are persistent.

Every culture operates with an (usually unconscious) epistemology, which predisposes its followers to emphasize certain kinds of perception, learning, and action, and ignore others. Individuals are hypnotized from infancy on to perceive the world in accordance with suggestions absorbed from the surrounding culture.

People from cultures that embody differing epistemologies will see reality differently. "The Sun's light when he unfolds it," wrote William Blake, "Depends on the organ that beholds it" (*Auguries of Innocence*). Epistemology is the sieve through which we see reality, to decide which realities are more real than others.

In order to impose some kind of order on our understanding of world politics, the study of international relations has insisted that in spite of the differences which characterize cultures, the relationships of actors can be conceptualized by certain common norms and attitudes -- ignoring the broad spectrum of cultures. The study of international relations has concentrated on discovering the common denominators of relations among whose war and peace could emerge. The reductionist emphasis on common denominators has often obscured the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon of politics.

But the facts are quite different. Although the absence of universally held norms compels each actor to assert its interest in terms of similar demands, the character of those demands arises from a specific socio-political culture. Theories of international relations have concentrated on the "how" of conflict resolution, but avoided understanding the "why" of conflict. In the world arena, an environment characterized by an absence of consensus and no enforcement machinery -- how states and groups are left to resolve their differences is limited only by resources and moral reservation.

The recognition that politics is essentially an ascriptive phenomenon -- that it is culture specific, and that values and goals which actors seek to maximize are a reflection of cultural differences, makes us attentive

to these differences and less likely to believe that "they" think precisely as "we" do. The pursuit of common denominators has explained similarities not differences of political actors. It is the differences with which ascriptive politics is primarily concerned and by which the calculations of war and peace ultimately are determined.

The first truly global political community has begun to emerge around us. What we in the international relations community called the inter-penetration of states in recent decades has probably evolved so far as to be irreversible, short of global catastrophe. We have moved from a humanity which lived its collective life as fragments of the whole, into a new context of humanity as a whole.

In fact it is no longer accurate to speak of the West as sharply distinct from the East, or even to speak of the North as opposed to the South. These distinctions are more appropriate as generalizations for popular mythology than as descriptions of actual international relations.

If we in the field of international relations have been guilty of a single error during recent years, it has been to overemphasize the traditional rituals of the world political game, and to underestimate the impact of the emergence of the first global civilization. Today's emerging global civilization has a far larger relative sway than Rome, the most extensive of its predecessors. For unlike Rome -- which knew only dimly of the civilizations of China and India, and nothing at all of American Indian civilizations in the Western hemisphere -- the global culture now coalescing excludes no one. Desert Bedouins and the remotest jungle villages are coming to feel the grip and penetrating power of the first planetary culture.

The objective situation of world politics, the circumstances and underlying forces have changed, but so too has the subjective situation -- the frame of reference or context in which events are interpreted. The biggest changes have been in values and ideas, not in underlying forces. We are leaving a world in which participants in international relations could play their roles on the world stage without the self-conscious awareness that they were playing a role. We have entered a world in which the actors, groups, and states are concerned with how their actions will affect the agenda of world politics.

The new global system of the Nineties is a pluralistic one with a crude but vital form of egalitarianism, as contrasted with the essentially European-rooted, aristocratic state system it is replacing. Actors will approach each other differently than they used to: Whereas heretofore they pursued their destinies and resolved their conflicts within a rigid and hierarchical social system, they will increasingly function within a pluralistic and egalitarian social system. Few of the conflicts will have ideological roots. Most will derive from clashes of communal identity, whether on the basis of race, ethnicity, nationality, or religion. These conflicts are proving to be intractable to the best efforts of dominant methods of conflict resolution.

Traditional techniques of conflict resolution using mechanistic, problem-solving methods, including the often manipulative signaling of positions are suitable for dealing with conflicts that relate to tangible material interests, for which it is usually possible to forge some sort of compromise. In contrast, non-material, identity-based conflicts are often not well understood to diplomats accustomed to operating in a Western, state-centered, culturally homogenous system. In the new international environment, viable conflict resolution requires an understanding of the beliefs, values, and behavior of conflicting parties.

The work of reconceptualizing international relations is well under way. The basic premises of the emerging global system are different from those that underlie the dominant Western-rooted international system. One such basic premise is that there is something in traditional cultures that is worth preserving. This premise places a great deal more emphasis on humane values. Fritz Schumacher, in *A Guide for the Perplexed*, emphasized the principle of adequatio: our thinking has to be adequate to the nature of the problem. Adequate thinking itself has to be diverse and symbiotic, pointing to cultural eclecticism. We must draw on all human cultural resources; we cannot afford to neglect any of them.

World events and trends will continue to expose the precariousness of international relations based on separateness in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world. The premises on which the traditional doctrine of statecraft were founded have been largely invalidated, simply because the world, which gave rise to them, no longer exists. Moving beyond such premises will require basic reformulations of the dominant Western perspective to incorporate traditional cultures. Does this mean, then, that the lessons of realism, geopolitics, and power politics, are useless? Perhaps this is exactly the case.

The world community is now threatened by some of the very mechanisms that conventional wisdom suggests served us well in the past. Until recently, the dual-standard of morality that opened within and among groups may have served a positive value. The competition among states may have served as a mechanism for mediating relationships and may have formed a frame of reference for humanity, which lived its collective life as fragments of the whole. As long as we lived in a 'flat' world that appeared infinite, groups in conflict could move on whenever they lost out in some competitive encounter over states, resources, or power. This competitive orientation served the collective function of dispersing humanity throughout the world. However, the competitive mechanism cannot serve us well in a finite, spherical, shrinking world. The competitive model of international relations -- a model in which each nation, by pursuing its private goals was contributing to the political market place of nations -- is no longer viable.

The question arises, "How should we deal with the first truly global civilization? The thought forms we predominantly use in academia, in governments and courts of law, in the press, and in social planning are modelled on Aristotelian logic. What we need instead are thought forms that are structured in the same way that our world is structured.

And what sort of structure is that? Take a look at one of those charts of the body's metabolic pathways that are tacked up on the walls of biochemistry labs. What you see is interconnected, interdependent chemical reactions whose products all feed back upon each other -- a homeostatic circuit. There are no straight lines, and to think in terms of "causes" and "effects" makes sense only if we cut out a portion of a circuit and treat it as though it were a whole entity.

We complicate problems of international relations due to our inability to perceive context and long-range consequences. Our information is always incomplete; natural, biological systems are always more complex and circuitous than our ideas about them. Using linear, cause-and-effect thinking to map out the world that is an interconnected, interdependent network of feedback circuits inevitably leads to inappropriate actions that return to plague the inventors.

The physiology of the human body, the complexities of family life, the network of global trade, and the infinitely varied and delicate interdependencies of the totality of life on earth, are alike in structure. There

exists in Buddhist mythology something called "Indra's net:" an immense, multiply-interconnected latticework of jewels each of which reflects all the others at once -- what we now call a hologram. This is a very accurate description of how our world really is.

In Darwin's theory of evolution, the unit that evolves is the organism or species. In Bateson's theory the unit that evolves is organism-plus-environment. The horse does not evolve, the grass does not evolve; rather the system horse-plus-grass co-evolves.

We try to maximize U.S. "interest" and then wonder why our policies backfire or produce the opposite effect. It is because we use a wrong unit of analysis. A correct unit is nation-plus-environment, interest-group-plus environment.

The equivalent (epistemologically false) unit of analysis at the level of daily life is the individual "me" or "ego." Perhaps the main factor that gave rise to the dilemmas of modern civilization was the myth of body/mind dualism, matter/spirit dualism, and the associated concept of the person as an individual surrounded by skin, with distinct inside and outside.

In other civilizations, "progress" was associated more with perfection of the human soul within the wholeness of society and the universe. Viable units of evolution are always expressed in terms that involve wholeness, context, community. Self-other, me-environment, yield the true self of Jungian psychology or of the various mystical traditions in Vedantism, Kabbalah, Buddhism, and Sufism schools of mystical training.

The world community is now threatened by the very mechanisms which, in the past, have served an evolutionary purpose, and, because humans did not until recently possess the technology to render their environment lethal, were at least evolutionarily tolerable. But now we have run out of room. The competitive mechanisms that are still taught as the subject matter of international relations cannot serve us well in a finite, spherical, homeostatically interconnected world. We have moved into a new context for humanity as a whole. We need to be committed to a world which includes everyone. This idea is alien or at best seems like a pipe dream to present-day national leaders who continue to look at the world in terms of a competitive epistemology. Whether this idea is regarded as "impossible" or not is a matter of epistemology. We know it is possible in practice because that is the way Earth's biosphere has been functioning for some hundreds of years.

Just as we find that the naive materialism of the post-Renaissance centuries is not working in the long run, things have begun to change in the direction of a more inclusive epistemology. Now, towards the end of the twentieth century, we are "discovering" that the deeper we delve into the fundamentals of science, the closer we are to the fundamentals of many of the traditional mysticisms. We are now coming to recognize the reality of the sacred.

Here I am defining "the sacred" as any process that explicitly links us back to the largest possible context to which we belong. Among the Sufis, who represent the mystical tradition of Islam, the most important daily practice or litany is called the zikr, which means "remembrance." The role of the prophet (in us all) is then not the simple minded notion of someone who can foretell the future, but someone who reminds us of what has always been there, thus rejuvenating the world. Gregory Bateson, when once asked to define "sacrament" said, "The recognition of the pattern which connects." "Buddha" translates literally as "the

one who woke up," and refers not just to a historical personage but also to any human being in a state of mind of full awareness, i.e. a person dedicated to the support of the total patterning and harmony of our world.

Re-investment of the sacred means the humanizing of the sacred. It also refers to the consecration of the human, the recognition that sacred activity is not separate from immediate, personal, and interpersonal experience. Our being together on this planet becomes, then, a sacred day-to-day reality, and what we call God becomes human. This seemingly impossible process of transformation has already begun, though it is often hard to see the signs. The signs are waiting to be created by us here, today.