

Western and Eastern values are complementary¹

Ashok Natarajan, Secretary & Senior Research Fellow, The Mother's Service Society, India; Fellow, World Academy of Art & Science

Abstract. *All values are spiritual in their essence, even those that appear to be physical. For all values seek perfection of the whole. The widest and highest perfection is based on the totality and oneness of reality. Such a perfection is comprehensive and inclusive. It is founded on truths that complete other truths rather than compete with them. Despite their vast cultural differences, Eastern and Western values reflect complementary aspects of a unified whole. But the process of developing values in any society depends on its underlying cultural perspective. The nature of mind is such that it divides and analyses reality, and concentrates on one thing at a time, whereas spirituality is founded on the perception of the whole. This vast difference in underlying cultural orientation helps explain the immense gulf in understanding that has long distinguished and separated the cultures of Asia and Europe.*

Key words: *Values, Eastern cultures, Western cultures, perfection, totality, individual, mind, spirituality, complementary, mutual reinforcing*

Sommario. *Tutti i valori, anche quelli che sembrano fisici, sono spirituali nella loro essenza, perché tutti i valori cercano la perfezione dell'insieme. La perfezione più ampia e più alta si fonda sulla totalità e sull'unicità della realtà. Tale perfezione è onnicomprensiva e inclusiva. Si fonda su verità che completano altre verità piuttosto che competere con esse. Nonostante le vaste differenze tra loro, i valori orientali e quelli occidentali riflettono aspetti complementari di un tutt'uno. Ma in ogni società lo sviluppo dei valori dipende dalla sua prospettiva culturale di base. La natura della mente è tale che essa divide e analizza la realtà, concentrandosi su una cosa alla volta, mentre la spiritualità si fonda su una percezione d'insieme. Questa enorme differenza tra gli orientamenti culturali di base contribuisce a spiegare*

1 Published in CADMUS, Vol. 3, Issue 4, May 2018: 128-134.

l'immenso divario di comprensione che da lungo tempo distingue e separa le culture dell'Asia e dell'Europa.

Parole chiave: *Valori, culture Orientali, culture Occidentali, perfezione, totalità, individuo, mente, spiritualità, complementari, mutuo rinforzo.*

Eastern values, Western Values, and their variation over time

When they first heard tales from travellers of enormous wealth and sophistication of the far older civilizations of the East, Europeans were filled with wonder and admiration. Those tales fuelled their urge for exploration and the quest for adventure. They discovered societies of unimagined prosperity and inventiveness. When the age of explorers began, China and India were the most prosperous nations on earth. They represented about 40% of the world's population, roughly the same as they do today. During the many centuries when European society rejected the mental heritage of Hellenic Greece and ancient Rome, China developed an advanced mental culture while India's achievements were spiritual. China developed a class of intelligentsia to govern the country long before any Western nation developed paper currency or invented gunpowder. Like the Japanese, they found little to admire in other nations and turned inward and insular. They responded to the incessant onslaught of Western men of fortune, zealous missionaries and infectious diseases by retreating into isolationism and erection of barriers to protect civilization from the onslaught of barbarians.

Long before the seafaring conquests of Europe, the Silk Road extended all the way from China to Central Europe. It was a common sight to see Indian traders in the Roman market and Roman ships frequenting Indian harbours. Apart from trade and military life, India was well developed in cultural affairs. It had cultivated advanced shastras or scriptures covering 64 different branches of knowledge. Religious hatred was generally unknown in India apart from some aberrant exceptions in South India. Though royal Kshatriya families ruled in North India, down south the Vaisya agricultural community took the lead in leadership-forming royal dynasties. Such South Indian royalties were also men of notable character. The extraordinary spiritual insights of India's

Bhagavad Gita predate Ancient Greece's philosophical wisdom. The great Mahabharatha war was fought for the ideal of ridding the world of evil. At one point in the epic, the Gita says that the war was won not so much on the battlefield as in the subtle plane. More than 2000 years ago, King Ashoka renounced the principle of war after conquering all opponents on the battlefield.

Gradually the balance between East and West changed, as it always does when more advanced and less advanced civilizations meet. The younger, more aggressive with less to offer and more to gain, gradually acquires the advantage over the older, more stable and sedentary civilization that seeks to preserve the order and stability of what it already possesses. Thus, over the past five centuries, the West has developed quickly, thriving on its trade with the East and stimulated by its obvious inferiority to explore, invent, innovate and seize that which it lacked. The triumphant rise of the West through commerce, military conquest, science, industry, the spread of education and democracy shifted the balance. The newly rich and powerful acquired a sense of their own value and developed a world view based on the relative superiority of Western culture. This view came to dominate the perspective of Western scholars to the point that they mistook their temporary ascendancy for a sign of ultimate pre-eminence.

Indeed, the same viewpoint coloured their understanding of everything outside Europe. America too was disparaged as a nascent unformed society. The noted historian Paul Johnson observed that while he was at Oxford he never heard America taken seriously by any scholar. Even the Encyclopaedia Britannica devoted most of its space to Europe, its accomplishments and its personalities, while great Asian achievements and personalities were given far less attention. This prejudice reflected Europe's deep preoccupation with itself. It is only in the past three decades that European historians have awakened to the realization that the entire history of the world during the past five centuries was skewed and coloured by their own limited perspective and cultural values. Given its very rapid advances and remarkable achievements in recent centuries, Europe's self-preoccupation during this period is understandable.

But the difficulties the East and the West encountered in understanding, appreciating and respecting one another have still deeper roots. We should focus not merely on differences in their periods of ascendancy and relative speed of advancement at different times. Indeed, the recent speed of change

in Asia far exceeds the most rapid progress ever witnessed in the Western world in the past. The lack of comprehension arises from more fundamental differences in the cultures of the East and the West.

We can now see more clearly the highest achievements of both sides of the world. They reveal distinct but complementary approaches to reality – one mental, the other vital-social; one emphasizing the ultimate value of the individual, the other the sacred value of the social collective; one founded on individual uniqueness, the other on social unity. In the Western World, the mind was liberated from the dominance of social culture and the past and came to place increasing emphasis on the fullest freedom for the maximum development of the individual. In the Eastern World, the mind was subordinated to the wider social goal of collective harmony, integration and continuity with the past. The West made freedom the ultimate value and perceived society as the context and field for individual development and achievement. The East based itself on the value of social harmony and continuity based on a consciousness of the immense contribution of the collective to individual achievement.

“When any truth or power is followed in the extreme, it inevitably turns into its very opposite”

From the onset of the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment in the West, the individual progressively emerged from subordination to the collective in politics, religion, the economy and society. A culture of individualism gradually came to replace the culture of individuality affirmed by the ancient Greeks. The pursuit of self-interest replaced the loftier pursuit of self-realization. In India, the ultimate freedom of the individual to pursue a unique spiritual quest was preserved in the spiritual institution of sannyasa, in which a mature man after fulfilling his obligations to family and society was entitled to abandon all social responsibility to pursue the ultimate freedom of the spirit. But as most Westerners tried to exercise their freedom within a narrow field of egoistic self-interest, all but the most extraordinary Asians adhered to the underlying spiritual values of society through subconscious subordination of the individual ego to the social collective.

Even today, adherence to spiritual values can be observed in the conscious subordination of youth to the guidance and direction of elders. In India, the ideal behind this attitude is the acceptance of the father as the spiritual guru, even if the elder is illiterate and uninformed. The scriptures call on Indian women to relate to their husbands as the representative of the Spirit in their lives. The word for husband in India is Purusha, which means the Self. In situations where the husband deserts his wife and runs away, the wife has the right to distance herself from him both emotionally and physically. It is very rare in such situations for a wife to maintain a deeper spiritual allegiance to her spouse. But there are known instances in which the ideal is still followed. Such subordination of the individual is frowned upon in the West. Even in modern educated India today it is rejected by most as old-fashioned superstition. Nevertheless, it is based on a knowledge that progress comes by accepting external challenges and changing one's own inner attitudes and surrendering egoistic preferences.

The attitude in the West appears to be quite the opposite, but it is based on a complementary principle. In Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Bennet is portrayed as a typical English country gentleman. After his marriage, he finds that his wife is not amenable to reason. He seeks the peace and quiet of reading literature in the seclusion of his library. The family life goes on for another 25 years without any major incident. Then tragedy strikes and his youngest daughter elopes with a penniless adventurer named Wickham. This shocks Mr. Bennet and the scandal threatens to prevent the marriages of his four other daughters. Even then he does not turn to God or religion for solace. He relies solely on himself. He does not blame anyone else in the family for the tragedy, not even Wickham. He recognizes his own negligence in the way he had run the family and accepts full responsibility for the consequences. As a reward for his personal sincerity, the run-away girl is located and safely married off to her lover. It is a reward for his self-reliance. Such self-reliance helped create a mental culture of individuality in the West. His good fortune does not stop there. His two eldest daughters are both married to wealthy men of a higher class. It is noteworthy that no one in the family turns to prayer at the time of crisis. In a spiritual culture like India, most would instantly resort to prayer. But in both cases, the result is attained by a subordination of egoistic personality to a higher value, either individual or collective. In this sense, Western and Eastern cultures adopt complementary paths to perfection.

“The process of organization has a tendency to limit and transfix that which it attempts to express”

A mental culture prides itself on its intellectuality. That capacity helps to liberate the mind from the limitations of superficial sense impressions. The achievements of the last few centuries have been primarily those of the intellect. But when any truth or power is followed in the extreme, it inevitably turns into its very opposite. Intellectual knowledge is always based on a set of explicit or implicit assumptions. There are always issues that fall outside the pale of assumptions. Often the limitation of initial premises is forgotten and a partial truth is applied outside its field of validity. The extreme doctrines of state communism and neoliberalism are examples of the excessive application of partial truths as if they were universally valid.

Rupert Sheldrake is a well-known English biologist who applied the scientific method to study phenomena outside the normal pale of biological research. The thousands of experimental results he studied led him to develop a controversial theory about the transmission of information based on subtle knowledge about life known for millennia in Eastern culture. When Nature published an article challenging his theory and research findings, Sheldrake wrote to the editor presenting a detailed rebuttal of the objections. The editor dismissed his rebuttal without even reviewing the evidence because Sheldrake's research and conclusions lay outside the established boundaries of current scientific thinking. The editor's attitude is a typical consequence of intellectuality which mistakes a partial view for the whole reality. Intellectuality takes any issue and reduces it to abstract generalizations which omit vast amounts of relevant information in the quest for a unifying principle. But the process of accomplishment and the actions of great men such as Napoleon, Churchill and Caesar cannot be reduced simply to abstractions.

Traditional Eastern cultures exhibit a different type of limitation, by blindly subordinating ideas and experience to established wisdom and thereby reducing knowledge to superstitious beliefs. Ancient Greece laid the foundations for all the knowledge the Western world has today. It was purely mental and did not extend to life or the higher realms above the mind. It lacked the intuitive perception of ancient India and the pragmatism of modern Europe. As a result, the Golden Age of Greece survived for only a century. Greece's

mental culture gave birth to the more pragmatic mentality of ancient Rome. Whereas the Greeks had applied the mind to the realm of pure mental ideas – philosophy, mathematics and ethics – the Romans applied mental principles to the field of social life. Discarding the social traditions of the past, they developed a civic and military culture based on law and mental principles of organization, laying the foundations for the rise of the Roman Empire, which lasted several centuries before its inevitable decline. The mind has the power to clarify the insights of spiritual intuition that inevitably manifest themselves in social superstition. But we see from this case that without the continuous inspiration of spiritual knowledge, mental knowledge inevitably degenerates into narrow rigid principles that suppress the vitality and complexity of life. Without that spiritual influence, the mind cannot continue to grow.

“The future evolution of humanity requires the integration and unification of multiple complementary perspectives to arrive at a whole which transcends the narrow boundaries of competing partial truths. Contradictions are complements”

The Roman Empire declined as its physical expansion overstretched its financial resources and it lacked the subtle knowledge of the foundations of social existence. Rome ran out of money because it did not understand the principle of public debt. It did not realize that it could monetarize future tax revenues, as England discovered ten centuries later and employed them as a resource to finance its expanding empire. The foundation of money is people, human relations and confidence in the social institutions. But at that time money had not yet acquired its full symbolic power as the representative of the financial power of the government and the nation. Without that support, the Roman Empire came to an end.

Spirituality in India rose high enough to empower individuals to attain spiritual liberation. Hundreds of spiritual seekers have successfully trodden this path. Many more millions have adopted it as an ideal. Having this as the goal, the country tries to implement these spiritual values in the vital life of the nation, endowing the ancient society with enormous powers in every walk of life. Consciousness evolves by organization and organization evolves by giving

constant expression to new and greater sources of inspiration. But by its very nature, the process of organization has a tendency to limit and transfix that which it attempts to express, so eventually the inspiration that gave rise to the organizational structure either dies out or has to seek new avenues for expression. The whole history of the world testifies to the need for perpetual renewal of decadent, ossified organizations. In India, the very vitality of its ancient social institutions became an obstacle to future progress. As elsewhere, intuitive wisdom became enshrined in doctrine. Living institutions ossified into rigidly fixed social structures such as the caste system in India, the feudal system in Europe and religious institutions in all countries. In the process, India lost her native vitality and creativity and became enslaved first to conventional tradition and later to foreign occupation. Any hope of regaining her past spiritual culture only became conceivable after India attained her independence.

There is a proper sequential order to the process of development. It appears that both the East and the West have strayed from that natural evolutionary sequence. The West was preoccupied with the quest for spiritual salvation during the Middle Ages. The economic revolution that gave rise to the Renaissance soon subordinated this quest for the pursuit of material prosperity. Spirituality became ossified in the form of organized religion. Until the end of World War II, church attendance in the West was very high. The arrival of prosperity, democracy, education and free thinking diminished the influence of the church. In recent times a scarcity of priests in the West has led to the large-scale import of clergymen from India and other Asian countries.

As the Age of Imperialism thrived before its brief period of ascendancy and rapid decline, the age of scientific materialism is now reaching the limitations of a purely physical understanding of reality. The global challenges confronting humanity today – political, economic, social, cultural and ecological – are all a direct consequence of that limiting premise. They compel us to challenge the validity of a dominant world view reaching the end of its utility. Ultimately, knowledge is not the sole possession of any country or culture. It is both wider and deeper than any one perspective can fully realize. The future evolution of humanity requires the integration and unification of multiple complementary perspectives to arrive at a whole which transcends the narrow boundaries of competing partial truths. Contradictions are complements.

In Europe, the development of mental culture was spearheaded by the aristocracy. The English parliament was for a long time populated solely by members of the aristocracy. Many were men of notable character and capable of selfless service. In those days, members of the Parliament, other than cabinet ministers, were not paid. Only those with property could afford to serve. The upper classes enjoyed the incomes from vast landed properties inherited over time. These properties were taken care of by tenants who also doubled as soldiers during times of war. This arrangement effectively meant that real power remained with aristocracy. The English who came to India were surprised beyond measure by the profusion of castes in the country. They valued aristocratic blood as much as the Indians valued caste purity. Aristocrats retained their relevance so long as they retained their character supported by extensive income. Even impoverished aristocrats usually retained something of that nobility of character.

But the decline in the status and wealth of aristocracy eventually brought with it a decline in the values on which it had earlier risen and been sustained. Even where wealth was retained, character gradually declined with the intermixture of the classes and the lure of new sources of wealth. Like organization, character and culture need to be continuously replenished by springs of deeper energies in order to sustain high values. Anthony Trollope's novel *Dr. Thorne* depicts the immense power of high values amidst the declining culture of 19th-century England. Dr. Thorne is the descendant of one line of an 800-year-old family which gradually loses its property and wealth. Impoverished after the death of his clergyman father, Dr. Thorne still retains the high character of his aristocratic class. His younger brother, Henry, however, displays all the weaknesses in character of a people and class in decline. Henry is killed by a stonemason named Roger after he seduces Roger's beautiful and virtuous sister Mary, offering false promises of love and marriage. Henry's older brother Thomas learns the truth and pleads with the court to save Roger from lifelong imprisonment. During Roger's six months in prison, Thomas helps Mary marry and move to the colonies, by agreeing to adopt the baby girl, also named Mary, who is born out of wedlock. After his release from prison, Roger rises to the heights of commercial success as a contractor and acquires massive wealth equal to that of many aristocrats. Meanwhile Thomas then becomes physician to the family of the wealthy Squire Gresham, whose

wealth is quickly vanishing as the result of his marriage to an Earl's daughter and costly failures in Parliamentary elections. Raised in close proximity, the Squire's son Frank falls in love with Mary, the doctor's illegitimate niece, and insists on marrying her. Frank's parents protest both because of Mary's low birth, and also because they desperately need Frank to marry into a wealthy family in order to avoid the bankruptcy of the Gresham estate. After years of delay, Frank insists on his love for Mary, but Mary declines marriage to avoid becoming the source of misfortune to his family. Through it all Dr. Thorne has faithfully served as the trusted adviser to both the wealthy Roger and impoverished Squire. At last Roger dies and bequeaths his immense wealth to Mary. As his executor, Thorne presides over the transfer of wealth to his niece and her marriage to Frank. Thorne's ancient family of high values is restored to prominence. The illegitimate but now wealthy Mary is elevated by marriage to Frank into high society. The Greshams are saved from bankruptcy by Frank's marriage to Mary. The situation Dr. Thorne faces is so daunting that few men could retain their sanity under such circumstances. He lives by his aristocratic values with no thought of personal gain. His entire conduct is guided by the highest values.

The values of the East and the West are thus complementary and mutually reinforcing.