

# FROM GLOBAL ETHIC TO WORLD ETHOS?

Building on Hans Küng's Legacy of Basic Trust in Life



Jonathan Keir

# **FROM GLOBAL ETHIC TO WORLD ETHOS?**

**Building on Hans Küng's Legacy of Basic Trust in Life**

Jonathan Keir

Karl Schlecht Stiftung (KSG)

ISBN 978-3-00-058821-1  
© 2018 Karl Schlecht Stiftung (KSG)  
Gutenbergstraße 4  
72631 Aichtal  
[www.karlschlechtstiftung.de](http://www.karlschlechtstiftung.de)

First printed in 2018

Mack, Schönaich

© Cover picture: Albert Edelfelt, *Louis Pasteur*, 1885

All rights from texts and pictures published here, including abridged reproductions, for any public use by means of electronic or other methods of reproduction must remain reserved for the author.

To the memory of Naguib Mahfouz, who led me to this subject.

*It is not the fact of liberty, but the way in which liberty is exercised, which ultimately determines whether liberty itself survives.*

Dorothy Thompson

*What we do here matters somewhere else.*

Peter Hitchens

*I never meant to deny the moral impact of art, which is certainly inherent in every genuine work of art. What I do deny and am prepared to fight to the last drop of my ink is the deliberate moralising which to me kills every vestige of art in a work however skillfully written.*

Vladimir Nabokov

*How can we expect a harvest of thought [from those] who have not had a seed-time of character?*

Thoreau

*Uniting people under slogans is easy. The easiest thing in the world is to get people to agree publicly on a common principle, but when it comes to moving the depths of individual human beings, I prefer Satan and poetry to the angels of consensus.*

Adonis

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the following people for their kind support between 2014 and 2017 as this book came into being:

The triumvirate of the Weltethos Institut Tübingen: Christopher Gohl, for making my extended stay in Tübingen possible; Claus Dierksmeier, for reminding me why writerly self-discipline matters; and Bernd Villhauer, for growing a much-needed beard;

The staff of the Institute - Esther Nezere, Hanna Schirovsky, Christina Illek and their army of student helpers - who make the place stay up;

Karl Schlecht, for reminding me that the only important question is 'Yes, but do you love what you do?';

The team at the Karl Schlecht Foundation, for welcoming me to their Aichtal office despite my glaring lack of pedigree for the job;

Len Swidler, for showing me that age is no barrier to anything important;

Klaus Leisinger, for not forcing me to wash his feet in honour of Zhou Enlai and Khrushchev's widow;

Tu Weiming and his team at the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies at Peking University, for reminding me what this project of ours is all about and could one day be for our children; and Matthias Niedenführ, for opening this Chinese world of his to me;

Hans Küng, for sharing a Campari with me in his home in December 2015 despite his struggles with Parkinson's disease; and Eberhard Stilz, Stephan Schlenz, Karl-Josef Kuschel and the team at the Stiftung Weltethos, for their earnest support;

Mehmetcan Akpınar and his better half, Jana Matuszak, for rescuing me and keeping me sane during a tough period;

My family, as always, for everything. They know who they are.

## Contents

Introduction: From Global Ethic to World Ethos?	8
Beyond Theology, Beyond Philosophy, Beyond Psychology: The Aesthetic Contours of a World Ethos	10
1. 'No One Can Behave Ethically Without It': Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel on Basic Trust in Life	11
2. Liberals, Atheists and a World Ethos: Ronald Dworkin and Martha Nussbaum	36
3. Rescuing 'All Under Heaven': A Chinese Idea and a World Ethos	42
4. 'Scripture Subjugates': From Jonathan Brown to Navid Kermani on Revelation and Basic Trust in Life	60
5. Beyond Fairness: Erich Fromm and the World Ethos Project	72
6. Jürgen Habermas, the All Blacks and a Beer at the Rugby World Cup	78
7. Two Brothers, One <i>Ethos</i> : Christopher Hitchens, Peter Hitchens and the Meaning of Duty	87
8. <i>Weltethos</i> As a Living Thing: Roger Scruton's <i>The Soul of the World</i>	97
A World Ethos in Action: Non-Fictional Accounts from Biography to Journalism	103
9. Teaching Our Children to Love Life: The World Ethos of Abdulhamid al-Ansari and Friends	104
10. <i>The Universe or Nothing</i> : Elena Poniatowska, Guillermo Haro and a World Ethos	110
11. Stefan Zweig's <i>Erasmus</i> : 500 Years from Reformation to World Ethos	129
12. <i>Moskva, Moskva</i> : Mikhail Gromov's <i>Chekhov</i> and Basic Trust	138

13.	<i>Homo Economicus</i> Finds Love? Svetlana Aleksievich's <i>Second-Hand Time</i> and the 'Age of Anger'	145
14.	'Synchronising the Nobility of the World': Alain Finkielkraut and Hans Küng's World Ethos	154
15.	<i>La Vie, La Mort, La Vie</i> : Erik Orsenna's <i>Louis Pasteur</i> as a Paean to Basic Trust	162
16.	Clinging to Justice in a Post-Truth World: Robert Fisk, Patrick Cockburn and a World Ethos	170
	Imagining a World Ethos: The Power of Poetry and Storytelling	177
17.	'The True Miracle': Boualem Sansal, World Literature and a World Ethos	178
18.	<i>Love and Pedagogy</i> Meets <i>Projekt Weltethos</i> : Miguel de Unamuno and Hans Küng on Moral Motivation	185
19.	'We Can't Lie, Not to Them': <i>The Wire</i> and Cultivation of Basic Trust in Life	192
20.	The Nightmare of Basic Mistrust: Leila Slimani's <i>Chanson Douce</i>	200
21.	Good Stories Want to be True: Nikolai Gogol's <i>The Overcoat</i> and a World Ethos for Global Business	210
22.	Hollywood and Basic Trust: From <i>La La Land</i> and <i>Person of Interest</i> to <i>The Circle</i> and Beyond	219
23.	'Aesthetics is the Mother of Ethics': Joseph Brodsky and the Unrivalled Attractiveness of the Impossible	226
24.	Hermann Hesse's <i>The Glass Bead Game</i> : A World Ethos and the Death of Joseph Knecht	231
	Afterword (Tübingen, December 2017)	237
	Bibliography	238



## Introduction: From Global Ethic to World Ethos?

This book project emerged gradually in the ferment of my years spent at the Weltethos Institut at the University of Tübingen between 2014 and 2017. That Hans Küng, a Catholic theologian who had challenged the Vatican hierarchy to reform and modernise (a generation before his good friend Pope Francis), was the biggest ticket in this provincial Swabian town became known to me by geographical accident as I wandered past the Weltethos Institut in Tübingen's Hintere Grabenstraße in early 2014. Hans Küng? I had heard of his Global Ethic Project (*Weltethos* in German, as I discovered here, to my surprise), and had unconsciously wondered what had become of it without ever having explored it further, so I was excited to learn that a local businessman, Karl Schlecht, had thrown his financial support behind the idea in the form of multi-million-euro investments in the Weltethos Institut and Stiftung Weltethos, the foundation which seeks to continue Küng's pioneering work in the sphere of interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

A book deserves to be written on the politics of this constellation, but an infinitely more important project - that of furthering Küng's project as a whole in a new era - has emerged over the last three years as an intellectual and professional priority. I do not pretend to be able to define this future on my own with this book, but I do hope to do what I can to breathe some life into it as the world celebrates, in 2018, Küng's 90th birthday and the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Küng-drafted *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago. The *Declaration* has, to put it bluntly, unkindly but honestly, failed to energise and unite global civil society as Küng hoped it might when it was signed by a raft of religious and spiritual leaders from around the world in 1993. My 20-year-old students at the Weltethos Institut have heard neither of Hans Küng nor of his *Weltethos* idea; what hope for the rest of the world if students at Küng's own university - a university which recently discussed the idea of renaming itself the Hans Küng University of Tübingen - have not even heard of this ambitious project?

This book, then, is a book full of stories, echoes of an *ethos* which Küng sought in the second half of his career - following the loss of his 'licence' to teach Catholic theology (*missio canonica*) in 1979 - to disseminate. We begin with a chapter on Küng and his erstwhile companion Karl-Josef Kuschel before branching out in the directions of my amateur competence - Chinese philosophy, Russian literature, liberal Arab intellectuals, European cultural debates, the American entertainment industry, rugby in my native New Zealand and so on - in a bid to illustrate by cumulative, greater-than-the-sum-of-its-parts example the existence of a common *ethos* which, while much less than a new and unwanted global religion, could still be said to contain a useful and timely thrust of unapologetic universalism. The reader will judge the success or failure of this endeavour at the end, although she is also, as with any book of stories, encouraged to pick and choose according to her moods and curiosities; the book is characterised by an elliptical recurrence of themes rather than a rigidly linear structure. The broad division of the book into three sections is intended only to provide generic signposts and orientation to the uninitiated and curious; everyone will recognise *some* names from the Contents, but it is unlikely that anyone will recognise everyone; if I can win your trust with the chapters on the material more familiar to you, then hopefully you will push on to explore the less-known frontiers.

The idea that anyone could write the final book on the World Ethos Project is absurd; the very arbitrariness of the choices for this volume attests to something not only much bigger than Hans Küng, but something much, much bigger than the fifty or so people whose work is critically discussed at any length here. The difference between a 'Global Ethic' - the dream of a full and final list of consensus principles on human ethical behaviour (a dream enshrined in the failed 1993 *Declaration*) - and a 'World Ethos' is precisely the difference between alchemy and chemistry: by throwing these fifty or so disparate human voices together here for the first time, we hope to produce a chain reaction which prompts further engagement, experimentation and inquiry from those who read it. The combined genius of Hans Küng and Karl Schlecht provided the laboratory in Tübingen in which this particular series of experiments - part of the ongoing big experiment of a World Ethos fit for the 21st Century and beyond - could be carried out.

**Beyond Theology, Beyond Philosophy, Beyond Psychology:  
The Aesthetic Contours of a World Ethos**

# 1. 'No One Can Behave Ethically Without It': Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel on Basic Trust in Life

*Nihilism and cynicism [...] are destructive attitudes to life, and can suck all joy out of ourselves and those around us. There are, indeed, unhappy examples of such individuals - I need only think back to experiences in faculty meetings in years gone by - whose mere presence could change the entire atmosphere of the occasion. One can only wish that such toxic characters, who make life difficult for themselves and others, might be gifted a dose of real joy for once.<sup>1</sup>*

Hans Küng

## Introduction

Hans Küng's *Projekt Weltethos* is in many ways a declaration of resistance to the 'nihilism and cynicism' which must nevertheless be tolerated in any free society. This chapter sketches Küng's conception of *Grundvertrauen* or 'Basic Trust', which forms the hard core of his *Weltethos* idea.

Broadly speaking, *Grundvertrauen* means saying Yes to reality, to the unity of the world and the meaningfulness of human life within that world. This may or may not entail a direct reference to God; most important of all is the parent-child relationship, particularly in the earliest years of life. As Küng asks, 'how else should a young person in particular understand what it means to be accepted by God if she has never been accepted by a single human being?'<sup>2</sup> Summarising his life's work in *Was ich glaube (What I Believe)* (2010), Küng begins with a chapter on *Lebensvertrauen*, 'Basic Trust in life', which he describes as 'the cornerstone of a healthy personality'.<sup>3</sup> Such trust in the ultimately positive nature of life, however, 'is not simply there; it must be learned'.<sup>4</sup> Developmental psychology has shown that a child begins the process of learning to trust life 'quite literally at its mother's breast'<sup>5</sup>; Küng describes himself as belonging to the ranks of the 'countless people who inherited a strong trust in life from a by no means perfect but basically solid attachment to my mother, father and other family members'<sup>6</sup>. Not everyone, however, is so fortunate: 'The emergence of Basic Trust is vital for the healthy physical and

---

<sup>1</sup> Hans Küng, *Was ich glaube*, (München: Piper, 2010), p. 50. All translations in this book – and there are many – are my own unless otherwise stated. Readers who are willing and able to do so are encouraged to compare my (frequently liberal) renditions with the original source texts cited in the footnotes; in the interests of producing a readable paperback edition, however, the originals have *not* been reprinted here. For similar reasons, the full text of the 1993 *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic (Erklärung zum Weltethos)*, has *not* been included as an Appendix; the complete English version is available in open-source format online at [http://www.weltethos.org/1-pdf/10-stiftung/declaration/declaration\\_english.pdf](http://www.weltethos.org/1-pdf/10-stiftung/declaration/declaration_english.pdf) and in the original German at [http://www.weltethos.org/1-pdf/10-stiftung/declaration/declaration\\_german.pdf](http://www.weltethos.org/1-pdf/10-stiftung/declaration/declaration_german.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Hans Küng, *Was bleibt: Kerngedanken*, (München: Piper, 2013), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> Küng, *Was ich glaube*, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Küng, *Was ich glaube*, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Küng, *Was ich glaube*, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Küng, *Was ich glaube*, p. 18.

psychological development of every small child. If a child is damaged in these early years - whether by psychogenic illnesses, the disappearance of a guardian or emotional abuse and/or neglect from disinterested or overbearing caregivers [...], Basic Trust simply cannot develop.<sup>7</sup>

### The Conditions for Basic Trust

The primary challenge for Küng's *Weltethos* Project, logically prior to any interreligious dialogue ('no peace between the religions without dialogue between the religions!' in Küng's best-known formulation) or searches for an 'overlapping consensus' on adult values, is therefore somehow to promote, globally, the kind of healthy parenting and guardianship which fosters this *Lebensvertrauen* from the very beginning of each new human life, even and perhaps especially in the very first year. Such a position clearly pathologises, from the very beginning, nihilistic, sadistic or cynical conceptions of the good life arising out of a childhood steeped in Basic Mistrust. Such destructive ideas, however, remain *intellectually* plausible, and therefore are not eradicable by brute force, as Küng's *Weltethos* colleague Karl-Josef Kuschel explains:

Not only the question of Yes or No to God, but moreover the question of Yes or No to reality and life as a whole must be addressed [by contemporary theologians]. Küng tackles this question in one of the most exciting passages in his entire corpus, namely the chapter of *Does God Exist?* devoted to Friedrich Nietzsche. Unlike many of his predecessors, Küng faces the challenge of nihilism head-on, and openly accepts the possibility of a radical negation of a meaning or goal to human existence. [Such nihilism] is 'a basic option for all thinking people', and remains 'unfalsifiable' if also 'unprovable'. Only when one reaches such an epistemological horizon [...] can one begin to understand why Küng focuses on the question of Basic Trust in the first place and identifies it as the basis of science, ethics and religious 'faith'.<sup>8</sup>

The stakes for Küng could not be higher: he wagers the very possibility of a *Weltethos* - and by extension the very survival of life on Earth ('no survival of our planet without a Global Ethos, a World Ethos sustained by religious and non-religious people!<sup>9</sup>) - on the triumph of *Grundvertrauen* over the forces of mistrust and cosmic meaninglessness:

Non-Christians too, we discover, [find ways to] say Yes to life, such as it is, and to the idea of a meaning of life. These will often be connected to conceptions of guilt and grace, but they need not have anything specifically Christian or Catholic about them. In this sense, Basic Trust is for me the foundation of an *ethos* which can connect us all. For without

---

<sup>7</sup> Küng, *Was ich glaube*, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Karl-Josef Kuschel, in Karl-Josef Kuschel and Stephan Schlensog (eds.), *Hans Küng: Eine Nahaufnahme*, (München: Piper, 2008), p. 59.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Küng, *Der Islam: Geschichte, Gegenwart, Zukunft*, (München: Piper, 2004), p. 783.

this acceptance of reality, without this trusting 'Yes' to reality despite all temptations to reject it, without this Basic Trust, no one can behave ethically. Basic morality presupposes Basic Trust in life.<sup>10</sup>

So begins the Catholic Küng's quest, via dialogue, for partners in *Grundvertrauen* from other spiritual and even secular traditions. The question whether the desire to seek formal 'common ground' is a sufficient condition for 'dialogue' in the highest sense, however, remains a central question, perhaps *the* central question, for the entire *Weltethos* project, and is a source of creative tension in Küng's own work. In the formulation of Küng's colleague Hermann Häring, echoing many similar definitions proposed by Küng himself, '*Weltethos* is not a theoretically elaborated ethics, but rather a collection of "binding values, irrevocable standards and basic moral attitudes" which are lived today, or at least recognised, by most people everywhere'.<sup>11</sup> The advantage of such a formulation is that it allows followers of all religions and belief systems (including atheists and agnostics) to hold their positions unchallenged as long as they happen to subscribe to the basic *Weltethos* norms (as laid out, for example, in the 1993 *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic*); by not demanding more than this, the probability of reaching a minimum consensus on values remains higher than if one were calling on members of other faiths to discard elements of their own creeds or to adopt new elements from other traditions. And yet 'dialogue', and in a sense *Lebensvertrauen* itself, would seem to entail a readiness to have one's mind changed, perhaps even radically, through conversation; if one is not willing to put one's most cherished beliefs up for discussion, then in what sense is a dialogue 'open'? The core *Weltethos* principle of *Wahrhaftigkeit* ('truthfulness' or 'respect for truth'), listed among others in the 1993 *Declaration*, would seem to require such openness from the very beginning, and therefore to exclude in advance all excessively dogmatic belief systems. Dialogue between Islamic civilisation and Western modernity, for example, is only possible if *both sides* are ready to admit that there may be something not just minimally compatible, but also potentially *superior* or uniquely enriching and not yet discovered in the tradition of the other. Neither perfunctory 'tolerance' nor meaningless 'respect' is enough for healthy coexistence on this dynamic model; the demanding barriers to entry to the *Weltethos* club preclude detours towards either the Scylla of fundamentalism or the Charybdis of relativism. Küng's invitations to the six major 'world religions' - Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism - as well as to more minor religions (and even to the secular agnosticism and atheism of post-Renaissance Western modernity) open up to all members the centuries-long heritages of cultural traditions in *all* of which at least *something* new and life-enhancing will inevitably be found by any remotely open mind.

The *Weltethos* model, then, is of a large but not infinite library of collected wisdom, in which the individual reader or 'librarian', to follow the Borgesian metaphor, is not a desperately isolated meaning-seeker or prisoner of any one corner of the library, but is rather free to roam and to rearrange her favourite books as she reads and rereads the texts available to her, perhaps even adding her own contribution to the library herself one day. This unassailable individual freedom to read and to write

---

<sup>10</sup> Hans Küng, *Wozu Weltethos? Religion und Ethik in Zeiten der Globalisierung* (Freiburg: Herder, 2002), p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Hermann Häring, in *Hans Küng: Eine Nahaufnahme*, p. 108.

does not, however, alter the fact that *Weltethos* cannot remain a strictly private or personal matter: such deeply political questions of trust-building cannot, Küng and friends agree, safely be decided by market forces and *laissez-faire* cultural liberalism alone. Küng's *Projekt Weltethos* (1990) was intended as a step in this direction and as a corrective to triumphalist late-20th-century political liberalism, which, assuming that 'history' was at an end, insisted on absolute and eternal public neutrality regarding 'conceptions of the good life'. Between totalitarian unfreedom of religion on the one hand and total liberal neutrality on the other, public institutions can promote the development of Basic Trust in life, Küng argues, without compromising the formal freedoms which modern liberalism has won for individual citizens. In other words, 'nihilism and cynicism' are rights, but they can still be actively, intelligently and humanely discouraged.

Beyond their respective sacred or canonical texts, the world's civilisational and spiritual traditions are, with their literature, philosophy, art, music and other creative forms, a major source of such potentially enriching and Basic Trust-fostering material. Karl-Josef Kuschel in particular has carried the *Weltethos* flag in this direction, not least with his monumental *Life is Bridgebuilding (Leben ist Brückenschlagen)* (2011). One of the central figures in Kuschel's pantheon of *Weltethos* cultural ambassadors is Thomas Mann, who 'ironises' and 'humanises' the Ten Commandments for a wartorn Nazi Germany desperately in need of recovering its lost *Grundvertrauen*. The whole National Socialist project, in fact, was for Kuschel's Mann a negation of the idea of a World Ethos: 'Thomas Mann was in any case convinced that Fascism sought and demanded the overthrow of the whole idea of a "moral code" for humanity. In the face of fascist war crimes he defended the idea of a real and universal Moral Law.'<sup>12</sup> Mann's attempt to recover the spirit of the Ten Commandments for the 20th Century, however, is best understood less as a quest to carve a new code once and for all into stone than as a gesture of reconciliation between theists, agnostics and atheists who, by all taking the idea of morality and moral self-cultivation seriously, share a higher common commitment, beyond value catalogues:

[Mann's] ironic distance-taking from the authority of the [biblical] text serves as a means of humanising it. The 'holy' books [of the world's religions in general] lose their aura as unquestionable, eternally applicable, submission-demanding [revelations] and become instead models of a possible reality. Such models, however, are in principle open to change.

In this sense, Mann's short story *The Law* represents an enduring dilemma at the heart of modern consciousness: the realm of morality and virtue is in the end affirmed as real, but only at the price of a certain ironic distance [from the source(s)]. [...] At the same time, however, the need to affirm a universal *ethos* we can somehow share with each other only becomes more urgent the more one knows about the very real dangers of abandoning our old [theological] illusions altogether. [Modernity] is no alibi for relativism.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Karl-Josef Kuschel, in Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Wissenschaft und Weltethos*, (München: Piper, 2001), p. 476.

<sup>13</sup> Kuschel, *Wissenschaft und Weltethos*, p. 480.

This model of *Weltethos* as an ongoing literary project, 'in principle open to change', clashes with the older Abrahamic picture of morality as a fixed set of timeless revealed commandments. Incorporating a principle of literary dynamism remains a contemporary challenge for the *Weltethos* movement, one which the *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* has failed to meet on its own (hence the motivation for this book): on the one hand, Küng and Kuschel are clear that they want less than a new global religion ('modern ideologies of unity, whether of socialist, capitalist, scientific or religious inspiration [are] less and less convincing'<sup>14</sup>; '*Weltethos* is not a new world ideology, but rather a realistic vision'<sup>15</sup>); on the other, Küng in particular seems keen - at times arguably too keen - to leave believers alone with their beliefs just as long as they subscribe to his bare minimum: '[A World Ethos] respects the plurality of religious and philosophically grounded moral cultures and does not seek to put pressure on the convictions of those who think differently.'<sup>16</sup> This is, depending on one's definition of 'pressure', perhaps a far cry from dialogue: if potential partners are promised in advance that they will not have to change any of their beliefs or incorporate any new additional principles, then this is a hucksterish oversimplification of what is required for a dialogue-driven *Weltethos*. All meaningful contact implies change of some kind; we cannot know in advance how our Basic Trust in life may be shaken or strengthened by contact with Islamic civilisation, for example, but if we remain *utterly* unconvinced and unmoved by the entire civilisation and its cultural products, then Islam has had nothing of its own to offer us. Peaceful coexistence with such a civilisation may still be sought, but on a very different, much colder and more brittle basis than if at least some interpenetration of ideas and feelings has occurred.

Küng's own writings are marked by an understandable desire to make the *Weltethos* idea as undemanding and therefore as attractive as possible - firstly to sceptical Catholics and then to even more sceptical non-Catholics - but this is sometimes at the price of concealing the true, dialogical and ultimately literary nature of the project. One understands when Küng says that 'it would be a silly illusion to want to replace or supplant the Torah of the Jews, the Christian Sermon on the Mount, the Qur'an, the Bhagavad Gita, the sayings of Buddha or the *Analects* of Confucius'<sup>17</sup>, but at the same time they can hardly be left undiscussed either, as if they were unimprovable, and as if those who draw inspiration from them should be left politely alone and unchallenged. *Weltethos* is neither an 'artificial superstructure' nor an 'abstract *ethos* of unity for the whole world' nor a 'total ethical consensus' and 'certainly not a single World Religion, World Culture or World Ideology'<sup>18</sup>, but it is surely also, if it is to live up to its name as an *ethos*, more than a *Grundkonsens* which lists 'some of the basic values, standards, and attitudes which, despite undeniable differences, can be found in all major religions and philosophical traditions'.<sup>19</sup> At the very least, the *Weltethos* commitment to the value of *Wahrhaftigkeit* or truthfulness, by implying a respect for the idea of truth in the sphere of morality and a continual readiness for 'dialogue' in the highest sense, already contains within itself a principle of literary dynamism which smashes through the language of reluctant consensus to reach the higher plane of the 'library' of a world culture composed of the 'best that

---

<sup>14</sup> Küng, *Handbuch Weltethos*, p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> Hans Küng, *Handbuch Weltethos: Eine Vision und ihre Umsetzung*, (München: Piper, 2012), p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> Küng, *Handbuch Weltethos*, p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> Küng, *Handbuch Weltethos*, p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> Küng, *Handbuch Weltethos*, p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> Küng, *Handbuch Weltethos*, p. 54.



has been thought and said'<sup>20</sup>. This is not a 'single world culture' imposed or imposable by force, but a qualitatively free space, too big for exhaustion in any single lifetime, in which each individual can nevertheless challenge and define herself and even leave behind her own unique wisdom for others. The arrogant assumption - shared by 'extremists' or 'fundamentalists' in all civilisations - that one's own creed is already unimprovably perfect and has no real need whatsoever for this wider, ever-expanding common human library is itself a criterion for exclusion from the *Weltethos* realm.

This thoroughgoing *Wahrhaftigkeit* or commitment to the truth - potentially as bitter and difficult as the often misunderstood Confucian value of 'harmony' - leaves room for unbelievers of at least a certain kind: 'Even here the individual human being remains - within limits - free. He can say no. He can view all forms of Basic Trust with scepticism and even go so far as to reject them.'<sup>21</sup> Just as Muhammad Iqbal and Naguib Mahfouz<sup>22</sup>, however, portray Muhammad as the great liberator of humanity from both nihilism and the promise of any future divine revelation (because Islam metaphorically proclaims itself to be the 'last revelation' and therefore compels human beings to take responsibility for their own moral development), so too does K ng's revolutionary Jesus put truth above all wish-thinking:

It was to be a new God, a God who had freed Himself from his own Law, a God not of the blind rule-followers, but of the rule-breakers - yes, one must put it just so strongly, in all its contrarian aggression - a God not of the God-fearing, but of the Godless! A truly unprecedented revolution in the understanding of the Divine!

[...] Jesus is the public spokesman of God not in a superficial, judicial sense - not only God's employee, enabler or lawyer - but in a deeply existential way: a personal ambassador, trusted aide and friend of God. In him all people are confronted, without any form of compulsion but unavoidably and directly, with an Ultimate Reality which challenges them to make a decision regarding the final end and purpose of their lives. This Ultimate Reality seems to demand from them a critical attitude to their lives as a whole and their dealings in society, to the political structures and laws which have been handed down, to questions of worship and hierarchy, institutions and traditions, family ties and wider affiliations. This extends, naturally, to the victims of these systems, to the suffering, victimised, guilty and failed people of all kinds, and calls them to take their side in compassion. This Ultimate Reality provides a guiding light for his life as a whole.

[...] In this Ultimate Reality, then, which he calls God, his Father and our Father, one finds anchored a principle which can be summarised in one word: his *freedom*. [...] A radically new dimension opens up for the individual human being and for society as a whole: a real alternative with other values, norms and ideals, a truly qualitative

---

<sup>20</sup> See Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*. [http:// www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4212/pg4212.html](http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4212/pg4212.html), (accessed 10/9/2017).

<sup>21</sup> K ng, *Was bleibt*, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> See my discussion of Mahfouz and Iqbal on the question of revelation in Islam in Jonathan Keir, *Warriors for Civilisation: Naguib Mahfouz, Andrei Tarkovsky, Tu Weiming and their Western Counterparts*, <https://publikationen.uni-tuebingen.de/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10900/57853/wfc%20library2.pdf?sequence=1>, accessed 8/8/2017, pp. 80-91.

jump to a new consciousness, a new goal in life, a new *Lebenswelt*, a new society of freedom and justice.

[...] The amazing thing about [Jesus's] death is not only that he died - as Luke and John painstakingly describe - in alienation from the human community around him, but in a state of total abandonment by God.<sup>23</sup>

Basic Trust for Küng means a trust which, after a stable childhood, eventually frees itself from the vicissitudes of adult life - sickness, aging and death - against which no defence can ultimately be found. The paradox of moral responsibility is therefore constituted by the fact that terrible things can always happen, to oneself and others; in such a world of *uneingeschränkter Gottverlassenheit* or 'total abandonment by God', the meaning of one's life can never be found in trying to overcome this radically insecure position, but rather in learning to trust in what lies beyond it, and in developing a default setting of gratitude instead of a sense of ultimate cosmic injustice. This 'qualitative leap to a new form of consciousness' can be summarised as the shift from the utilitarian, animal struggle to make life on Earth longer and more pleasant to the realisation that moral values - the practice of virtue on Earth - connect one with a higher unity or plane of being on which all meaning is situated. No one can be forced to make this leap, but it remains the core of Küng's *Weltethos* idea: Basic Trust implies not some blind imagining of the unimaginable, nor any clinging to outdated and indefensible dogmas of any kind, but a reasoned extrapolation from a stable childhood:

Only a theology fit for the present age, an academically rigorous and for this reason open and dialogical theology deserves its place alongside other university disciplines.

[...] This is the path between an irrational and uncritical dogmatism and an equally irrationally founded rationalism: the path of critical rationality.

[...] Everything which develops at the level of reason - in our everyday lives, our professions and our sciences, our philosophy and even our religion - is not so much irrelevant for questions of faith as it is determined by the prior dialectic of Basic Trust - affirmation versus rejection of life, justification versus accusation - with which every individual, Christian or otherwise, is confronted. Faith in God is not an exclusive privilege for believers in biblical revelation, as Barth's theology claims, but, as with many non-Christian believers in God, is based on a form of trust grounded in reality itself, which leads to trust and faith in a divine essence.

[... Such] faith is not an unreasonable and blind wager, but always a trust, grounded in reality itself, which responds to the dictates of reason.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Küng, *Was bleibt*, pp. 93-94, 99, 100, 117.

<sup>24</sup> Hans Küng, *Theologie im Aufbruch: Eine ökumenische Grundlegung*, (München: Piper, 1987), pp. 242, 244, 245.

This 'postmodern paradigm' has nothing whatsoever to do with deconstructionist relativism or scepticism concerning the sources or usefulness of morality, but is rather to be understood as the beginning of a postcolonial, post-imperial intercivilisational dialogue in which partners in Basic Trust are sought in good faith and as potential equals.<sup>25</sup>

Art and literature, to repeat, can and should be marshalled in support of this trust-building exercise (and will be so marshalled in the remainder of this book). This does not mean that art is irredeemably instrumentalised or politicised, or that art which fails to engender Basic Trust should ever be censored; it suggests simply that one important function of a certain kind of art is that it can help to build

a Basic Trust in reality which, in view of the deeply questionable nature of this reality, demands both critique and active engagement with unjust social conditions: an art which from a foundational 'Yes' to life, and precisely because of it, is able to represent all the terrible, ugly, wicked and destructive aspects of reality and gather them up in a higher aesthetic synthesis.

[...] For this we need, both as artists and as viewers of art, a mixture of fantasy, creative power, civil courage and intellectual integrity. Artists can, each in their own way, and in ways that activism alone seldom finds, help the otherwise helpless to enhance their conception of life and of reality as a whole, and thereby to confront their own alienation and to develop new senses of their place in the world.<sup>26</sup>

Trusting in the existence of a higher plane of meaning does not, for Küng, in any way free the individual from the urgency of improving earthly social and economic conditions, for herself and those around her; on the contrary, such 'faith' only reinforces the necessity and ultimate meaningfulness of the struggle and provides the energy for it, not because of some hoped-for individual pleasure-bonus beyond the grave, but because the work itself is already its own reward (Küng praises Mozart, for example, who like his hero St. Paul 'worked tirelessly until his very last days'<sup>27</sup>). In this sense, one need not place one's faith in 'God' at all; there will always be those who 'cultivate their Basic Trust in life via human relationships, productive work, and scientific or political activity... In other words, atheism [and agnosticism] do not automatically imply nihilism.'<sup>28</sup> Modern scientists like Albert Einstein, for example, display an extraordinary and exemplary Basic Trust in reality: 'Wherever I gain an insight into experimental research, I am typically amazed by the energy, patience and endurance, often over years, required to gain new insights.'<sup>29</sup> The Earth, and the physical universe as a whole, is indeed a *locus* of immense injustice and suffering - Küng therefore rejects simple pantheism ('I offer myself no illusions: always and everywhere, living beings must harm and even kill other living beings in order to survive'<sup>30</sup>) - but even in this bleak realm, Basic Trust and an iron will to virtue - faith

---

<sup>25</sup> See Küng, *Theologie im Aufbruch*, pp. 247-248 for a full outline of this new theological paradigm.

<sup>26</sup> Hans Küng, *Kunst und Sinnfrage*, (Zürich: Benziger, 1980), pp. 37, 61.

<sup>27</sup> Küng, *Was ich glaube*, p. 66.

<sup>28</sup> Küng, *Was ich glaube*, p. 36.

<sup>29</sup> Küng, *Was ich glaube*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>30</sup> Küng, *Was ich glaube*, p. 57.

in the existence, so to speak, of a 'World Ethos', or of an *ethos*, a candle, behind the world - can survive and flourish.

### Basic Trust and a World Ethos

Later in life it became clearer and clearer to me that trust plays an utterly decisive role in the overall life of a society, even in global politics and the global economy.

I do not in any sense exaggerate when I describe trust as *the basis of human community*.<sup>31</sup>

Creating Basic Trust within oneself is hard enough: the resolve to share this feeling of automatic purpose and belonging with the whole planet is the lofty *Weltethos* mission. Küng's emphasis on *interreligious* dialogue stems not only from his own background as a theologian, but also from the well-founded assumption that only 'religion' in the literal, etymological sense of the word can 'bind' or unite groups larger than tribes or clans. If *Weltethos* is indeed less than a new *Weltreligion*, it at least requires faith in the possibility of an interreligious dialogue which is actually mutually enriching rather than a polite and vaguely annoying search for 'compatibility': in short, it entails the cultivation of a spirit which is greater than the sum of its parts. Karl-Josef Kuschel explains the difference between Küng and his great rival and contemporary, Pope Benedict XVI Joseph Ratzinger, in the following terms, exposing the Benedictine conception of dialogue as a distrustful fraud:

As Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger expressly agreed with the philosopher and former President of the Italian Senate, Marcello Pera, when he wrote in his Foreword to Pera's book *Perché dobbiamo dirci cristiani* (2008) that interreligious dialogue 'in the strict sense of the term' was not possible, since a true dialogue implied 'putting one's own faith in brackets'.

[... But] one [must] in no way place one's Christian faith in brackets to call for interreligious dialogue. On the contrary, one can be legitimised and motivated by one's own faith to do so. Moreover, what is the point of 'dialogue' if it is nothing more than an explanation of one's own faith to someone else? [...] Those who already have the truth for themselves and do not think to put it up for discussion are in reality not interested in 'dialogue'. [...] Not everyone who says the word 'dialogue' really means it.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast to Ratzinger's papal conservatism, Küng and Kuschel's Christianity already contains within itself the kernel of faith in the meaningfulness of dialogue; their 'new theological paradigm' requires all 21st-century religions to do the same, and posits that the world's major religions (including, as we will see in more detail

---

<sup>31</sup> Küng, *Was ich glaube*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>32</sup> Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Leben ist Brückenschlagen*, (Stuttgart: Patmos, 2011), pp. 33-34.

below, Islam and Confucianism) at their best all contain a similar *ethos*, a commitment to *Wahrhaftigkeit* or truthfulness which is incorporated into the core of each religion itself (and well represented, for example, in the Islamic *hadith* 'Seek knowledge even in China', however 'unreliable' the *hadith's* provenance may be).

Whatever local earthly absolutes we may rightly or wrongly cling to in the conduct of our daily affairs - 'Don't kill', 'Don't steal' and so on (the *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* does a good job of summarising those that seem to be clung to across cultures and spiritual traditions) - Küng argues that 'we cannot say today where the final Truth lies. We discover ourselves along the way. We are all, as the ancient expression has it, *homines viatores*, pilgrims on this Earth. We see everything, as St. Paul says, in a mirror and in fragments, and not as it is in itself. We will only meet the full and final reality at the end; for the time being, we can only catch glimpses.'<sup>33</sup> A broad acceptance of precisely this schema or spirit, or indeed *ethos*, is required, Küng argues, for 21st-century international citizenship, of which the European continent is, or was, a potential model for the world as a whole: 'My vision is of an ethically grounded Europe - free from fundamentalism, but also from 'anything goes' relativism! - a Europe, in other words, held together by [...] an *ethos* which bridges individual self-realisation and responsible solidarity and is anchored in a certain form of spirituality.'<sup>34</sup>

As Küng and Kuschel repeatedly argue, the exploration of this middle way between self-assured and dangerous fundamentalism on the one hand - the belief in the possession of the whole, finished truth - and equally dangerous relativism concerning all truth and values, on the other, can perhaps most fruitfully be conducted in the province of the arts and humanities, and in literature in particular. The German experience of Nazism illustrated this in the 20th Century, and perhaps explains why the *Weltethos* idea would be born there: Kuschel depicts the Nazi project as the absolute worst of both extremes, a kind of fundamentalist relativism determined to overthrow all pre-existing moral authority. This siren's call must constantly be resisted:

The idea of an *ethos* is in reality a thin civilisational ice-sheet over an abyssal human potential for monstrosity which can seemingly always be reawakened from the depths.

Literature has addressed this problem more deeply than any other discipline. If poetry can contribute to the dialogue between cultures and religions, then perhaps it is above all by illuminating the human condition in all its peaks and troughs. A 'World Ethos' which aims to understand and to *change* individual behaviour therefore cannot do without literature as a dialogue partner.<sup>35</sup>

Each great writer is granted, in the words of Martin Amis, her own 'corner of the truth', no more and no less; more often than not, this experience of relative moral clarity is won through exposure to outright chaos, as was the case in postwar Germany: 'It took an experience of civilisational collapse to bring a generation together to conceive, without intellectual overcomplexity or crippling cynicism, the idea of a

---

<sup>33</sup> Küng, *Wozu Weltethos?*, p. 23.

<sup>34</sup> Küng, in *Wissenschaft und Weltethos*, p. 36.

<sup>35</sup> Kuschel, in *Wissenschaft und Weltethos*, p. 459.

shared *ethos*. It took a clear perversion of the idea of the Good to bring new plausibility back to categories such as “Good” and “Evil”.<sup>36</sup> While a straightforward acceptance of outdated Judeo-Christian myths and traditions will no longer do in a post-Enlightenment world, Kuschel follows Thomas Mann in defending the place of monotheistic thinking in the new constellation:

The person who reflects [today] on morality will find herself caught between irony and *pathos*. On the one hand, the post-Enlightenment individual knows about the [evolutionary] origins of her instincts and the dubious genealogy of morals. At the same time, however, she experiences the historical necessity of a [common] *ethos* in an age of [world-scale] catastrophes, collective blindness and general desecration of the moral order. This catch-22 is part and parcel of the spiritual physiognomy of modernity. Awareness of sin, however, is not simply a symptom of a repressive ideology for which monotheism deserves the blame; Thomas Mann shows, on the contrary, how a certain form of monotheism can act as a positive force for the embodiment of morality against the conscience-free deniers and destroyers of such an *ethos*.<sup>37</sup>

*Weltethos* seen in this light is not a matter of polite minimum consensus at all: ‘An *ethos* inspired by a certain proper spirituality is by no means a pious varnish over which a society can ride roughshod in its everyday dealings and amusements. Such an *ethos* is much more a liberating impulse to take responsibility for others and for one’s own moral development, and to prepare oneself for sacrifice on behalf of something beyond oneself.’<sup>38</sup>

What, if anything, can possibly inspire this readiness for sacrifice? The *Weltethos* pioneers Küng and Kuschel are clear in their conviction that no single closed system of religious references could do this job, now or in the foreseeable future: ‘*Weltethos* does not mean a total ethical consensus, let alone a single world religion, world culture, or world ideology.’<sup>39</sup> And yet the *Weltethos* founders remain loyal to their native discipline of theology even in a post-Kantian, cosmopolitan universe; like Kant, they remain convinced that something like ‘the idea of God is still needed, at least as a theoretical term, a distant and unreachable star which can be held firm as an ideal goal’.<sup>40</sup> Rather than leaving people alone with their existing gods, Küng calls for the development of a new, universal but dynamic *ethos*, ‘another way of doing theology’<sup>41</sup>:

God is neither a fixed idea of goodness independent of humanity or of the historicity of the world (Plato), nor an unmoved mover (Aristotle), nor an unliving One (Plotinus). Nor does He reach miraculously into history from outside. He is not a trick-performing magician either. ‘God’ is the

---

<sup>36</sup> Kuschel, in *Wissenschaft und Weltethos*, pp. 477-478.

<sup>37</sup> Kuschel, in *Weltethos und Wissenschaft*, p. 479.

<sup>38</sup> Kuschel, in *Weltethos und Wissenschaft*, p. 484.

<sup>39</sup> Küng, *Handbuch Weltethos*, p. 54.

<sup>40</sup> Küng, *Was bleibt*, p. 59.

<sup>41</sup> Küng, *Theologie im Aufbruch*, p. 247.

dynamic *ethos* itself which creates and maintains the world and moves it unseen from within.<sup>42</sup>

This shift from a static to a dynamic understanding of God and morality is a crucial element of the *Weltethos* vision itself. Describing the coming millennium as the 'dialogical millennium' - not as an apocalyptic 'end-time' but as a potential 'turning-point' in the history of humanity akin to the (first) Axial Age - Küng calls for a new understanding of 'religion', 'no longer as an ahistorical and eternal weight', but rather as a humanistic *ethos*, 'an expression of a transhistorical, transsocial reality', a 'historic social achievement': 'tolerating others by ignoring them is no longer enough!'<sup>43</sup> In the 21st century, such a commitment to lived equality clearly requires, as a start, dialogical engagement with the leading global religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism) and their cultural products in a bid to create 'a theology fit for the current horizon of our experience'<sup>44</sup>. Out of this theological and cultural ferment, there emerges a new picture of a *truly* common *ethos*, not just a polite contractarian consensus: this new paradigm for theology faces squarely the question whether 'there is, at the end of the day, only one true religion or many true religions'.<sup>45</sup> Of the four possible answers - no religion is true, one religion is true (Küng describes this as 'the traditional Catholic position'), all religions are true, different religions have a share of the truth - Küng prefers the latter, not least because it allows truth and religious freedom to coexist, or in any case prevents both 'a betrayal of liberty for the sake of truth' and 'a betrayal of truth for the sake of liberty': 'Contrary to [libertarian and relativist conceptions], freedom is not simply freedom from constraints and duties, a negative concept, but rather a positive [call] to new responsibility: towards other people, towards oneself, towards the Absolute: true freedom therefore, a freedom for truth.'<sup>46</sup>

This emphasis on 'qualitative freedom', taken up by *Weltethos* Institut Director Claus Dierksmeier in his attempt to integrate Küng's *Weltethos* into business ethics discourse<sup>47</sup>, allows the individual to retain her existing commitments without ever abolishing the future or the possibility of change: Instead of 'a syncretism where everything good and bad is simply thrown together into a blend'<sup>48</sup>, Küng defends his own Christian corner of the truth without claiming Christianity as the true religion for all time:

I am a Christian because I believe - following on from the Jewish faith and in advance of Islam - that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob not only worked in the history of Israel (and Ismael), but that he made his existence and essence known in an incomparable and, for us, decisive way in the life, works, suffering and death of Jesus of Nazareth. [...] This means, however, if one calls Christians to self-criticism, that Christians do not 'believe' in *Christianity*, for Christianity as a religion - with its

---

<sup>42</sup> Küng, *Was bleibt*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>43</sup> Küng, *Theologie im Aufbruch*, p. 22.

<sup>44</sup> Küng, *Theologie im Aufbruch*, p. 242.

<sup>45</sup> Küng, *Theologie im Aufbruch*, 273.

<sup>46</sup> Küng, *Theologie im Aufbruch*, p. 285.

<sup>47</sup> See Claus Dierksmeier, *Qualitative Freiheit: Selbstbestimmung in weltbürgerliche Verantwortung*, (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016).

<sup>48</sup> Küng, *Theologie im Aufbruch*, p. 285.

dogmatism, liturgies and disciplines - is a highly ambivalent historical phenomenon, just like any other religion.<sup>49</sup>

One can, and should, debate the historical novelty of Jesus and the enduring meaning of his message, but whatever one's position, the future of humanity transcends any individual, no matter how exemplary or revolutionary she was in her time. A critical rationality fit for the challenges of the 21st Century must accept the unavoidable fact of the march of time:

One fact about the future is known: at the end of humanity or the end of the world, there will be no Buddhism or Hinduism, no Islam and no Judaism. There will be no Christianity either. There will be no religion left, just the inexpressible *ethos* itself, towards which all religions strive.

And in the end there will be no prophet or sage to stand between the religions and keep them separate from one another, no Muhammad or Buddha-figure, not even a Jesus, in whom Christians believe, but rather [will] God Himself - *ho theos* or however he may be called in the East - truly become, not just a part of everything, but everything in everything.<sup>50</sup>

The overtly Christian language of this call to theological reason should not obscure its universal claims: followers of other religions, other prophets and gurus and leaders, must also accept the historical contingency of their affiliations and the higher, dynamic and transhistorical *ethos* which will survive them and all their efforts. In this sense, *Weltethos* is indeed no new *Weltreligion*, but it remains an identifiable *ethos* rooted in Basic Trust and a sense of the historical continuity and significance of our moral lives as a whole.

The last three decades of Küng's professional life have essentially been dedicated to the quest for this common dynamic spirit; rather than provide an exhaustive survey or overview of Küng's multifarious *Spurensuche*<sup>51</sup> or 'search for traces' across his sixty-plus book publications, we will briefly sketch the *Weltethos* engagement with two major traditions in particular - Islam and Confucianism<sup>52</sup> - with a view to offering the reader a short taste of the possibilities of the *Weltethos* paradigm (as well as a sense of the limits of Küng's own pioneering forays and the need to push beyond them), before building more diverse flavours into the mix in subsequent chapters.

### Weltethos on Islam

---

<sup>49</sup> Küng, *Theologie im Aufbruch*, p. 301.

<sup>50</sup> Küng, *Theologie im Aufbruch*, p. 306.

<sup>51</sup> See Hans Küng, *Spurensuche: Die Weltreligionen auf dem Weg*, (München: Piper, 1999) as well as the DVD series of the same name for the most general overview of his engagement with the world's major religious traditions.

<sup>52</sup> Stephan Schlenzger offers a highly recommendable book-length study of Indian contributions to the *Weltethos* conversation - a notable absence from the present volume - in *Der Hinduismus: Glaube, Geschichte, Ethos*, (München: Piper, 2006).



*Goethe had so assimilated himself to the spirit and world of this 'guardian of the Qur'an' [Hafez] that he went so far as to describe himself as 'the Persian's spiritual twin'. He was the only poet with whom he was interested in 'competing'. Quatrains from Goethe's Divan such as 'God is the East!/ God is the West!/ Northern and southern lands/Rest in the peace of His hands!' and 'how foolish that we each / Prize our own creeds! / If 'Islam' means simply 'given to God' / then we all live and die in Islam' have not lost any of their didactic charm, though if quoted today, fall like a meteorite out of the blue sky into a giant pit of Islamophobia.<sup>53</sup>*

Karl-Josef Kuschel

Goethe's *West-Östlicher Divan*, and other Enlightenment-era *Weltethos* prototypes such as Lessing's *Ring Parable*, constitute the cultural background for Küng and Kuschel's *Weltethos* engagement with Islamic religion and civilisation. This attempt to find friends in Islamic history, however, remains true to what friendship really is: a recognition not just of compatibility but of potential superiority in at least some areas, and a Basic Trust in this state of affairs.

In this spirit, Kuschel singles out the three great modern reformers of Islam - Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Mohammad Abduh and Muhammad Iqbal - for admiration and praise. Al-Afghani refuses to accept Ernest Renan's claim that 'Islam itself is responsible for the "inferiority" of the countries it governs and the "shrivelled spirits" of its believers, for this religion makes its followers believe that they possess the absolute truth, and forces them to pay the price of "spiritual inferiority" for this "arrogance"<sup>54</sup>: in contrast, it is clear that al-Afghani, 'despite the scepticism of his European counterpart, regarded Islam as entirely fit for a modernity shaped by the natural sciences and technology'<sup>55</sup>, and correspondingly 'argued for a dynamic, creative and progressive Islamic civilisation and religion across the Muslim world'.<sup>56</sup> Abduh builds on his teacher al-Afghani's insights, extending the Salafist movement not in the Wahhabist direction it has largely since taken, but in a Confucian-like quest to recover the best from the past and to use that wisdom to overcome the challenges of the present, which include, then as now, 'the disunity of Muslims, the lack of universal education, an authoritarian political culture and a religious orthodoxy mired in traditionalism'.<sup>57</sup> Iqbal, most significantly of all, was

a man who united three rare talents in his person: poetry, philosophy, and political engagement. His poetry? The best stuff was written in the spirit of Goethe's *Divan* and Rumi's love mysticism. This was enough to make Iqbal, fluent in both Urdu and Farsi, the honoured national poet of Pakistan. [...] The main insight of the *Book of Eternity* is an

---

<sup>53</sup> Kuschel, *Leben ist Brückenschlagen*, p. 38.

<sup>54</sup> Kuschel, *Leben ist Brückenschlagen*, p. 40.

<sup>55</sup> Kuschel, *Leben ist Brückenschlagen*, p. 39.

<sup>56</sup> Kuschel, *Leben ist Brückenschlagen*, p. 39.

<sup>57</sup> Kuschel, *Leben ist Brückenschlagen*, p. 42.

understanding of Islam as a path to the self-realisation of the individual and the transnational unity of peoples. Experts have judged it to be 'a spiritually rich and readable summary of Iqbal's philosophy and a fine example of Islamic humanism'. [...] And yet there should be no room for misunderstanding: Iqbal is the opposite of a Pakistani nationalist or Muslim exclusivist. His vision, spiced up with spiritual sources from Goethe to Rumi, is transnational, and oriented towards humanity as a whole.<sup>58</sup>

Kuschel summarises Iqbal's vision by echoing the evaluation of Hermann Hesse: 'His dream is a humanity united in the idea and service of Allah.'<sup>59</sup> The great paradox of Islam understood as the final revelation is that, taken to its logical conclusion, it does away with the need for revelation itself, and reflexively destroys its own authority as revelation; Iqbal's 'Allah' is nothing more than a literary personification of the universal *ethos* itself, a long, long way from the Islamism which 'divides the world into truth and lies, belief and unbelief, holy and unholy, a house of peace and a house of war, in order to dream of a mass conversion of the world to Islam'.<sup>60</sup> Kuschel does his best to present Mahatma Gandhi as a more natural ally for Iqbal than Osama bin Laden or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi:

Gandhi does the same with Islam and the Prophet as we have seen in his evaluation of the Sermon on the Mount and the figure of Jesus: he is first and foremost convinced by that which is *already near to him* (endurance, dedication to one's work, self-discipline, self-cultivation, trust in God and faith in one's own mission).

[...] He draws practical consequences from this, above all for his understanding of the equal footing of the different religious traditions: 'Whoever swears by the Gita,' Gandhi wrote in an article as early as 1927, 'ought not to make a distinction between Hindus and Muslims. [...] Hindus and Muslims alike continually demand that there be no compulsion in matters of spirituality. Posterity will regard us as unbelieving savages if we carry on with our fruitless strivings to convert one another to our own religious symbols.'<sup>61</sup>

Allah, God, or whichever name one chooses for the dynamic moral principle at the heart of the *ethos* of the world, is a single living principle rather than a grey practical consensus; Küng embarked on his famous trilogy covering the three Abrahamic religions - *Judaism, Christianity, Islam* - with this idea already in mind:

What epoch-defining changes have taken place in the world's major religions, even as their core messages have remained the same? Küng speaks here, in the language of the philosophy of science, of a 'paradigm shift', and sees all religions as confronted with similar structural problems in the move from pre-modernity to modernity and

---

<sup>58</sup> Kuschel, *Leben ist Brückenschlagen*, pp. 43-45.

<sup>59</sup> Kuschel, *Leben ist Brückenschlagen*, p. 45.

<sup>60</sup> Kuschel, *Leben ist Brückenschlagen*, p. 34.

<sup>61</sup> Kuschel, *Leben ist Brückenschlagen*, p. 257.

postmodernity. Küng calls this his 'trilateral methodology', and applies it in all three of his monographs on the monotheistic religions. The common theme: all three religions face the same historical challenges [in the dialectic] between tradition and innovation.<sup>62</sup>

How then can one accept the simultaneous dynamism and enduring sameness of a *Weltethos*, the need both to refine one's own moral identity over time as a meaningfully free individual and to rely on atemporal standards with which one cannot be accused of fiddling to suit one's own short-term self-interest? Both Christianity and Islam (as well as Judaism) succeed, when best understood, in this seemingly impossible task by incorporating dynamism and freedom from dogma into a 'hypermodern' (as opposed to relativistically 'postmodern') faith or Basic Trust in the existence of God, a Being defined, in both traditions, not simply as 'Great' but as the 'Ever Greater', in fact as an *ethos* of ever greater moral development rather than as a static Being at all: 'At bottom, God is in the universe, and the universe is in God! At the same time, however, God is more than the world. [...] And even if there is more than one world: God in the Christian tradition is the *semper maior*, the ever Greater, and Muslims express this same idea with the formula *Allahu akbar* - God is *greater*.'<sup>63</sup>

Küng's *Islam: Past, Present, Future* dramatises the rise and fall of this 'ethos of dynamism' across 1400 years of Islamic civilisation and its eventual, almost total eclipse by Ibn Taymiyya-inspired fundamentalism, before calling for a Reformation along *Weltethos* lines. There is, as Küng patiently illustrates, plenty of material in the Islamic civilisational tradition to warrant optimism regarding the possibility of reform: 'It is the *ideal of a religion* which has been presented here. Islam is uncomplicated in its daily structures, rational and tolerant. It is in this sense a bearer of the eternal lesson in trust which defines monotheism in general.'<sup>64</sup> Such monotheism is not totalitarian or blind to the demands of *Wahrhaftigkeit*; on the contrary, it is faith in the existence of a single, dynamic *ethos* which allows the idea of truth to take hold as a universal value in the first place:

In the long run, all idealisations, mystifications and glorifications end up costing the religion itself, whether Christianity or Islam or any other religion. And don't both these religions demand a spirit of truthfulness? Why not truth regarding themselves then? [...] No one, no religious or secular authority, has the right to hinder the search for truth by banning the asking of questions. Precisely for the sake of the truth of one's own religion, an uncompromising commitment to truthfulness is required, one which by definition goes hand in hand with justice and fairness.<sup>65</sup>

According to this very logic of Islam itself, not even the Qur'an is immune from such rational scrutiny: 'Even orthodox Islamic Qur'an studies have never made a secret of the fact that the Holy Book, as we possess it today, was only compiled decades after the Prophet's death.'<sup>66</sup> With *Wahrhaftigkeit* integrated into the Islamic system of

---

<sup>62</sup> Kuschel, in *Hans Küng: Eine Nahaufnahme*, pp. 62, 72-73.

<sup>63</sup> Küng, *Was bleibt*, p. 64.

<sup>64</sup> Hans Küng, *Der Islam: Geschichte, Gegenwart, Zukunft*, (München: Piper, 2004), p. 44.

<sup>65</sup> Küng, *Der Islam*, p. 47.

<sup>66</sup> Küng, *der Islam*, p. 101.

values from the very beginning, the question of faith and Basic Trust - trust in what exactly? - takes centre stage for Küng: 'Like Judaism and Christianity before it, Islam is also a faith-based religion: human beings come to God neither through disinterested philosophical argument nor mystical quests for unity, but rather in a trusting faith. Faith in the one God.'<sup>67</sup> The highest meaning of prophecy in the Abrahamic religions is therefore not at all what it seems; it is an *expression* of existing faith in the benevolent dynamism and ultimately moral character of the universe, an effect rather than a cause of trust. All three monotheisms, Islam included, should be celebrated for their contribution to the revolutionary, civilisation-enabling discovery and development of the moral dimension of human life, celebrated by James Breasted in *The Dawn of Conscience* (1932) as the miraculous emergence of 'character' from the swamp of prehistoric ignorance and day-to-day Pleistocene desperation to survive.<sup>68</sup> Küng shares Breasted's view that we remain at the beginning of this world-historical transformation away from opportunistic polytheism and *ad hoc* nature-worship towards a trust-based, character-based *ethos*:

In India a mysticism of unity, in China a vision of cosmic harmony define the baseline religious mood, while in Islam it is an image of God and humanity facing each other which holds sway. Like its earlier Abrahamic cousins, Islam is a religion of confrontation between God and humankind, between an almighty God and created human beings. But through [the metaphor of] God's Word to humanity and human faith in this single God, it becomes a religion of contact, of dialogue. [...] It is in this sense that we can - as I endeavoured to show with Judaism and Christianity - speak of a basic *ethos* common to the three prophetic religions which can in turn offer its own world-historical contribution to a developing World Ethos.<sup>69</sup>

The insistent opposition, common to the Abrahamic monotheisms, between the eternal, dynamic, ever-moral beyond - God - and the frequently amoral and immoral prose of the here-and-now serves the important purpose of liberating the individual from what Peter Hitchens has called the 'crushing tribal group-think'<sup>70</sup> of ordinary human society, thereby allowing individual character, rooted in a Basic Trust nurtured in the tribe but not ending there, to flourish:

In the Qur'an, the Muslim individual is directly addressed, and called to change her life. This was a new development. In the Arabian tribal society of the period, the first loyalty was owed to the extended family, the second to the clan. The individual was worth little in comparison: in the desert, an individual was in any case lost; without the support of family or clan, she was nothing.

[...] The monotheism which Muhammad preached not only aimed at building a new community, but also at giving a new kind of

---

<sup>67</sup> Küng, *Der Islam*, p. 115.

<sup>68</sup> See James Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience*, (Prentice Hall & IBD, 1976(1932)). Parts of the text are also available at <http://www.goldenageproject.org.uk/dawn.php> (accessed 29/12/2017).

<sup>69</sup> Küng, *Der Islam*, pp. 129-130.

<sup>70</sup> Peter Hitchens, 'God Does Exist', *Oxford Union*, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnIH4gomOqc> (accessed 8/8/2017).

responsibility to the individual. If there is only one God, the creator, sustainer and judge of humanity, then the individual human being becomes worthy of a new form of dignity: he is no longer a toy to be thrown around among rival gods, nor a simple slave in a totalitarian arrangement of clans and tribes, but rather a creation of God Himself, indeed His descendant and representative on Earth, and responsible to this God for her conduct.<sup>71</sup>

The corollary of this sense of higher moral responsibility for one's life as a whole - Breasted's 'character' - in Islam as well as in Christianity and Judaism, is gratitude: 'If a human being is God's creation, then her basic attitude must be one of gratitude, not only [a reflex] to call on Him in an emergency, and, when the danger has passed, to forget Him again.'<sup>72</sup> This gratitude transcends the debates about the primacy of revelation over reason or reason over revelation which occupied Islamic scholars for centuries, and which Küng dutifully sketches in *Islam: Past, Present, Future*; beyond the early adoption of Persian and Greek ideas and the exemplary openness of the Mu'tazila ('No one in the history of Islam so decisively adopted Greek philosophy and other foreign sciences as the Mu'tazila'<sup>73</sup>), Küng singles out three figures for particular attention in the history of Islamic thought: al-Farabi (872-950), al-Ghazali (1058-1111) and Averroes (1126-1198). Al-Farabi 'sought to reconcile philosophy and revelation. [...] Since God is Himself the embodiment of reason, the human beings He has created are also gifted with reason and can freely define themselves, but as such they should, as individuals and social beings, cultivate moral principles (virtues) as a form of orientation'<sup>74</sup>. Al-Ghazali's legacy, though also great, was less outrightly positive in the long run:

The corpus of the mainstream tradition had remained fixed since the middle of the 9th Century; new additions were scarcely possible anymore. As a paradigm shift was now required, and as new prophetic words and deeds were no longer thinkable and the gateway of justice was closed to many, the religion, its theology and legal theory were faced with sclerosis, and it took a man like al-Ghazali, for whom the memorisation of the standard texts without critical reflection could scarcely be a satisfying form of education, to call the religion back to life.

Did this call work? In the short term, hardly at all, because the legalist resistance from all quarters was too strong. In the medium term, certainly: al-Ghazali's synthesis made the non-Sufis more tolerant of their Sufi brothers and sisters, simultaneously resisted the temptation to decouple Sufism from the realm of *Sharia*, and established for the Sunni majority a normative theology which remained a fundamental guide for many centuries after his death.

Even as a Sufi, this religious scholar did not in any way want to practise a form of escapism from society. He was not seeking a 'great escape', but rather a 'great renewal', which he hoped, even before his

---

<sup>71</sup> Hans Küng, *Der Islam*, pp. 199, 200.

<sup>72</sup> Küng, *Der Islam*, p. 201.

<sup>73</sup> Küng, *Der Islam*, p. 351.

<sup>74</sup> Küng, *Der Islam*, pp. 452, 453.

departure from Baghdad, to enact with his preaching and scribbling. [...] The true path for al-Ghazali the philosopher was that of the *Golden Mean*, which he had absorbed from the pre-Islamic tradition (beginning with Aristotle's definition of virtue): the *Via Media* as a guide for thought and action.

[...] In the long term, however, one can indeed wonder whether the thoroughgoing commitment to grounding the *Sharia* in Sufi theology did not breed its own need for a paradigm shift in the end. Did there not exist the danger [after Ghazali] of a 'legalistic Sufism' which would block all further attempts at innovation and renovation because it left too little room for new historical and theological developments?<sup>75</sup>

Averroes, meanwhile, represented the last great burst of light before the 'victory of traditionalism', a creed partially attributable to al-Ghazali but ultimately enshrined in the person of Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328). Unlike his traditionalist successors, Averroes clung to the idea that reason and inspiration could always, in a religion based on trust, remain happily married:

The philosopher sought to counter the believer's scepticism of the theologian Al-Ghazali, who rejected the application of the logic of cause and effect to metaphysical questions, and to stress the role of reason, not least by pointing out that any argument against reason presupposed the very thing it was seeking to deny.

Averroes separates revelation and philosophy in order to overcome the contradictions between them. It is unfair to describe this thesis as an argument for a 'dual conception of truth', as if the truth of revelation and the truth of reason stood in opposition to one another. It is much more the case that he regarded true faith as reasonable faith; even if these seemed contradictory, they were in fact part of the same principle.<sup>76</sup>

The rise of the star of Ibn Taymiyya, however, in the dreadful aftermath of the Mongol invasions, was both a cause and an effect of a collapse of Basic Trust from which the Islamic world has, in Küng's frank assessment, yet fully to recover: 'Neither Averroes and rational philosophy nor Ibn Arabi and mysticism would come to define the [modern] history of Sunni Islam, but rather the traditionalism of Ibn Taymiyya. All fundamentalists over the coming centuries will make reference to him, including Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, whose puritanical 'Wahhabism' would become the ideology of the House of Saud [...] during and after its battles with Ottoman rule.'<sup>77</sup>

After an 'analysis' of Islam's historical trajectory - the flowering of gratitude during good-spirited early debates about the relationship between faith and reason followed by a long autumn culminating in a winter of Wahhabism - the last part of Küng's monograph seeks a 'synthesis', a lasting 'Islamic Spring' which might rescue Islamic civilisation from its internal and external enemies. No amount of identity

---

<sup>75</sup> Küng, *Der Islam*, pp. 446-447, 448.

<sup>76</sup> Küng, *Der Islam*, pp. 456-457.

<sup>77</sup> Küng, *Der Islam*, p. 473.

politics or selfish insistence on rights will achieve this transformation away from a siege mentality towards a culture of gratitude and Basic Trust:

Neither Islamist ‘militancy’ nor secular ‘neutrality’ offers a satisfying solution for everyone. Is there a better way? [...] Such a dialogue will remain fruitless if it limits itself to polite platitudes and flattery and refrains from critique. Self-critique is above all required in order to make such critique of others convincing.

[...] If the dialogue is to reach concrete solutions, then it will not be without uncomfortable dealings for both sides, particularly those concerning rights. Every one-sided and thoroughgoing insistence on one’s own rights blocks the path to understanding, and is counterproductive. All human relationships in which one party constantly affirms her rights descend from the sphere of morality and will not be lasting. Any society which asks rights to do too much work will eventually be threatened by deep discords; rights and responsibilities belong together.<sup>78</sup>

Paradoxically, only interreligious dialogue in this highest sense has the power to remind Islamic civilisation of its own best essence and its unique and worthy contribution to human civilisation as a whole; Küng’s frustrations with ossified Vatican politics had earlier led him to an identical conclusion regarding Christianity and a recognition of the need for an ‘ecumenical turn’ in his own work as a theologian. After lovingly painting a 750-page portrait of Islamic theology and civilisation, Küng’s epilogue-synthesis for the 21st Century, which he calls his ‘*Hoffnungsbild Islam*’, rests on a foundation of post-literalist faith in the spirit rather than the letter of Islamic law, a reasoned Basic Trust in the future rather than a desperate clinging to a changeless past, a humanistic reorientation in which

Muslims in the 21st Century would no longer be required to hold onto the doctrine [*i’jaz*] of the literally revealed and therefore perfect, error-free and unchangeable nature of the 78,000 words of the Qur’an (and indirectly of the *Sunna* and *Sharia* as well), and would come to take seriously the idea of the ‘revelation’ as a historical phenomenon. In practice, [this would entail] a shift away from literalist interpretations of the text and traditionalist methods of argument towards a culture which tackles the spirit and meaning of the book as a whole, [a rejection] of an overgrown legalism in favour of both an older and newer understanding of the [Islamic] tradition: Islam as a foundation, understood not in fundamentalist terms but as an ever-renewed call to dialogue with the demands of the day.<sup>79</sup>

This dynamic *ethos* is easily recoverable in the Islamic tradition itself:

What we might conceive as a process of ‘secularisation’ is far from a privatisation of faith or a full and final separation of the political and the

---

<sup>78</sup> Küng, *Der Islam*, pp. 747-748.

<sup>79</sup> Küng, *Der Islam*, p. 765.

religious. We are talking here of a new form of enlightened religiosity. Islam's basic position on spiritual and scientific progress is in essence positive, as many Qur'anic verses and *hadiths* attest; the first five centuries of Islam, in which the Islamic world culturally outshone the West, speak for themselves.<sup>80</sup>

### Weltethos on Confucianism and Beyond

*I received more spontaneous support for my idea of a World Ethos from Chinese people than from anyone else. One can debate whether Confucianism is a religion or not; I take the clear view that it is a religion, because 'the Mandate of Heaven' plays such a large role. One can even dethrone an emperor if his deeds no longer correspond to the will of Heaven.<sup>81</sup>*

Along with the Islamic world, Chinese civilisation too, Küng argues, made the extraordinary leap from primeval polytheism to Breasted's 'discovery of character' and the idea of a single World Ethos; Küng's Confucianism is a 'progressive discovery of the worth of individual human beings, spurred by Confucius and never completely abandoned', and a celebration of the 'human capacity for moral greatness and even wisdom'.<sup>82</sup> In his book *Christianity and Chinese Religion*, co-authored with Julia Ching, Küng in fact traces the roots of this civilisation back beyond Confucius to

the cult of Heaven, already widespread long before Confucius' time, in many ways the key distinguishing feature of Chinese religion and proof of its true faith in the idea of God, and maintained today in the form of popular belief in a 'higher power'.

Indeed, it has long been believed in China that a single God or moral force governs the world and has a personal stake in the destinies of all human beings.<sup>83</sup>

Unburdened by the demands and potential distractions of revelation myths, Chinese civilisation has built its Basic Trust out of direct experience of the world and a deep sense of history, arriving, by a different path, at the same conclusion as the Abrahamic monotheisms properly understood:

While in India there developed a fascination for the eternal world of religious faith, in China and Israel an explicitly historical consciousness

---

<sup>80</sup> Küng, *Der Islam*, p. 768.

<sup>81</sup> Küng, *Wozu Weltethos*, p. 148.

<sup>82</sup> Hans Küng, in Hans Küng and Dieter Senghaas (eds.), *Friedenspolitik: Ethische Grundlagen internationaler Beziehungen*, (München: Piper, 2003), p. 115.

<sup>83</sup> Hans Küng, in Hans Küng and Julia Ching, *Christentum und chinesische Religion*, (München: Piper, 1988), p. 122.



was early apparent, not an Indian cyclical model, but a linear, progressive conception of history and human development. Just as biblical accounts of the bliss of paradise were never intended as empirical reports, so too were the longstanding Chinese myths of a Golden Age only ever intended as historical metaphors.<sup>84</sup>

Renewed interest in the historical details of Confucius' life is a fine illustration of this indigenous spirit of *Wahrhaftigkeit* in the Chinese tradition, not only for its own sake but also, and moreover,

because such research, when practised with the courage to think critically and with respect for the facts, corresponds to the basic Confucian mindset: *rational inquiry into the passing down of tradition*. To what end? To be responsible to oneself and others for what one believes, both in view of hypercritical modern anti-religiousness and uncritical premodern acceptance of inherited beliefs. Not a blind and authoritarian Confucianism, therefore, but a properly Confucian, rational and responsible attitude.<sup>85</sup>

After the ossification of Confucianism during the Qing Dynasty and its final sordid collaboration with the oppressive earthly powers of 19th-century imperial China - not at all incomparable with the appalling behaviour of many mainstream Christian and Muslim religious authorities in the 20th and 21st Centuries - Küng joins the ranks of New Confucians like Mou Zongsan and, more recently, Tu Weiming in calling for a renaissance of faith in the dynamic *ethos* at the heart of Chinese civilisation. Offering the highest praise a Catholic theologian could offer, Küng even places Confucius at the same high tavern table of honour as Jesus himself:

Neither [Confucius nor Jesus] was a metaphysical thinker who wasted undue time speculating over God, the ground of Being or other final-order questions. Neither described himself as a God. Both were more interested in practical consequences for human beings [of living lives taken to have a moral purpose].

They weren't sceptics or rationalists either, however, willing to reduce thinking to rationality and religion to moral rules without reference to a transcendent reality ('God', 'Heaven').

[...] They both lived what they preached...<sup>86</sup>

Having raised the bar of interreligious dialogue to new potential heights with this gesture, Küng then, committing a rare, grave and crucial mistake, seeks to distinguish between Jesus (the 'theocentrist'), Confucius (the 'anthropocentrist') and Buddha (the 'mystic'), before politely relativising all three: 'Beside Jesus (in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets extending to Muhammad) on the one hand and Buddha (and the Indian mystics in general) on the other, Confucius embodies a third type of religiosity, which one can and must - without seeking to rank them -

---

<sup>84</sup> Küng, in *Christentum und chinesische Religion*, p. 128.

<sup>85</sup> Küng, in *Christentum und chinesische Religion*, p. 130.

<sup>86</sup> Küng, in *Christentum und chinesische Religion*, pp. 133-134.

distinguish.<sup>87</sup> Tu Weiming's definition of Confucianism as an 'anthropocosmic'<sup>88</sup> belief system, however, in which human beings seek to deepen their understanding of the *ethos* inside themselves through a 'dialogical relationship with Heaven', would seem, as we will see in more detail in Chapter 3 and in a coming book project on Tu's 'spiritual humanism', a much more satisfying description of the Confucian *ethos* than any mere 'anthropocentrism'. K ung fails here to live up to the *Weltethos* project's own lofty conception of interreligious dialogue as a willingness to accept the possibility that an encountered belief system may in fact have elements which are not merely compatible with one's own, but superior; rather than concluding merely that 'Christians and Confucians can agree on the diachronic and synchronic connection between responsibility and culpability' and that 'a consensus should be found in this direction'<sup>89</sup>, perhaps the Chinese are simply right, as K ung's own idea of Basic Trust would seem to suggest, that the existence of evil in human beings is not 'a question of ontology (or of human nature as such) or even of theology (of Holy and Unholy), but rather, typically Chinese, a question of pedagogy'.<sup>90</sup> Maybe, just maybe, the Confucian approach to justice marries the 'Eye for an eye' and 'Turn the other cheek' opposites of the Christian tradition rather better than the Christian tradition itself does. K ung, however, will not hear of it:

With Jesus of Nazareth, on the other hand, every person can become a neighbour, *my* neighbour (this is the sense of the Parable of the Good Samaritan). Jesus aims to overcome the ingrained distinctions between family and stranger, religious ally and religious enemy, friend and foe.

[...] It is clear that the anthropocentrism of Confucius holds the reins of love for one's neighbour tighter than the theocentrism of Jesus of Nazareth. Loving one's *enemy*? 'Someone asked [Confucius], "Should I repay injustice with kindness?" The master replied, "If you do, how will you repay justice? One repays injustice with justice, justice alone with kindness."' Jesus puts it very differently: 'Be kind to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who offend you.'

[...] Who could claim that such an attitude of practical love for one's enemies would not be of immense significance for peacebuilding efforts between nations and religions in a polycentric, transcultural, multireligious world?<sup>91</sup>

This brings us to the great tension at the heart of K ung's work, and the *raison d' tre* of this entire book: if one's Basic Trust in life is rooted exclusively in one's own 'religion', then anything incompatible, or even *seemingly* incompatible (Confucius and Jesus, indeed, may not be nearly so far apart on the theme of 'loving one's enemies' as they are made to seem by K ung here) is a threat rather than an opportunity unless the dialogical principle is already embedded in the 'religion' itself. K ung, however, instead of allowing people to cherry-pick from multiple traditions in the name of a truly dynamic and borderless *Weltethos* of 'harmony without uniformity' (*heerbutong* in the

<sup>87</sup> K ung, in *Christentum und chinesische Religion*, p.136.

<sup>88</sup> See Tu Weiming, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity: Essays on the Confucian Discourse in Cultural China*, (New Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilisations, 2010).

<sup>89</sup> K ung, in *Christentum und chinesische Religion*, p. 144.

<sup>90</sup> K ung, in *Christentum und chinesische Religion*, p. 143.

<sup>91</sup> K ung, in *Christentum und chinesische Religion*, pp. 145, 146, 147.

Confucian idiom), at one point refuses to support the adoption of even a second religious 'nationality':

For all the possibilities of cultural and ethical integration, therefore, the truth claims of each religion reach a depth which, in the end, call each individual human being to a Yes or a No, and challenge her with an either-or. This is not only the case with the exclusivist prophetic religions of Semitic origin, but also with the more inclusive, mystical Indian religions and the wisdom-oriented religions of the Chinese tradition.

[...] As much as a cultural and ethical dual citizenship is possible and should always be encouraged, religiously speaking, in the deepest, strictest sense of faith, dual citizenship should be excluded as a possibility - for all the great religions.<sup>92</sup>

I hope to have shown in this chapter, however, that the whole idea of Basic Trust in life, on which Küng's *Weltethos* edifice is in fact built, not only allows for dual religious passport-holding, but actually does away with the idea of passports altogether. What matters is trust, not in Jesus or Muhammad or Confucius as bearers of an absolute or 'revealed' truth, but a broad trust in the dynamic and dialogical *ethos* these individuals each, in their own unique, powerful and humanly flawed ways, embodied and diffused in their own lifetimes. This *ethos* can be recovered and multiplied elsewhere too, in undiscovered artworks and stories from the past and in as yet unmade works and narratives from the future. One is naturally free, for whatever idiosyncratic reasons, to prefer the deeds and formulations of one sage or artist to another (as Küng openly does with Jesus of Nazareth), but the fundamentalist, 'all-or-nothing' attitude which Küng briefly and regrettably shows here in his critique of the idea of religious 'dual citizenship' seems incompatible with a 21st-century World Ethos based on *Lebensvertrauen* and a corresponding spirit of openness to new ideas - openness not only in a formalistic, rational, polite and superficial sense, but precisely in the sense of being ready to have one's heart ambushed by foreign beauty and the raw power of foreign example without feeling threatened in one's identity, but rather enhanced by contact. Thankfully, as the *Weltethos* movement – led by Küng and Kuschel's own brave and 'bridgebuilding' examples - has already helped to show (and as this book hopes to show further in diverse detail): unlike Breasted's miracle first discoverers of 'character' in the pre-Axial age, we have the shoulders of giants from all over the world, and from many different centuries, to stand on. All spiritual traditions worth the name - including enlightened forms of atheism and agnosticism - contain this *ethos*: it is not simply that one is free, if one wants, to accept dialogue with other religions and remain a Christian, Muslim, Confucian, atheist or agnostic; the very idea of a dynamic *Weltethos* rooted in Basic Trust in life is that such readiness for – and trust in - unpredictable spiritual growth is *part of what it means to be* a good Christian, Muslim, Confucian, atheist or agnostic in the first place. I was born and raised a New Zealander, but I do not need to stay in New Zealand or retain a New Zealand passport to remain true to my heritage; the very Basic Trust in life bequeathed to me by my education in New Zealand has stayed with me even as I have travelled the world, and indeed is the very thing which gave me the courage to

---

<sup>92</sup> Küng, in *Christentum und chinesische Religion*, p. 306.

explore it in the first place, adopting new 'passports' and visas as I go but always happy to return home, even as there remains so much about my native land that I would change. I only ever wanted to serve and expand the kernel of beauty I first discovered at home, in my own family; the collection of stories in this book, for all their diversity of origin, aim to do just that.

## 2, Liberals, Atheists and a World Ethos: Ronald Dworkin and Martha Nussbaum

### Introduction

'We are tired of ideologies of unity,' Hans Küng has emphasised repeatedly in defence of his *Weltethos* Project.<sup>93</sup> The century of fascism and communism, culminating in the proclaimed universal triumph of the liberal ideal in 1989, suggested that he might be right; what was needed for the 21st century was not, seemingly, a new religion for the whole world, but - a much easier sell - a liberal-enough-sounding 'overlapping consensus' on binding values across civilisations, economic systems and spiritual traditions. A quarter-century on from the 'end of history' and Küng's 1993 *Declaration Towards a Global Ethic*, enthusiasm for the liberal democratic project has arguably waned even in the heart of the Western world which first nourished it, as terrorism and war, mass migration and job insecurity, environmental strain and resource conflicts exert a heavy toll in the lives and imaginations of more and more first-world citizens. Younger generations of Westerners, unable to remember a world war or to imagine any serious checks on their private liberties, may not actively wish for an end to the *status quo*, but the postwar exhaustion which led Küng to his conclusion about ideologies of unity has now been replaced by a subtly new feeling, in Europe and, I will be arguing, elsewhere. Updating the Global Ethic Project for this new *Zeitgeist* is the goal of this book; a healthy scepticism regarding 'ideologies of unity' will remain at the front of our minds throughout, but so too a thoroughgoing belief in the need for a 'World Ethos' which goes beyond polite, frigid and meaningless postmodern 'consensus' on the contours of a 'Global Ethic' to embrace more ambitious questions of meaning and belonging typically associated with religion. This is not in any way to affirm a wowser's vision of peace, love and understanding or to insist on compulsory adult attendance at sermons, but simply to say that the moral education of minors - in the language of Hans Küng, a fostering of Basic Trust in reality rather than Basic Mistrust - matters, and is a collective responsibility. Such talk is apt to frighten liberals, but the argument - or rather recurring theme - of this book is that conceptions of the good life matter; there is, in Matthew Arnold's words, a 'best that has been thought and said in the world'<sup>94</sup> which, if digested early in some form, helps to foster Basic Trust in life. Such transmission of a World Ethos, Hans Küng and colleagues have argued, is unashamedly good for individuals and unambiguously necessary for 21st-century coexistence.

Two books by leading American liberal lights - Ronald Dworkin's *Religion Without God* and Martha Nussbaum's *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (both from 2013) - also go a long way towards stating this very case.

### Western Liberalism Meets God: Ronald Dworkin

---

<sup>93</sup> See, for example, Hans Küng, *Handbuch Weltethos: Eine Vision und ihre Umsetzung*, (München: Piper, 2012), p. 31.

<sup>94</sup> See Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*. [http:// www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4212/pg4212.html](http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4212/pg4212.html), (accessed 10/9/2017).

Dworkin argues that ethical seriousness is entirely compatible with disbelief in 'God': what matters is a commitment to moral monism, or in other words the idea of a World Ethos:

The theme of this book is that religion is deeper than God. Religion is a deep, distinct, and comprehensive worldview: it holds that inherent, objective value permeates everything, that the universe and its creatures are awe-inspiring, that human life has purpose and the universe order. A belief in a god is only one possible manifestation or consequence of that deeper worldview.<sup>95</sup>

What then to do with those who do not share this conception of value? The liberal Dworkin argues that individuals ought to be free to pursue their own 'conceptions of the good life', a freedom which presumably extends to nihilistic, relativistic or self-centred lifestyles provided that others are not directly harmed; yet the 'religious' Dworkin wants to convince us of the importance of a certain moral seriousness:

The religious attitude accepts the full, independent reality of value. It accepts the objective truth of two central judgements about value. The first holds that human life has objective meaning or importance. Each person has an innate and inescapable responsibility to try to make his life a successful one: that means living well, accepting ethical responsibilities to oneself as well as moral responsibilities to others, not just if we happen to think this important but because it is in itself important whether we think so or not. The second holds that what we call nature – the universe as a whole and in all its parts – is not just a matter of fact but is itself sublime: something of intrinsic value and wonder.<sup>96</sup>

At times it seems that those incapable of such seriousness are on Dworkin's view a threat to the social order, and that the goal of the book is to convince the 'religious' - God-fearers and morally serious agnostics and atheists alike - that they share a common enemy:

Materialism or racism might well reflect a genuine and gripping conviction about which lives are inherently successful and which wasted. Students of Nietzsche may have found a philosophically sophisticated defence of their instinct that power is the only good. Once we break the connection between a religious conviction and orthodox theism, we seem to have no firm way of excluding even the wildest ethical eccentricity from the category of protected faith.<sup>97</sup>

At others, however, Dworkin is found sticking to his liberal guns:

---

<sup>95</sup> Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 1.

<sup>96</sup> Dworkin, *Religion Without God*, p. 10.

<sup>97</sup> Dworkin, *Religion Without God*, p. 124.

Political liberty has two distinct components. A just state must recognise both a very general right to what we might call 'ethical independence' and also special rights to particular liberties. The first of these components, ethical independence, means that government must never restrict freedom just because it assumes that one way for people to live their lives – one idea about what lives are most worth living just in themselves – is intrinsically better than another, not because its consequences are better but because people who live that way are better people. In a state that prizes freedom, it must be left to individual citizens, one by one, to decide such questions for themselves, not up to government to impose one view on everyone.<sup>98</sup>

In his conclusion, however, Dworkin takes his own very personal stance on death, and encourages others to join him:

We think that, because we are mortal, it matters how we live; it matters, in the familiar diction, what someone does with his one life. We think of our life as a whole, as something we have made through our decisions and our fortunes, and we want that creation to be a good one. Not everyone takes this religious attitude, of course, at least consciously; indeed, many people say they are sceptical about the very idea that a life could be good or bad rather than simply long or short, pleasant or miserable. But those who do take that attitude need a standard to guide them in their ethical ambitions.

[...] What matters most fundamentally to the drive to live well is the conviction that there is, independently and objectively, a right way to live. That is at the centre of what I described, in Chapter 1, as a religious attitude to life.

[...] If we do crave that kind of achievement, as I believe we should, then we should treat it as a kind of immortality. We face death believing we have made something good in response to the greatest challenge a mortal faces. That may not be good enough for you: it may not soften even a bit the fear we face. But it is the only kind of immortality we can imagine; at least the only kind we have any business wanting. That is a religious conviction if anything is. It is available to you whichever of the two camps of religion, godly or godless, you choose to join.<sup>99</sup>

### Liberalism Meets Love: Martha Nussbaum

Martha Nussbaum affirms an even more explicit conception of the good life even while, like Dworkin, refusing to give up her commitment to the central tenets of political liberalism. Beyond all liberal concessions, however, emotions matter to the health and stability of all societies, even the most liberal, and cannot be left to chance or market forces:

---

<sup>98</sup> Dworkin, *Religion Without God*, pp. 129-130.

<sup>99</sup> Dworkin, *Religion Without God*, pp. 153, 155, 158-159.

All political principles, the good as well as the bad, need emotional support to ensure their stability over time, and all decent societies need to guard against division and hierarchy by cultivating appropriate sentiments of sympathy and love.

In the type of liberal society that aspires to justice and equal opportunity for all, there are two tasks for the political cultivation of emotion. One is to engender and sustain strong commitment to worthy projects that require effort and sacrifice - such as social redistribution, the full inclusion of previously excluded and marginalised groups, the protection of the environment, foreign aid, and the national defence. Most people tend toward narrowness of sympathy. They can easily become immured in narcissistic projects and forget about the needs of those outside their narrow circle. Emotions directed at the nation and its goals are frequently of great help in getting people to think larger thoughts and recommit themselves to a larger common good.

The other related task for the cultivation of public emotions is to keep at bay forces that lurk in all societies and, ultimately, in all of us: tendencies to protect the fragile self by denigrating and subordinating others.<sup>100</sup>

Although Nussbaum's liberalism is therefore far less liberal towards - among other apparent vices - selfishness than any 'Gordon Gecko' variety, she does not under any circumstances want to cede her liberal allegiance:

Here lies the challenge [...]: how can a decent society do more for stability and motivation than Locke and Kant did, without becoming illiberal and dictatorial in the manner of Rousseau? The challenge becomes even more difficult when one adds that my conception of the decent society is a form of political liberalism, one in which political principles should not be built upon any comprehensive doctrine of the meaning and purpose of life, religious or secular, and in which the idea of equal respect for persons gives rise to a careful abstemiousness about government endorsement of any particular religious or comprehensive ethical view.<sup>101</sup>

Nevertheless, a faith in justice - something very close to Dworkin's 'religious' view of the independence of value - is for Nussbaum a universal requirement of a liberal society:

The careful neutrality that a liberal state observes - and should observe - in matters of religion and comprehensive doctrine does not extend to the fundamentals of its own conception of justice (such as the equal worth of all citizens, the importance of certain rights, and the badness of various forms of discrimination and hierarchy). We might say that the

---

<sup>100</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, (Cambridge: Bellknap, 2013), pp. 2-3.

<sup>101</sup> Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*, pp. 5-6.



liberal state asks citizens to have different overall conceptions of the meaning and purpose of life to overlap and agree in a shared political space, the space of fundamental principles and constitutional ideals. But then, if those principles are to be efficacious, the state must also encourage love and devotion to those ideals.<sup>102</sup>

Nussbaum's argument for a 'civil religion' is, like Dworkin's but more openly so, a call for an embrace, if not of a comprehensive normative ethical view, then at the very least of a comprehensive *meta-ethical* one, which itself entails subscription to a relatively narrow range of 'conceptions of the good life' in which self-centredness is effectively scorned. Here, then, is Nussbaum's robust conclusion:

[A] healthy society needs to counteract the tendencies all human beings share towards submissiveness to authority and peer pressure.

[...] Respect is not the public emotion good societies require, or at least not the only one. Respect on its own is cold and inert, insufficient to overcome the bad tendencies that lead human beings to tyrannise over one another. Disgust denies fundamental human dignity to groups of people, portraying them instead as animals. Consequently respect grounded in the idea of human dignity will prove impotent to include all citizens on terms of equality unless it is nourished by imaginative engagement with the lives of others and by an inner grasp of their full and equal humanity. Imaginative empathy, however, can be deployed by sadists. The type of imaginative engagement society needs [...] is nourished by love. Love, then, matters for justice.<sup>103</sup>

## 21st-Century Political Liberalism and a World Ethos

What is significant about both Dworkin's and Nussbaum's arguments here is that, like K ung in his defence of *Weltethos*, they felt the need to assert their commitment to political liberalism before pressing on with more or less open defences of a conception of the good life which affirms the importance of an altruistic dimension of service for both individual fulfilment and social order. A negative 'respect' for the rights of others based on neo-Hobbesian calculations of self-interest - the 'I'll stay out of your way so you'll stay out of mine' model on which modern urban coexistence would seem to be based most of the time - is shown to be insufficient to meet the needs of a truly just society. Liberalism as a licence for selfishness is thoroughly discredited by Dworkin and even more thoroughly by Nussbaum, even though what we might lazily call American-style liberalism - economic as well as political - was, in theory at least, revolutionary arguably *because* it allowed selfish energies to bubble away beneath the polite surface of society, generating profits destined to trickle down in some form to the less fortunate and motivated. A society which explicitly aimed to stifle such energies through public art and education and progressive social policies (Nussbaum's prescriptions) may indeed turn out to be more just - and there is much to commend in Nussbaum's account as well as Dworkin's - but it is also surely less

---

<sup>102</sup> Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*, p. 7.

<sup>103</sup> Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*, pp. 379-380.

'liberal', by any sensible definition of that word, than a society in which a state truly does remain neutral with respect to selfishness and conceptions of the good life. Racism and homophobia, for both Dworkin and Nussbaum, are examples of conceptions of the good life which cannot safely be exercised in private even by those who obey anti-discrimination laws in public; they are rather to be viewed as cancers at the heart of any free society, to be educated out of the hearts and minds of all with a mixture of carrots and sticks.

Nussbaum says that the focus of her book is the nation; our focus here is global. If even political liberalism, as conceived by two of its most prominent spokespeople, ends up requiring a commitment to far more specific ethical (or meta-ethical) content and conceptions of the good life than we thought, then perhaps the idea of a World Ethos might also be ready to emerge from the shadow of Western political correctness and to appeal to liberals and conservatives, religious believers and atheists alike. Then, perhaps, it might have a chance of becoming truly global.

### 3. Rescuing 'All Under Heaven': A Chinese Idea and a World Ethos

#### Introduction

*Tianxia* ('All Under Heaven') is an ancient Chinese model of world governance based on broadly Confucian ethical principles. Attempts to develop a 21st-century brand of *Tianxia*, most notably the efforts of Zhao Tingyang, have met with significant resistance, both in China, where feelings about a Confucian cultural revival remain mixed, and in the West, where *Tianxia* has been criticised as a Chinese neo-imperial threat to the stability of the Westphalian system and as an affront to liberal democracy. This chapter seeks to rescue the kernel of Confucian insights on ethical world governance and to question liberal reluctance to engage with them, all against the backdrop of Hans Küng's *Weltethos* idea.

#### Reviving the Ancient *Tianxia* Model

*Even if an empire rules everywhere, it makes no world. Ruling the earth does not mean possessing a world of worldness, as argued in Confucian theory, since having hold of the land, in a geographical sense, instead of the 'hearts' of all peoples, would lose the world in a spiritual sense. The world exists only where and when peoples want it to be.*<sup>104</sup>

Zhao Tingyang

Zhao Tingyang presents the Chinese and Greek approaches to politics as diametric opposites; while the Athenian *polis* secures the competing rights of individual citizens in a city-state, the Confucian All-Under-Heaven (*Tianxia*) system identifies 'politics' from the beginning as the search for a 'justified order' among tribes and peoples, an arrangement in which individual rights are secured only in a prior climate of universal moral responsibility.<sup>105</sup> The idea of a morally neutral politics - a pure political liberalism - is, Zhao argues, a non-starter in Confucian thought; it is the self-reinforcing 'political-ethical circle' (good people make good institutions which make better people which make better institutions) which, in its chicken-egg way, makes 'harmonious' coexistence possible in the first place.

Discussions of Zhao's work degenerate quickly into East-versus-West posturing; Zhao's own writings do not always do enough to prevent this. His goal is to revive the *Tianxia* model for the 21st century to serve as an antidote to the politics of national interest, which are driven by what he perceives as 'Western' self-centredness; the whole concept of the *international* order guarantees that the

---

<sup>104</sup> Zhao Tingyang, 'All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism: An Old Story and New World Peace', in Fred Dallmayr and Zhao Tingyang (eds.), *Contemporary Chinese Political Thought: Debates and Perspectives*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, p. 54.

<sup>105</sup> Zhao, 'All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism', pp. 46-47.

interests of the world as a whole will be neglected, resulting in what he calls a *failed world* dominated by hegemonic empires. Confucian philosophy is duly wheeled out to save this 'world' from aggressive 'Western' overreach; what Zhao refers to as Confucianism's 'methodological relationism' supposedly allows for a reorientation away from boisterous 'Western' insistence on individual rights and towards a more 'Eastern' insistence on human responsibilities and the priority of relationships over individual well-being.

Before engaging with such details, however, it will be worthwhile to examine whether Zhao's broad *Tianxia* vision is as incompatible with 'Western' modes of thought as he claims. By mythologising the ancient Zhou sage-kings and their creation of the *Tianxia* system as 'something unusual and quite avant-garde in thinking and doing politics with world problems in the early days of civilisation'<sup>106</sup>, Zhao suggests that the more local efforts to achieve early forms of justice in Greek city-states like Athens were less revolutionary by virtue of being less avowedly internationalist in scope. At a time of such limited communication between distant tribes and even between neighbouring villages, the establishment of the *Tianxia* system was indeed remarkable. To suggest, however, that Greek endeavours in the sphere of justice were not also informed by Platonic universalism and Athenian cosmopolitanism, and to paint the *polis* as a Wall Street of unbridled self-interest, is to exaggerate for effect in a bid to make the *Tianxia* model look more unique, and more uniquely Chinese, than it is. Western concern with human responsibilities as the necessary condition for meaningful human rights is at least as old as Socrates, and runs through Jesus, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment to reach the 21st century, most notably for our purposes, in the form of Hans Küng's *Weltethos* project.<sup>107</sup>

When he is not busy overplaying the Chineseness of *Tianxia* values or adopting a defensive posture against those who may see the revival of the *Tianxia* model as a cover for Chinese imperial ambition ('It is not my place to worry about misunderstandings caused by war-oriented thinking, a typical complex in Western political consciousness or subconsciousness, leading to much unnecessary fear of nonexistent enemies'), Zhao is keen to maintain that his idea of 'a future all-under-heaven does not necessarily mean "a Chinese system", but instead suggests a universal system of and for all peoples'.<sup>108</sup> This claim - namely, that the export of a Confucian *ethos* offers potential solutions to the challenges of intercultural dialogue and globalisation - is worth exploring in its own right, even if Zhao undercuts his own argument in places with frivolous generalisations ('roughly, China's spirit has a *Confucian heart* that decides basic values and a *Taoist mind* that chooses strategies'<sup>109</sup> etc. etc.).

The 'earliest and most respected works' of Chinese philosophy - the *Yijing*, *Shangshu*, *Zhouli*, *Guoyu* and *Liji* - all contain at least one 'very important, influential and enduring general idea', Zhao argues, namely 'the metaphysics of changes and ways'.<sup>110</sup> Broadly speaking, this metaphysics of flux and radical scepticism serves to draw the battlelines of Chinese philosophy from the beginning squarely within the

---

<sup>106</sup> Zhao, 'All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism', p. 46.

<sup>107</sup> See Hans Küng, *Projekt Weltethos*, (München: Piper, 1996(1990)).

<sup>108</sup> Zhao, 'All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism', p. 64.

<sup>109</sup> Zhao, 'All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism', p. 47.

<sup>110</sup> Zhao, 'All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism', p. 47.

realm of ethics and political philosophy: since the universe and our place in it are always subject to unpredictable change, the meaning of life can only ever come from efforts to cultivate virtue in the face of such unpredictability; trying to prevent or shape change through hard work and scientific inquiry may be brave and noble, but we will all have to deal with failure and contingency sooner or later. The realm of morality is the only metaphysical refuge we have for such physical despair; a Basic Trust in Heaven and the Mandate of Heaven, beyond all inevitable fleshly chaos, sustains the Confucian individual. 'In other words,' Zhao concludes, 'we are unable to change the world, but we can instead change what we do to the world'.<sup>111</sup>

At times, Zhao seems to contradict positive evaluations of Confucianism's philosophy of history ('with the consciousness of endless changes, the world is understood as an always open story of unpredictable changes in forms of order and disorder, a story of neither linear progress to the end of history nor the determined cycle of fatalism'<sup>112</sup>); such flux, however, actually gives meaning to human action, not only because, as Zhao argues, it denies a role to primitive 'mysticism or superstition' and instead 'encourages a positive consideration of human deeds as the power to partly determine situations'<sup>113</sup>, but also, and more radically, by shifting the focus from the physical world of unjust consequences and pointing to a higher, objective realm in which our decisions, and the way we make them, somehow matter. Confucian emphasis on ritual (*li*) is understandable in precisely these terms; the immediate physical consequences of the ritual act are irrelevant compared to the aesthetic standards of judgement by which the purity of the ritual act will be evaluated.

Translating this *ethos* into the sphere of so-called 'international relations' requires, in Zhao's view, nothing short of the abolition of the nation-state system, a new politics of, by, and for the 'world' as a whole ('more and more evidence shows clearly the impossibility of solving international problems in the framework of internationality'<sup>114</sup>). 'Unfortunately,' Zhao laments,

popular ideologies nowadays rarely care about worldness. They remain either unilateral universalism, actually aggressive imperialism serving the national interests of the most developed countries, or noncooperative pluralism, essentially resistant nationalism to protect the local interests of less developed nations. Such a situation of unilateral universalism versus noncooperative pluralism leads to a sort of prisoner's dilemma, preventing any possible improvement in world peace and mutual development.

In order to remake the world order, we need the creation of a universal system of the world, based upon a new philosophy that speaks for the world. The question is, in turn, how to take care of the world for the world. We need an idea more than a voice of appeal. This practical question leads us back to the claim in the documents of King Yao, who is regarded the best king in history: the ultimate political task is 'to create universal harmony of all peoples'. This is my reason for introducing and renewing the Chinese philosophy of world politics in terms of *all-under-*

---

<sup>111</sup> Zhao, 'All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism', p. 47.

<sup>112</sup> Zhao, 'All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism', p. 48.

<sup>113</sup> Zhao, 'All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism', p. 48.

<sup>114</sup> Zhao, 'All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism', p. 63.

*heaven (Tianxia)*, a notion that originated about three thousand years ago. I argue that a renewed theory of all-under-heaven might be helpful in finding a better solution to the chaotic situation of the world.<sup>115</sup>

*Tianxia* does more than describe ‘all under heaven’; it is a normative as well as a descriptive project, an attempt to ‘unite heaven and humanity in virtue’ as the Confucian formulations *tianrenheyi* and *tianrenhede* suggest:

The term *all-under-heaven (Tianxia)* means more than the ‘world’. It can be used to refer to the world in the usual literature or in ordinary language, but essentially speaking, it is a philosophically dense concept of ‘world’ consisting of a trinity of meanings: (1) the earth or all lands under the sky (ordinary usage); (2) a common or public choice made by all peoples in the world, truly representing the general will (in Chinese, a universal agreement in the ‘hearts’ of all peoples - Confucianism’s interpretation); and (3) a universal political system for the world, with a world institution responsible for universal order and justice (Zhou’s idea and also the Confucian ideal). It is implied that the physical world, or the earth, is far less than the humanised world as all-under-heaven. A humanised world *is* only when the world is otherwise *made to be* a political world by means of a worldwide institutional system reflecting universal agreement and acceptance in the hearts of all peoples. In other words, the natural world will not be *our world* unless it is constituted as *all-under-heaven*, the synthesis of the physical world (land), the psychological world (the general will of all peoples), and the political world (a worldwide institutional system). In this sense, the earth is thus still a non-world, not yet in the order of a world institution representing all peoples and fully accomplishing the universal *eidos* of worldness.<sup>116</sup>

Zhao’s search is for a *Weltethos*, or what he calls a *Welteidos*, which allows for ethical action and political identity beyond the confines of artificial and historically contingent nation-state formations. Such a system is not inconsistent with large degrees of local and regional autonomy, but it derives its justification not by satisfying the selfish claims of local interest groups (Zhao’s ‘Western’ model) but rather by calling all to recognise *a priori* the higher importance of the ‘world’ as a whole and the associated idea of a Mandate of Heaven, faith in the existence of which is required on the Confucian account if the world and the individual human beings who compose it are ever fully to realise themselves. The general spirit of the Zhou *Tianxia* principles requires that ‘politics should make an effort to gain the ardent support of all by creating correlations accepted by all, rather than by making individual boundaries accepted by each. Upon these principles, Zhou created a universal system of all-under-heaven, an all-inclusive network of autonomous substates with a central supervisory government.’<sup>117</sup>

Zhao recognises that the Zhou system cannot simply be revived in its ancient form for the present age. In an effort to soothe and seduce his Western readers, he

---

<sup>115</sup> Zhao, ‘All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism’, p. 55.

<sup>116</sup> Zhao, ‘All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism’, pp. 59-60.

<sup>117</sup> Zhao, ‘All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism’, p. 56.

insists that his project is by no means inconsistent with Western attachment to democracy and the rule of law; what is sought, however, is a superior grounding of these values:

Confucians would not accept the Western modern political justification, since it is a self-referential justification of a political system by its own political ideologies. For instance, democracy has to resort to the ideology of democracy, for nothing can justify or guarantee the truth, goodness, or rightness of the majority's choices.

[...] Confucianism and most other Chinese schools, except Legalism, always highlight the reciprocal justifications between the political and the ethical. This is often misunderstood as Confucian denial of the rule of law. I think the truth is that Confucius finds law of secondary importance and that the best politics is to make a society of 'no lawsuits'. This seems an overstatement and may mean 'few lawsuits'.<sup>118</sup>

What, then, is required for a 21st-century revival of *Tianxia*? Zhao is clear that nothing less than a New World Order will do: 'First, a new all-under-heaven needs, of course, a world constitution. The political existence of the world should not be an enlarged nation. It must instead be a compatible all-inclusive system. [...] It is my belief that the world constitution of a new all-under-heaven should be founded on universal values defined in terms of relational values instead of individual values.'<sup>119</sup> The goal of the next section is to understand what these 'relational values' of Confucianism really are, and whether it might make better sense to talk in terms of 'trust' than 'relationships'.

### Beyond Relationships: *Tianxia* and Basic Trust

*Generally speaking, human rights and human obligations are parallel, of equal importance. However, we must see the danger that the notion of human rights could be misused or abused in some cases, led astray by the concept of the self-centred individual, leading to practical threats to the human rights of others.*<sup>120</sup>

Zhao Tingyang

Just as Zhao distinguishes sharply - too sharply - between Athenian and Zhou approaches to politics, so too does he race to set up Confucian 'methodological relationism' and 'philosophy of coexistence' as the antidote to the poison of 'Western individualism' and 'philosophy of existence' which supposedly infects the current

---

<sup>118</sup> Zhao, 'All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism', pp. 61-62.

<sup>119</sup> Zhao, 'All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism', p. 64.

<sup>120</sup> Zhao, 'All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism', p. 65.

international order. Even Kantian cosmopolitanism is rejected as un-Confucian and unfit to serve as a *Weltethos* guiding international institutions:

The Kantian *perpetual peace*, or the 'Kantian culture', in Alexander Wendt's terms, has been proven a most important idea by its political products, such as the United Nations and the European Union, as well as the inspiration for the very popular 'democratic peace theory'. But the much-loved Kantian politics meets a theoretical limitation that prevents it from the universal success of perpetual peace.<sup>121</sup>

Zhao argues strongly against the 'Kantian culture' of 'collaborative alliances', underlining repeatedly that All-Under-Heaven 'suggests more than a Kantian project' ('maybe the Kantian culture could relax the tension of the international situation and reduce hostility, but it still seems far from fostering worldwide perpetual peace and cooperation'<sup>122</sup>). The crux of the matter is a refusal to see Kant as a virtue ethicist, a problem made worse by the almost total inability of Western philosophers, with rare exceptions<sup>123</sup>, to do so. Following the lead of early New Confucian scholars like Mou Zongsan (himself a prominent translator of Kant into Chinese), Zhao sets up the whole Western philosophical tradition - culminating in Kant, Hegel and their heirs - as a quest for metaphysical certainty, a 'philosophy of existence' which the Chinese 'metaphysics of changes' pushes *a priori* into the realm of 'coexistence' or morality ('I think Confucius would consider political philosophy to be the first philosophy'<sup>124</sup>). Kant is nothing more than the high-point of this fatally flawed Western tradition; by failing to understand that human beings are defined in terms of their *relationships*, Zhao argues, Western philosophy can only ever end up privileging an illusion: the illusion of the autonomous self.

Yet Confucian philosophy, perhaps more than any other intellectual tradition in world history, stresses the prior importance of moral *self-cultivation* for the development of virtue; learning to appreciate one's relationships, culminating in gratitude and a readiness for sacrifice on behalf of others and ultimately for the world as a whole, is the end of a long and intimate process of individual moral development. Innate tendencies towards altruism notwithstanding, young children do not typically have a problem loudly asserting their own autonomy and behaving in a highly egocentric fashion; the whole idea that one thinks of oneself from the beginning of life as no more than the sum-total of one's relationships is a non-starter, as any parent knows. Any 'wisdom' or 'virtue' must be introduced through education; it is simply not true that Western philosophy, from Plato and Aristotle through Kant and beyond, is uninterested in this process or unhelpful for those trying to cultivate such virtue. Rather than *reducing* the self, as Zhao does, to its relationships (and thereby abolishing it), Confucian approaches, such as that of Tu Weiming, describe the self, more accurately, as a 'centre of relationships' expanding outwards to include, gradually, family members, extended kin, friends, compatriots, fellow human beings everywhere, other sentient beings, the Earth and the cosmos as a whole, culminating

---

<sup>121</sup> Zhao, 'All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism', p. 52.

<sup>122</sup> Zhao, 'All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism', p. 63.

<sup>123</sup> See, for example, Claus Dierksmeier, 'Kant on Virtue', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 113(4): 2013, pp. 597-609.

<sup>124</sup> Zhao, 'All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism', p. 47.



in a dialogical relationship with Heaven itself.<sup>125</sup> It is in this primordial Confucian *tianrenheyi* spirit that Zhao seeks to reorient the global political order away from bottom-up ‘Kantian collaborative alliances’ and towards a top-down *Tianxia* approach. The problem is that not even Confucian moral cultivation, as properly understood, works in this way; the Mencian ‘sprouts’ with which we are all born must be lovingly nurtured if they are ever to reach the height of Heaven. Only once there can the virtuous individual, like Plato’s philosopher returning to her cave having glimpsed the light, begin to care about the fate of the ‘world as a whole’. While the *homo economicus* models of neoclassical economics deny the existence of a moral, spiritual or social dimension to individual human beings altogether, Zhao’s ‘methodological relationism’ denies us our prior individuality; what is needed is neither a ‘Western’ philosophy of existence based on ruthless selfishness nor an effete and impossible ‘Eastern’ philosophy of coexistence, but something wholly other: a world order which respects our aspirations as autonomous moral beings. Zhao’s call for such an order is intuitively appealing to people everywhere, without the need to dichotomise East and West and without resorting to a confusing and masochistic ‘methodological relationism’.

Zhao remains on much surer footing when he makes his call in straightforward language:

In order to remake the world order, we need the creation of a universal system of the world, based upon a new philosophy that speaks for the world. [...] The ultimate political task is ‘to create universal harmony of all peoples’. This is my reason for introducing and renewing the Chinese philosophy of world politics in terms of *all-under-heaven* (*Tianxia*), a notion that originated about three thousand years ago.<sup>126</sup>

Just as Martha Nussbaum has argued recently that even the most liberal societies need ‘love’ as well as mere passive ‘respect for difference’ in order to survive and prosper<sup>127</sup>, so too does the global order as a whole need a common fount of intercivilisational trust and love, based on metaethical seriousness and a commitment to Ronald Dworkin’s ‘independent reality of value’<sup>128</sup>, if it is to sustain itself by ‘winning the hearts and minds of all’ without falling into the trap of erecting, in Hans Küng’s words, a new and unwanted ‘ideology of unity’. Since human beings will never agree, and never want to agree, on normative issues or on the concrete applications of normative principles, the only hope of constructing such a winning *ethos* for world politics is at the level of metaethics or aesthetics. Such ‘harmony’ would not be ‘harmonious’ in the ordinary, boring sense of the word, and would require, for example, a Socratic willingness to engage in adversarial dialogue, with oneself as well as others, rather than politely avoiding direct intellectual confrontation. But there can be no doubt that Basic Trust in life – trust in the idea or ideal of ethical truth, an ethical purpose to reality as a whole and to one’s place within that reality (even as one remains humble about one’s own degree of access to that truth) - is central to

---

<sup>125</sup> See Tu Weiming, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity: Essays on the Confucian Discourse in Cultural China*, (New Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilisations, 2010).

<sup>126</sup> Zhao, ‘All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism’, p. 55.

<sup>127</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, (Cambridge: Bellknap, 2013).

<sup>128</sup> See Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

the New Confucian account of human flourishing, and by extension, to a Confucian view of a just international order.

Cheng Chung-yi makes just such an argument ‘between fundamentalism and relativism’ in his paper ‘Confucian Religiousness and its Implications for Interreligious Dialogue’, presented at the 2015 ‘Chinese Philosophy in the Contemporary World’ Conference hosted by the International Society for Chinese Philosophy at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Cheng’s starting-point is Confucius’ own claim that the morally serious person ‘worries about the Way, not about poverty’; once awake to the voice of Heaven within, the whole Confucian process of moral self-cultivation can begin:

It is mistaken to consider self-love as selfish or egoistic love. Rather, self-love can be conceived as the imperative that humans, in contrast to animals, should authentically comprehend that they have to live up to their ontological role – being engaged in the process of learning to be fully human. Hereby, self-love is also benevolent love and altruistic love. It is benevolent love because when people once awakened to their self-love, they can no longer bear the suffering of a degenerate, meaningless life. And if one is sensitive to one’s suffering of being unable to live an ideal life, this sensitivity should also extend to others. It is unimaginable that a person with self-love is devoid of sensitivity to the suffering of others. So self-love entails altruistic love; both of them are two sides of the same coin.<sup>129</sup>

A corollary of this attitude of Basic Trust in life is a spirit of truthfulness; Cheng quotes the *Doctrine of the Mean* to this effect: ‘Sincerity means the completion of the self, and the Way is self-directing. Sincerity is the beginning and end of things. Without sincerity there would be nothing. Therefore the superior man values sincerity. Sincerity is not only the completion of one’s own self, it is that by which all things are completed. [...] Self-love is being sincere and authentic to one’s own existence,’ Cheng concludes. The Confucian challenge, therefore, is to *extend the self*, not just to include one’s family and immediate surroundings, but to include *everything*, even Heaven. ‘The process of enlarging the self is strenuous and ceaseless, and the one who is engaged in this process is deserved to be called the “great man”, while the person who is degenerating into a selfish ego is called the “small man”.’<sup>130</sup> In this sense, Confucian ‘world politics’ contrasts sharply with the ‘international politics’ of self-interest; the latter system merely indulges the weaknesses and fears of ‘small men’, while the former reflects what Cheng calls a ‘gentlemanly’ concern with the Way, a politics unafraid of ‘poverty’:

For Confucianism, the responsibility (or the Heaven-ordained mission) of humans *qua* humans is to value things for their own sake. In other words, we should value the world for the specific properties it has, not for what we can use it for; we should enjoy having a world, or being

---

<sup>129</sup> Cheng Chung-Yi, ‘Confucian Religiousness and its Implications for Interreligious Dialogue’, paper presented at the International Society for Chinese Philosophy 19th International Conference (Chinese Philosophy in the Contemporary World), Chinese University of Hong Kong, 21-24 July 2015.

<sup>130</sup> Cheng, ‘Confucian Religiousness and its Implications for Interreligious Dialogue’.

around it; we should contemplate it; we should value it for itself. All in all, we are not superior to the world, but part of the world.<sup>131</sup>

This horizon of spiritual perfection is not dull, worship-the-world-as-it-is pantheism, but a call to take responsibility for the fate of the 'world' or 'cosmos' as a whole, and to shape it in an image which is 'sincere' to our own understanding of ourselves: 'We were born with a disposition to seek a view of the world that can play a certain role in our inner lives – a disposition that used to be identified as religiosity'.<sup>132</sup> The cultivation of this trusting disposition - extending outwards from the self to reach all the way to Heaven - leads to the realisation that 'the Transcendent, whatever we call it, such as "God", the "Absolute" or the "Ultimate", must be One, due to its infinite and unlimited nature. But for a religion and religious teaching to approach it, it must be Many, due to the finite and limited nature of any given religious tradition (i.e., they are rooted in particular times, places and histories without exception)'.<sup>133</sup> From the Confucian perspective, therefore, as well as from that of any other 'sincere' religion,

we should be able to transcend the inherent limitation or closed nature of our own religions, and be deeply skeptical of the claim that any particular religion is the sole representative of the Transcendent, as this is intellectually untenable. Undoubtedly, this meta-reflection on religion can help in fostering mutual understanding, learning and respect between different religions, and thus can serve as the theoretical framework of religious pluralism.<sup>134</sup>

Note, however, that such pluralism does not entail an embrace of polytheism or relativism; Confucian 'religious pluralism' really looks a lot like Dworkin's 'alliance of the morally serious', those who, irrespective of their position on 'God', nevertheless believe in the independence of value. The question how best to deal with those who lack this Basic Trust, however, remains an open one:

We can further reflect on the concept of 'religion' so as to be able to differentiate true religion from pseudo-religion. My proposal is that a religion should at least (i) arouse its believers to pursue self-consciously the way of being fully human; (ii) lead its believers to explore the interconnectedness between humans and the universe – that is, to have a dialogical relationship with and an authentic belief in the Transcendent; and (iii) have a set of morals concerned to guide its followers in practice. It is not difficult to acknowledge that these three basic features of religion are in effect the minimum commonalities shared by all great religions.<sup>135</sup>

When deciding who should be let into this élite pluralist club, we ought to consider the characters of believers as much as specificities of doctrine ('at the core of religious truth is a notion of "true" which cannot be understood in either an analytical

---

<sup>131</sup> Cheng, 'Confucian Religiousness and its Implications for Interreligious Dialogue'.

<sup>132</sup> Cheng, 'Confucian Religiousness and its Implications for Interreligious Dialogue'.

<sup>133</sup> Cheng, 'Confucian Religiousness and its Implications for Interreligious Dialogue'.

<sup>134</sup> Cheng, 'Confucian Religiousness and its Implications for Interreligious Dialogue'.

<sup>135</sup> Cheng, 'Confucian Religiousness and its Implications for Interreligious Dialogue'.

sense or an empirical sense, but only in an authentic sense (the truthfulness of believers)<sup>136</sup>; the key test of such ‘authenticity’, and that which disqualifies religious ‘fundamentalists’ of all stripes from admission, is whether the believer finds her way to the ‘natural’ conclusion reached by all sincere, thinking people that

there are a number of (authentic) religions that are equally legitimate ways to the Transcendent, the One or God. Not only is this conclusion a reasonable hypothesis predicated on sophisticated philosophical thinking, but it is also an authentic belief that is generated from our real experience of being involved in interreligious dialogue. The Transcendent, the One or God always appears to us in different guises. [...] Let us use mountain climbing as a metaphor. Although there may be a number of possible paths leading to the peak, for any given climber at any time, one can climb up to the peak only through the path one has successfully explored and walked. [...] As opposed to other possible but not-experienced paths, the concrete path one has taken is that which one prefers to defend passionately as superior to all others. Thus, the effort expended to convince people to follow this path is completely understandable and justifiable. [...] By implication, it is legitimate for sincere religious believers to make a doctrinal judgment to defend passionately the superiority of their own religious beliefs over other religious views. On yet another level, they can also accept a kind of religious pluralism like the Confucian one I articulated above. These two levels are compatible with each other.<sup>137</sup>

Just like Dworkin and Hans Küng, Cheng himself reaches a conclusion that is openly intended as a ‘metaethics for everyone’, a basis for Zhao’s ‘world politics’:

Suppose that (i) I am a sincere religious believer who is already equipped with an appropriate understanding of pluralism. (ii) Therefore, my religious passion will push me to defend the superiority of my beliefs, to persuade others to follow these beliefs, and to argue that they should at least learn from these beliefs. (iii) However, as I encounter other religious beliefs, I should not arbitrarily reject them as heretical or false. Rather, I should try to understand them and to see whether I could reciprocally learn something from them. (iv) After all, a legitimate doctrinal judgment of religions can enable me, on the one hand, to cultivate my passion of belief and, on the other hand, to engage in healthy interreligious dialogue with others for the sake of self-enhancement.<sup>138</sup>

Note that there is no pretence of equally accommodating all possible belief systems and tastes here; we must take the idea of a transcendental, or at least independent, moral realm seriously, and take seriously all others who do so as potential dialogue partners, if we are to achieve the ‘worldness’ of the Confucian *Tianxia* system. ‘All-

---

<sup>136</sup> Cheng, ‘Confucian Religiousness and its Implications for Interreligious Dialogue’.

<sup>137</sup> Cheng, ‘Confucian Religiousness and its Implications for Interreligious Dialogue’.

<sup>138</sup> Cheng, ‘Confucian Religiousness and its Implications for Interreligious Dialogue’.

Under-Heaven', then, is best understood as a metaethically and aesthetically 'harmonious' community ('harmonious without being uniform'), a community which strives to educate and to welcome all, but which reserves the right to defend itself against those who either violently refuse the dialogical principle ('fundamentalists') or violently refuse the idea of the ultimate 'Oneness of the Transcendent' ('relativists' or 'nihilists').

Relationships matter to all ethically serious people, not just to Confucians, but the defining characteristic of the Confucian *Tianxia* ideal (and also the defining characteristic of Küng's *Weltethos* model<sup>139</sup>, Dworkin's *Religion Without God* and even Nussbaum's defence of the humanities<sup>140</sup>) is *trust* in the ethical meaning of one's life as a whole - cultivated from early infancy (witness here too the Confucian emphasis on education and parenting<sup>141</sup>) - not a dogmatic clinging to 'methodological relationism' and its Eastern uniqueness.

### Towards a *Tianxia* for Everyone: Overcoming Wild Suspicion of Political Confucianism

The very idea of a Confucian approach to ethics and politics arouses deep suspicion and even outright hostility, both in China, where it is still widely perceived as responsible for China's 19th-century humiliations, and, as Zhao himself notes, in the West, where it is associated with contemporary Chinese authoritarianism and imperial ambition. Eske Mollgaard's already influential 2015 essay 'Political Confucianism and the Politics of Confucian Studies' is a representative dose of this anti-Confucian cocktail, and warrants our sustained attention here.

Mollgaard takes Richard Rorty as the standard-bearer of Western liberal values, and argues that Confucianism cannot really be squared with Rorty's liberal ironist position. Whereas Ronald Dworkin and Martha Nussbaum admit the importance of belief in some form of common *ethos* (Dworkin's 'independence of value' in *Religion Without God* and Nussbaum's emphasis on 'love' in *Political Emotions*) for stable political community, Rorty wants to ground 21st-century 'solidarity' on 'contingency' and 'irony' - the renunciation of all metaphysical and metaethical certainties - alone.<sup>142</sup> We may still care deeply about moral issues, Rorty argues, but we have no means of defending the foundations of our moral preferences; if we could all just accept the radical arbitrariness of our individual moral concerns and adopt an ironic distance from them, then we would be making a giant collective leap forward.

On one level, Küng's *Weltethos* vision and the New Confucian *ethos* so far presented (labelled 'spiritual humanism' by Tu Weiming) do also require an assumption of critical distance from one's own beliefs, but they fall short of the radical scepticism about moral knowledge on display in Rorty's work: the goal of interreligious and intercultural dialogue for the former is a deepening of one's lived aesthetic experience and embodied humanistic understanding of the *ethos* within

---

<sup>139</sup> See Hans Küng, *Was ich glaube*, (München: Piper, 2010).

<sup>140</sup> See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, (Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>141</sup> For a recent discussion of Confucian attitudes to parenting, see Erin M. Cline, *Families of Virtue: Confucian and Western Views on Childhood Development*, (Columbia University Press, 2015).

<sup>142</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

oneself and behind the world, not an *a priori* admission of its non-existence. What the leading Western voices in this debate - Dworkin, Nussbaum, Kung - and the leading New Confucian figures - Tu Weiming, Cheng Chung-yi - are seeking to carve out is a space of meaningful individual freedom between authoritarian fundamentalism and coercion on the one hand and a relativist wasteland of lonely irony, meaninglessness and self-absorption on the other. Rorty, Mollgaard argues, 'points out that unlike Confucians we moderns have given up hope for "authoritative guidance" from past sages whose minds we can somehow read. He sees no normative pattern in the world, nothing like the Confucian Way (*dao*) or Heavenly principle (*tianli*)'.<sup>143</sup> This is the crux of the matter: for Dworkin, Kung, Tu Weiming and Cheng Chung-yi alike, the question is how humanely to deal with those who 'see no normative pattern in the world', or rather no metaethical one, but for the Rortian camp, the problem is the other way round: how should the 'modern' or postmodern world deal with those who cling to the idea of the world having a metaethical or aesthetic *ethos* of some kind? In other words, Mollgaard argues, there are for Rorty 'two varieties of intellectuals':

One is the romantic intellectual who conceives the imagination "as superseding the order of nature rather than helping us grasp it." For this intellectual the goal of the free play of the imagination is social change and creative disorder, as is evident in the close association of romanticism and the French Revolution, and "the only point of realizing a just public order is to make as large a space for individual choice as possible." The other kind of intellectual sees a connection between the natural, cosmic order and the social order. For this intellectual the imagination is subservient to nature as it tries to grasp the order of nature, and the goal is social harmony and orderliness. For this type of intellectual "a just public order is an end in itself." Clearly Confucians are this second type. Rorty is an intellectual of the first kind, and he considers romantic individualism "the most distinctive and most valuable Western contribution to the quest for greater human happiness".<sup>144</sup>

This 'Western' obsession with the quantitative maximisation of options - 'the more, the better' - is now facing sharp critique from within Western political philosophy itself, most notably and recently by the Director of Kung's *Weltethos Institut* in Tübingen, Germany, Claus Dierksmeier, who favours a new paradigm of 'qualitative freedom' and 'responsible world citizenship' for 21st-century economic and political life.<sup>145</sup> The idea, moreover, that the imagination plays no role in Confucian ethics, or that Confucian harmony is particularly 'harmonious', are themselves non-starters: the Confucian imagination is not so much 'subservient to nature' as it is 'in search of the highest nature', namely Heaven or the Mandate of Heaven itself; 'harmony' is simply the name given to the social state of affairs which results when the individuals composing a particular society are honestly engaged in this private quest. Rorty is right that 'Romantic individualism' in its most extreme and literal form denies the

---

<sup>143</sup> Eske Mollgaard, 'Political Confucianism and the Politics of Confucian Studies', *Dao* (14): 2015, p. 393.

<sup>144</sup> Mollgaard, 'Political Confucianism and the Politics of Confucian Studies', p. 393.

<sup>145</sup> See Claus Dierksmeier, *Qualitative Freiheit: Selbstbestimmung in weltbürgerlicher Verantwortung*, (Transcript: Bielefeld, 2016).

validity of this quest altogether, reducing life and ‘imagination’ to what an individual already happens at any given moment to want, and then retroactively justifying those preferences as long as others are not directly harmed. The very idea of sacrifice in the name of a higher ideal beyond one’s own fleeting appetites is, if one takes one’s ‘romanticism’ too far, cast to the winds, and with it, the very possibility of a meaning beyond oneself or for one’s life as a whole. What seems at first like a liberation from arbitrary coercion is in fact a form of enforced solitary confinement: one may be maximally ‘free’ to dream up new imaginative scenarios for oneself, but one is decidedly *unfree* to do anything else.

Mollgaard is right that ‘many of the attempts to reconstruct Confucianism as a liberal philosophy use Rorty as leverage’<sup>146</sup>; this is, however, to take the worst of both worlds, just as Mollgaard also gets the worst of both worlds by taking the the opposite position:

The reason that Confucian values do not suit people living in a modern liberal democracy is not that Confucian values cannot be defended philosophically, but that they do not cohere with our historical experience. We have gone through many struggles to achieve our liberal form of life, and the positive outcomes of these struggles—voting rights for women, minimum wages, social security, and so on—were never assured. There is no normative order that makes the outcome necessary; there is no superhuman guiding hand that helped us. It is all a matter of contingency, and yet our preferences are the result of having gone through that historical experience; they are not grasped out of thin air. They are “grounded in” and “correspondent to” our historical experience in the sense that they fit with that experience. We have achieved a sociopolitical order that is fragile and far from perfect but nevertheless is the one we prefer in the strong sense that at this point in our history there are a number of other options we cannot entertain. Confucianism is one of the options we cannot consider.<sup>147</sup>

Rather than seeking to ground the best of the Western Enlightenment tradition – including the Romantic heritage - in terms of correspondence to a higher or independent World Ethos, Mollgaard is content with merely situating it, and thereby imprisoning himself, in history. The fact that Mollgaard’s Western liberal cannot even *consider* Confucianism as a viable option for himself is revealing of an extraordinary lack of intellectual freedom; Matthew Arnold’s idea of a ‘best that has been thought and said in the world’ is abandoned in favour of what one already knows and values:

It is an illusion to think that one can mix Confucianism and modern liberal democratic postmetaphysical philosophy in the style of Rorty, for the difference in historical experiences that separates the two is simply too vast to overcome. In spite of his anti-Kantian positions, Rorty is much closer to Kant than he is to Confucius. As Robert B. Brandom points out, Rorty is trying to complete Kant’s project of Enlightenment, which in Brandom’s words is “to bring humanity out of its adolescence into full

---

<sup>146</sup> Mollgaard, ‘Political Confucianism and the Politics of Confucian Studies’, p. 394.

<sup>147</sup> Mollgaard, ‘Political Confucianism and the Politics of Confucian Studies’, p. 394.

maturity, by taking responsibility for ourselves, where before we had been able only to acknowledge the dictates of an alien authority". According to Brandom, Rorty pushes this project one step further than Kant: whereas Kant freed us from the idea that our judgment of what is good or bad, noble or base, is grounded in some outer authority, Rorty wants to free us from the idea that these same judgments are grounded in the authority of "objective reality". This move does not bring us closer to Confucius; it takes us further away from the sage and his sage-knowledge.<sup>148</sup>

This description, however, denies the very possibility of a 'meaningful' life in the traditional sense, namely a freely chosen identification with a 'moral authority' or *ethos* discovered and cultivated inside oneself (Kant's 'Moral Law within') but also, given the very nature of the discovery, existing and mattering elsewhere (Kant's 'starry sky above'), or indeed everywhere (hence *World Ethos*). Mollgaard's understanding of Western liberalism may leave us with the infinite possibilities of our own fancy, but it denies us the right to one big thing we might conceivably care about: an ethical life based on trust that 'what we do here matters somewhere else', a life of meaning beyond the petty trifles of mere animal selfhood and the historical accidents which have shaped it.

Keen as he is to dismiss the best of Confucianism, Mollgaard fixes on the obvious worst of the Confucian tradition in a bid to frighten his Western audience:

Confucian studies on the mainland developed with state sponsorship and some mainland scholars asserted themselves as the inheritors of the Confucian tradition. The result was a shift in the focus of Confucian studies, for one vocal group of mainland scholars do not primarily view Confucianism as a philosophy or humanistic religion based on self-cultivation—the view that dominates Confucian studies in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United States—but as a vision of humane government that can compete with Western democracy.<sup>149</sup>

This 'turn to political Confucianism', Mollgaard argues, is 'a return to a more authentic Confucianism'<sup>150</sup>; rather than entertaining Zhao's constructive view of a *Tianxia* for the new globalised circumstances of the 21st Century or Tu Weiming's 'anthropocosmic' vision of a New Confucian 'spiritual humanism'<sup>151</sup> informed and improved by the best of the Western Enlightenment and Western modernity, Mollgaard opts instead to assume, *a priori*, that 'political Confucianism does not accept Western liberal democracy as an equally "humane" (*ren*) performance'<sup>152</sup> of political virtue. Mollgaard seizes on 'one of the leading voices of political Confucianism', Jiang Qing, who ostensibly

---

<sup>148</sup> Mollgaard, 'Political Confucianism and the Politics of Confucian Studies', p. 395.

<sup>149</sup> Mollgaard, 'Political Confucianism and the Politics of Confucian Studies', p. 395.

<sup>150</sup> Mollgaard, 'Political Confucianism and the Politics of Confucian Studies', p. 395.

<sup>151</sup> See Tu Weiming, 'Spiritual Humanism: An Emerging Global Discourse.'

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ya-jsyg6c\\_I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ya-jsyg6c_I), 18/12/2015 (accessed 11 August 2016).

<sup>152</sup> Mollgaard, 'Political Confucianism and the Politics of Confucian Studies', p. 395.



argues that the most pressing political task of our century is to substitute the Confucian “Way of the Humane Authority” for Western democracy. Democracy is unrestrained by “universal morality” and this leads to “selfishness, [...] vulgarization, hedonism, mediocritization.” Democracy has “lack of ecology, lack of history, and lack of morality,” and it gives rise to “imperialism, fascism, and hegemonism”. The Confucian Way of Humane Authority avoids this depravity by making sure that the will of the people is “subject to the universal restraint of religious morality”.<sup>153</sup>

Rather than evaluating this position on its merits, Mollgaard draws a dubious analogy with torture to suggest that even *thinking* about arguments against democracy poisons the very well on which the Western liberal democratic tradition draws.<sup>154</sup> Instead of questioning the possible limits of democracy, we are called simply to accept as axiomatic that ‘the extension of electoral suffrage is one of the best indicators of moral progress in the last two centuries in the West, and surely the danger is not that we have gone too far but that we have not gone far enough (why can’t all sixteen-year-olds vote?)’.<sup>155</sup> This last question serves as a convenient *reductio ad absurdum* of Mollgaard’s position: not even the most fervent democrat in the world believes that ‘minors’, however defined, deserve the right to vote; a process of ‘moral’ or (in the metaethically neutral language of Western political correctness) ‘civic’ education is nevertheless required before the right to vote, and the other rights and responsibilities of adult political life, can safely be conferred on an individual (would Mollgaard want a sixteen-year-old, or an eleven-year-old for that matter, to serve on the jury at his murder trial?). The best of the New Confucianism does not argue for an upending of the ‘one person, one vote’ principle, at least among ‘adults’; it simply asks that the idea of ‘moral education’ in at least a metaethical sense - the task of preparing the young for the responsibilities of adult life by helping them to cultivate a sense of Basic Trust in reality and to explore the idea that their lives as a whole may have ethical meaning - be taken seriously, rather than left in the hands of the free market. Instead of seeking fruitful, critical exchange with ‘political Confucianism’, Mollgaard prefers instead to ascribe pathologies to its leading proponents. One of Mollgaard’s favourite *bêtes noires*, the American Confucian scholar Daniel Bell, exemplifies

the masochism of the Western subject who longs for the humiliation that will make it understand what reason itself cannot comprehend. Bell himself has completed this process of learning, for he explains that back in 1989 he supported the prodemocracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, but since then he has learned that this was “partly out of a form of self-love.” He thought that the demonstrators wanted to be just like him, but now, “mainly due to my lived experience in China,” Bell has overcome his self-love and learned “to think outside the [Western] box”. It is in moments like this that Confucian studies attain their true value, for here this rather obscure academic field shows that it is able to grasp

---

<sup>153</sup> Mollgaard, ‘Political Confucianism and the Politics of Confucian Studies’, p. 395.

<sup>154</sup> See Mollgaard ‘Political Confucianism and the Politics of Confucian Studies’, pp. 398-399.

<sup>155</sup> Mollgaard, ‘Political Confucianism and the Politics of Confucian Studies’, p. 398.

the present if not in thought then at least in the symptoms it itself exhibits.<sup>156</sup>

As well as being an immensely unfair summation of Bell's manifold efforts to bring China and the West closer together following the end of the Cold War, Mollgaard's conclusion (in which alleged Confucian defences of torture and cruel punishment in the name of social order are duly wheeled out) simply closes the space in which a serious discussion of the proper scope of democratic rights in a globalised 21st-century can take place. That for which 'political Confucianism' cannot be forgiven by Mollgaard - what it insidiously forces us to *think* - is that the Rortian position on morality (at least as Mollgaard presents it) may not be the final one, or indeed one which allows us to build a functioning 21st-century 'international community' at all. Stephen Angle's claim "that the political order must ultimately get its legitimacy from a sacred source—" *Tian* remains the source of authority" - and that politics is founded on "ethical insight"<sup>157</sup> is Mollgaard's real target here: such Dworkinesque positions on the 'independent reality of value' and the necessity of an alliance of the metaethically serious cannot happily coexist with such thoroughgoing relativism. Just like Dworkin in *Religion Without God*, the best of the New Confucians seek to encourage new generations to adopt 'the religious point of view' - with or without reference to 'God' - by fostering trust in the 'Oneness of the Transcendent' in full knowledge that coercion in such matters is impossible; a Confucian *Tianxia* model, updated and wholly reformed for the demands of the 21st Century (including many of the demands quite reasonably made by Mollgaard himself), may indeed offer a corrective to the relativistic and nihilistic excesses of Western-style liberalism that Dworkin himself came to fear at the end of his life. Many Westerners, like Mollgaard, may not be easily convinced of the benign intentions of contemporary 'political Confucianism' or dissuaded from thinking the worst of the uneasy relationship between Confucianism and Chinese state power, but it is a tragedy not even to be able to entertain the possibilities of New Confucian thought and art in the first place.

### Concluding Remarks

*When you exert your heart-mind to the fullest, you become aware of your nature. When you are aware of your nature, you begin to understand the Mandate of Heaven. By retaining your heart-mind and cultivating your nature, you are serving Heaven. Never change your attitude whether your life is long or short. It is through awaiting whatever is to befall you with cultivating your person that you stand firm on your proper destiny.*

Mencius 7A1

---

<sup>156</sup> Mollgaard, 'Political Confucianism and the Politics of Confucian Studies', p. 400.

<sup>157</sup> Mollgaard, 'Political Confucianism and the Politics of Confucian Studies', p. 397.

How, then, might one go about convincing such sceptics of the possibilities of a reformed and updated *Tianxia* model? The first step would clearly be to free them from thoroughgoing relativism; overcoming such a lack of faith in the very *possibility* of a World Ethos, however, is a mammoth task, particularly when the entire Westphalian system is based on mistrust of fellow state actors and even of one's own motives, and when the liberal consensus in Western political philosophy remains intent on separating private morality and 'conceptions of the good life' from public political architecture. Recent work by the likes of Ronald Dworkin and Martha Nussbaum has challenged this *status quo* in the West in recent years, but the old realist guard, typified by former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, remain committed to a view of the world in which Confucian insights into the 'political-ethical circle' are essentially unwelcome distractions from the hard, amoral business of statecraft. Like Mollgaard, Kissinger refuses to see that political Confucianism could ever be more than a thin veil to cover Chinese expansionist ambition: just as the logic of *Dar al-Islam* poses an apparent threat to the Westphalian balance-of-power system by insisting that 'there must be only one empire, one faith, and one sovereignty in the world'<sup>158</sup>, so too has *Tianxia* been instrumentalised, Kissinger argues, by a Chinese Communist Party which claimed for decades to be utterly hostile to the legacy of Confucianism, in order to return China to its rightful place at the centre of a moral world order:

In the end, [Maoist] upheaval was designed to produce a kind of traditional Chinese outcome: a form of Communism intrinsic to China, setting itself apart by a distinctive form of conduct that swayed by its achievements, with China's unique and now revolutionary moral authority again swaying 'All Under Heaven'. [...] In July 1971 - during my secret visit to Beijing - Zhou Enlai summed up Mao's conception of world order by invoking the Chairman's claimed purview of Chinese emperors with a sardonic twist: 'All Under Heaven is in chaos, the situation in excellent.' From a world of chaos, the People's Republic, hardened by years of struggle, would ultimately emerge triumphant not just in China but everywhere 'under heaven'. The Communist world order would merge with the view of the Imperial Court.<sup>159</sup>

Kissinger himself insists that 'in the modern world the need is for a global world order. An array of entities unrelated to each other by history or values (except at arm's length), and defining themselves essentially by the limit of their capabilities, is likely to generate conflict, not order.'<sup>160</sup> The problem is that a blind insistence on the superiority of Westphalian 'agreement to disagree' on questions of metaethics and aesthetics is equally likely to 'generate conflict, not order', because such an *a priori* amoral approach to politics in the name of the higher sacred goal of 'order' is not compatible with, for example, the best Islamic or Confucian governance models, which privilege means as well as ends: governments from the Islamic and Confucian cultural spheres may follow the rules of the Westphalian system for as long as they are obliged, but they are unlikely ever fully to internalise them.

---

<sup>158</sup> Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, (New York: Penguin, 2014), p. 5.

<sup>159</sup> Kissinger, *World Order*, pp. 222-223.

<sup>160</sup> Kissinger, *World Order*, pp. 9-10.

Kissinger is adamant that the moralising logics of *Tianxia* and *Dar al-Islam* are hostile to Western liberalism, but these are premises based on fixed readings of history, not conclusions based on generous explorations of intellectual possibility. The idea that Western liberalism and the entire heritage of the Western Enlightenment should remain unchanged and unimproved by renewed contact with, for example, 21st-century Islamic and Confucian dialogue partners is as absurd as the idea that the Islamic and Confucian worlds have nothing whatsoever to gain from Western modernity. Leading figures on both sides, such as Tu Weiming, Martha Nussbaum, the Paris-based Syrian poet Adonis and countless others within and beyond this book, show in their own biographies and intellectual contributions to a wider humanity that such critical, dialogical openness is possible, and that a world of 'entities unrelated to each other by history or values' need only exist for as long as people, like Eske Mollgaard and Henry Kissinger on one side and a global army of reflexively anti-Western intellectuals (including a sizable Chinese contingent) on the other, keep saying so, and keep refusing even to *listen* to the arguments of those seemingly unrelated to them 'by history or values'.

#### 4. 'Scripture Subjugates': From Jonathan Brown to Navid Kermani on Revelation and Basic Trust in Life

*It's the same with 'Church Going'. [Larkin's hero] thinks, 'Well this is all nonsense!' But, as long as you don't believe a word of it, you can spend a tranquil moment in a church [as the first line of Larkin's poem says] 'once I'm sure there's nothing going on.'*<sup>161</sup>

Christopher Hitchens (on Philip Larkin's poem 'Church Going')

##### Introduction

Jonathan A.C. ('Jack') Brown (1977-) is one of the most prominent Western Muslim voices of our generation. I had the pleasure of meeting Jack in 2015; fascinated by his hardline and seemingly inexplicable defence of the role of Qur'anic revelation in the modern world, I ploughed through his *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy* (2014) more or less in a single sitting. The implications of Jack's book for the future of the World Ethos Project in its - let's be honest about this - tricky dialogue with Islam deserve sustained attention here; it is hard to think of a more important contribution to the debate about the place of Islam at the high table of globalisation than *Misquoting Muhammad*, not least because it forces the reader to confront her own, as well as Jack's own, doubts about just what Hans Küng's idea of 'Basic Trust in life'<sup>162</sup> might mean, or where it might come from.

##### Do I Need It More than It's True? Brown's Byzantine Defence of Revelation

Brown, to his immense credit, asks all the difficult questions about revelation; he just answers them in ways which suggest that, behind it all, a certain psychological frailty might be lurking. The purpose of this chapter is to ask whether this is actually so, and whether Brown ultimately uses the idea of revelation as a defence mechanism and false refuge, or more charitably as a springboard to genuine spirituality. Both arguments seem, at the outset, highly plausible, but it seems to matter enormously which of the two is more plausible and why.

Consider Brown's choice of language when talking about the 'fall' of Christian revelation to the status of 'mere literature':

---

<sup>161</sup> Christopher Hitchens, 'Late Night Hitch Stand-Up at Hay Festival', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11t7EXps050> (accessed 8/3/2016).

<sup>162</sup> See Chapter 1 of Hans Küng, *Was ich glaube (What I Believe)*, (München: Piper, 2010) for a full discussion of the theme of Küngian *Grundvertrauen*.

The possibility of trenchant biblical criticism today only highlights the Bible's previously fortified canonical status. Before serious criticism of the scripture began in Germany in the late 18th century, one could not say that the Bible was historical invention or utter nonsense (at least, not without dire consequences). The appearance of the historical-critical study of the Bible and the fall of the bible from scriptural canon to mere literature among scholars has been one of the great events of modern Western history.<sup>163</sup>

Already behind this language is the question whether Islam should follow suit; Hans Küng wrote a Christian theology for this post-fall, 'mere literature' world<sup>164</sup>, and essentially advocated that Islamic theology can and should make the same leap.<sup>165</sup> Brown, however, is in much less of a rush; he wants to survey every corner of the roof before giving up and jumping through the growing hole in the middle:

The flawless relevance of [Virgil's] *Aeneid* inheres because, when communities endow certain texts or bodies of material with authority, they commit themselves to interpreting those texts with charity, to extending them the benefit of the doubt. The notion of a canonical work or 'classic' is intimately linked to a commitment to making sense of the text and affirming its worth to the community.<sup>166</sup>

What, however, is 'charitable' about elevating the Qur'an to a status above all other books or above 'books' in general, refusing to regard it as a human book among countless others or to engage in literary criticism to find out what its enduring aesthetic and moral value might be? Virgil's *Aeneid* gets the 'benefit of the doubt' insofar as generations of Latin teachers have sought to maintain Virgil in the school curriculum as a worthy object of study, not because every word in it is timelessly true or revered as such: it is the very fragility and humanity of the transmission that makes it special.

Here we get close to Brown's strongest argument in the book: on the one hand, he seems to have little problem citing the likes of Spinoza, who dismissed 'figurative interpretations' of the Bible as

the affected gymnastics of readers whose notions of truth had moved on beyond the ancient Hebrews but whose sentimental attachment to the canon left them unwilling to read its texts honestly.

Spinoza represented the beginning of a new epistemological era in how the Bible and religion would be viewed in the west. For him, true religion is attainable by reason and is no more than the eternal moral truths of loving God and one's neighbour. The Bible was a book born in history like any other.

---

<sup>163</sup> Jonathan A.C. Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy*, (Oneworld Publications, 2015), p. 73.

<sup>164</sup> See in particular Hans Küng, *Theologie im Aufbruch: Eine ökumenische Grundlegung (Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View)*, (München: Piper, 1987).

<sup>165</sup> See Hans Küng, *Der Islam: Geschichte, Gegenwart, Zukunft*, (München, Piper, 2004).

<sup>166</sup> Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, p. 73.

[...] Both Spinoza and Reimarus acknowledged that the Bible might reflect greater moral or spiritual truths present outside its pages, but its laughable text certainly didn't *contain* them.<sup>167</sup>

On the other, however, he wants to affirm the human in the Islamic tradition specifically, a tradition to which he has grown personally very attached. The final anecdote in *Misquoting Muhammad* reflects this power of intergenerational transmission to reinforce Basic Trust in life:

Visiting the famous Dar al-Ulum Deoband *madrassa* not far from the North Indian town where Shah Wali Allah was born, I heard of a profound experience that one student who had studied there in the early 1900s had recorded in his memoirs. The student had strayed from the *madrassa* curriculum and submerged himself in books of philosophy and the modernist arguments of the *hadith* sceptics. Sitting in class in Deoband the student's mind was flooded with the most profound doubts about the reliability of *hadiths*. He even questioned Muhammad's prophethood. Instead of being open to possible explanations for reports like the *Hadith* of the Fly or the Devil Farting, the student felt he was falling into an abyss of irreverent suspicion. Finally, he went to his teacher, one of India's most saintly and revered *ulama*. The elderly scholar comforted the student and told him not to worry, that his faith was strong. 'Go now, and never again will you experience doubts of any kind,' he told him. The student never did.<sup>168</sup>

*Misquoting Muhammad* is full of reverence for the indispensable role of human teachers in transmitting the power of the original revelation; as with pre-Reformation Christianity, the idea that individual believers should confront the 'elliptical' text of the Qur'an and Hadiths directly, unmediated by the interpretive expertise of the '*ulama*, has been a non-starter in Islamic civilisation until very, very recently. The obvious benefits of this authority for the clerical class are not entirely lost on Brown; he even goes so far as to admit the attraction of Lutheresque direct engagement:

Tradition is rarely a match for the charisma of scripture. Even centuries after the warnings of figures as distinguished as Thomas More and many bloody wars of religion, Luther's call still rings with understandable allure. What believer does not want to return to the root of faith, to read revelation from the pages of prophets and stand in that place where the divine voice first pierced the fog of our earthly world? Who would want to have their contact with the divine mediated by clergy, voluminous books or the encrusted build-up of centuries of convention?<sup>169</sup>

But instead of reaching the conclusion a modern Western reader might expect him to reach - namely, that Luther, for all his immense faults, liberated the average individual to develop her own critical and personal relationship with the text of the

---

<sup>167</sup> Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>168</sup> Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, p. 290.

<sup>169</sup> Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, p. 163.

Bible, thereby giving her the possibility of building a relationship of Basic Trust with life as a whole instead of condemning her to placing her blind, illiterate faith in the joint authority of the revealed text and those above her interpreting it - Brown wants to double down on the sacred mystery of the source:

Concerning the written word, its hazards were known as far back as Plato. Writing may seem a 'sure receipt for memory and wisdom', warned the Athenian, but it is only a shadow of real knowledge. Written knowledge is passive before the reader and unable to defend itself against misunderstanding. People read into books only what they already believe, and books cannot correct them. Only living teachers can. For the disciple seeking knowledge, it is the master who passes on true, sound wisdom, not the book. Left to their own devices, the uninitiated may choose their texts poorly. When dealing with claims of prophetic revelation, only the master knows the difference between the written words of God and the forgeries of Satan.

Of course, democrats do not feel anxiety over the dangers of the written word. Its perils only concern those who believe strongly that knowledge and wisdom are matters of correct understanding. They must be preserved against misreading and misuse. This is the anxiety of a clerical elite or an interpretive guardian class, who worry that those who stumble unassisted onto written tomes cannot grasp what truly lies within, that they cannot see what they are supposed to see.<sup>170</sup>

This extraordinary passage is, for all its undoubted insight, also a fine example of Brown's shield tactics at their worst: one can 'believe strongly that knowledge and wisdom are matters of correct understanding' and on precisely such grounds abandon the very idea of 'revelation' for a critical, intergenerational, humanistic, literary theology, just as Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel do. The canonical texts are, on Brown's own terms, not the baby in the bath of Abrahamic civilisation; they are, in many respects, the bathwater, at least some of which ought over time to be flushed away and replaced by fresh sources. To say so is not to blaspheme against water or to denigrate the civilising role played by the Qur'an, Bible and Torah in their time and, to varying degrees, since; it is simply to understand what the baby-body of human civilisation and the dynamic *ethos* underlying it is, and how it refreshes itself from one generation to the next. Brown is right to emphasise the role of human transmission in this; there is nothing wrong with enjoying the particular 'warmth' of Islamic transmitters, as Brown has in his wide travels in the Islamic world, and one can still admire the 1400-year-old edifice of *hadith* and *fiqh* transmission and understand its deeper human and humanistic significance while nevertheless looking back, from a position of modern privilege, at the misguided literalism of many or most of its generations. In just the same way, one can admire one aspect or other of Kant's philosophy while still viewing his pronouncements on the intellectual inferiority of black people, for one example among several, with all the scorn and derision proper to them.

Brown, however, reminds his reader that for self-defining mainstream Muslim 'believers' - and this includes him - the situation is one of existential all-or-

---

<sup>170</sup> Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, pp. 163-164.



nothingness. On the one hand, he is able to formulate his attachment to the House of Islam in the following beautiful way:

In Mukalla, Habib Hamid bin Sumayt, himself well over ninety, received us in his home and asked his servants to bring out a tray of dates and water. Each one of us approached him in turn and he placed a date in our mouth and gave us a sip of water. He recounted his chain of sacred knowledge back through Yemen's Ba'alawi masters to Iraq, then to Medina and to the Prophet of God himself. Just as he had given us dates and water, so had he received them from his *shaykhs*, they from theirs, all the way back to Muhammad. Habib Hamid recited the Hadith repeated by every link in that chain after serving dates and water: the Prophet said, 'Whoever receives a believer as a guest, it is as if he has received Adam as a guest; whoever receives two believers, it is as if he has received Adam and Eve; whoever receives three, it is as if he has received the angels Gabriel, Michael and Israfil...' and so on.

No one in the gathering felt any need to question the authenticity of this living *hadith*. It had no relation to the rulings of the Shariah or to Islamic theology. The *Baraka*, or pious blessings, of this smiling old shaykh inspired us and warmed the hearts of his guests. We all felt incorporated into an intimate bond with the Arabian prophet of fourteen centuries past. In time, we will feed dates and water to another generation and recount the chain of connection, brought into the present with our names added on at the end, in turn. No one in the gathering noted or thought to care that this living Hadith was actually forged by an eighth-century figure named 'Abdallah Qaddah. As one medieval *hadith* critic explained, 'The telltale signs of forgery are manifest with this *hadith*, but the 'ulama of Hadiths still pass it on out of a desire for blessings and with good intentions.'<sup>171</sup>

While visiting Istanbul, Brown also enjoys a similar feeling of intergenerational community, but the poetry of being and learning together on this occasion doesn't seem quite enough:

Sitting in the Fatih Mosque in the lesson given by Kevseri's last surviving student, I listen to him explain the meaning of *hadiths*. They are not controversial ones. I wonder how he would interpret *hadiths* on jihad or Aisha's marriage age. The warmth of the Turkish students around me staves off, just enough, Istanbul's predawn chill. They sit as their teacher reacquaints them with Islam's scriptures, unsure of what they will mean. It is so hard to know where truth comes from in a fractured age. What does one cling to and what does one tear up in a world that does not endure?<sup>172</sup>

The idea nags away that this accumulated wisdom might be based on literary rather than literal foundations; rather than thinking of himself as an enthusiastic member of

---

<sup>171</sup> Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, p. 265.

<sup>172</sup> Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, p. 160.

a book club devoted to an all-too-human source or sources of wisdom (the Tolstoy Lovers' Society, for example), Brown seems to want to have his cake and eat it too: he wants the community *and* the superhuman authority, not the hard-won personalised truth of literary engagement with a stimulating text or texts, but the chance, even still 'in this day and age', to 'abide tranquilly in the truth of scripture'<sup>173</sup>; anything less is presented as a psychologically intolerable plunge and as an affront to the *Umma* as a whole.

Brown's *preference* for Islamic civilisation contains nothing more objectionable than my own preference for Flaubert over Doris Lessing. But the psychological architecture of his preference looks, in the end, very different. I have no trouble recognising that Flaubert, for all his greatness, was still a flawed human being like the rest of us, and wrong about all kinds of things; if new information came to light regarding his character, I would adjust my picture of him accordingly: I have no vested interest in loving Flaubert for Flaubert's sake, and my feelings for Doris Lessing are certainly no threat to my feelings for Flaubert; if anything, they complement and feed each other. One senses, however, that Brown would object on some level to my even comparing the Prophet Muhammad to Gustave Flaubert or Doris Lessing; he needs something from this source that no ordinary earthly fact or fiction should be allowed to sully. Brown's Byzantine parallelisms all seem as if they are constructed to hide this fact from the reader, or perhaps first and foremost from himself:

Galileo was echoing Augustine and Catholic orthodoxy when he asserted that undeniable, empirical observation could not disprove the Bible, it only meant that Christians had been misinterpreting some of its details. Had he not been so prickly at a time of such sectarian tension, his advocacy of the scientific method would have raised no furor. But, as it is, we look back at Galileo as the symbolic proof that one must choose *between* religion and science. This dilemma had been set up by a civilisation that, since the late nineteenth century, has reified these two concepts and for the most part placed them at loggerheads. Now those who would defend a scriptural tradition must defend it, right or wrong, in a zero-sum contest. Woman-led prayer must be rejected regardless of evidence. To be free of the tyranny of the extra-scriptural you have to mistrust and perhaps even hate its sources with a vehemence that blinds you to the necessary, natural process of reconciling truth in scripture with truth outside it. Yet in the modern world there does not seem to be any other mode of resistance, since the relationship between scriptural and extra-scriptural truths has been recast permanently as one of mutually exclusive enmity.<sup>174</sup>

There is no 'enmity' here; Brown is right that any 'religion' or *ethos* worth the name ought to have nothing to fear from free scientific inquiry, but this extends to empirical questions related to the *ethos* itself. The question is not whether one literally believes the story of Muhammad; the challenge is to retain a certain equanimity regardless of what the latest evidence says about it. And a statement like this from the Grand Mufti of Egypt looks like pretty strong evidence in one direction:

---

<sup>173</sup> Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, pp. 289-290.

<sup>174</sup> Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, p. 289.

In contrast to [the] reformists, the traditionalists who uphold the undiminished relevance of Islam's pre-modern heritage resolve the issue of Qur'an 4:34 by emphasising the role of the ulama as the guardian class. It is they who should decide how the message of God and the Prophet should be applied in any one place and time, and it is they who must mediate between the Muslim masses and their revelation. Already implicit in the medieval ulama's explanations of 4:34 was the notion that physical violence was just one option for disciplining wives. Not only was it 'disliked' as an action in God's eyes in all but exceptional circumstances, it might also prove ineffective with many women. A twelfth-century Shariah judge in Seville named Ibn Al-Arabi, who had travelled east to study in Baghdad, instructed his students that people are not all the same in how they should be disciplined. 'A slave might be hit with a stick,' the judge noted as an analogy, 'while with a free man it's enough to point it at him.'

Ali Gomaa [Grand Mufti of Egypt 2003-2013] has built on this theme in a small book of fatwas recently written for women. He took the standard late Shafi'i school position that it is not recommended for a man to strike his wife and that he must pay her compensation for any injury he causes. Men who truly want to follow the model of the Prophet would never beat their wives. Gomaa tries to preempt the question asked by many Muslims today: why would the Qur'an include this dangerous command at all? 'The Qur'an came for all humankind,' Gomaa explains, 'for every time and place, and every kind of people that there will be until the Day of Judgment.' Though unpalatable in the West, there are some cultures, Gomaa contends, where a woman will not heed her husband unless he uses physical force against her - in fact, she sees this as proof of her husband's manliness (Gomaa gives his native Upper Egypt as an example).<sup>175</sup>

What, from a perspective of post-Christopher Hitchens privilege<sup>176</sup>, could be more obviously *man-made*? One can admire Islamic civilisation intensely and still want to tear most of the stinking edifice described here down. Brown seems to want to accept this, but something always stops him from making a full-blown condemnation of - in this concrete case - wife-beating:

In a practical sense, saying 'no' to the Qur'an was not controversial at all. Muslims had, in effect, said 'no' to the Qur'an and Hadiths innumerable times over the centuries. They had said 'no' to the evident meaning of the Qur'an when it said 'polytheists are naught but filthy', favouring a figurative interpretation in light of Islam's overall teachings that humans are pure. They had said 'no' to the evident meaning of the *Hadith* of the Sun Prostrating on the basis of empirical observation, understanding it instead as a personification of the sun's submission to God's will. In effect, the overarching teachings of Islam and empirical

---

<sup>175</sup> Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, p. 278.

<sup>176</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2007).

realities were more powerful than the specific words of God or the Prophet as contained in a Qur'anic passage or *hadith*. But this was phrased as an act of *clarification*, not overruling, of asking 'how' rather than saying 'no'. The distinction in tone made all the difference, as it reflected a willingness to submit to revelation. It was seeking understanding from a just and living Lord, not refusing to obey a suspect patriarch and ossified relic of the old world.

[...] However, unless one accepts the argument that *daraba* in Qur'an 4:34 was misunderstood, one *must* accept that a husband using violence to discipline his wife is not inherently, absolutely and categorically wrong. There must be some time, place or situation where it is allowed, or God would not have permitted it. Many today are unwilling to accept this. It is in this sense that saying 'no' to scripture is fatal to its authority and signifies a turnover in epistemological eras. The move from assuming that scripture contains the truth but need only be understood properly to saying 'no' to scripture because it says something unacceptable or impossible is a blow that shatters the vessel of scriptural reverence. It means that some extra-scriptural source of truth has been openly acknowledged as more powerful and compelling than the words of God in scripture.<sup>177</sup>

'Scripture subjugates,' Brown admits. But, he continues, 'while true scripture might do so rightly, apocryphal scripture is a false idol, sometimes an opiate and at other times a tribulation'.<sup>178</sup> One need not be Karl Marx, however, to suggest that it is the very idea of 'scripture', which Brown so desperately wants to cling to 'even in this day and age', which is the real 'opiate' here; the challenge is always how we 'cull the living flower' of the *ethos* of Basic Trust in life recoverable in religious and spiritual traditions of many shapes and sizes. In the case of Islamic civilisation, this does not seem as if it should be a problem; we have 1400 years of artistic and theological resources to call on, starting with the human beauty and wisdom of many parts of the Qur'an itself. 'How do you retain faith in transcendent scripture and its commandments when many in the world declare them barbaric relics?' Brown asks. 'When the disapproving gazes and piques of contempt issue from colonial masters or an overbearing West, it is easy to understand why many Muslims cling to the canons of tradition and an idealised past more strongly than ever, turning vindictively on others who let them go.'<sup>179</sup>

This does not, however, explain the American-born and American-raised Brown's own spiritual situation. On the one hand, *Misquoting Muhammad* is an admirable attempt to bring Western readers into the complex psychological terrain of the contemporary *Umma* ('ring-fenced and embattled [by contact with the West], the symbols of Islamic identity - the Qur'an, the Shariah and the person of the Prophet - occupy a station made all the more sacrosanct by its precariousness'<sup>180</sup>); perhaps, if one is to remain 'charitable', Brown's book is an attempt by a Western Muslim to engage Muslims around the world on the meaning of their heritage. The obvious

---

<sup>177</sup> Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, pp. 287-288.

<sup>178</sup> Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, p. 262.

<sup>179</sup> Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, p. 158.

<sup>180</sup> Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad*, p. 119.

option, however - namely, to make the jump to viewing the Qur'an and Hadiths and all the centuries of commentary as just more historical documents, and to trust that what is to be salvaged from them will be salvaged in a climate of free inquiry and intercivilisational exchange - is the one Brown seems personally to like the least. A recipe for a World Ethos built on a foundation of Basic Trust in life, however, would seem to require just such a gesture from the intellectual leaders of the global Muslim community, of which Brown himself is an increasingly prominent member. The West has much to apologise for - I would in principle be ready to accept any petitions of grievance - but such apologies on their own, however forthcoming and genuine, will not provide the whole trust-building solution.

I am reminded at this point of a weekend 'conference retreat' in Belgium with Tariq Ramadan in January 2016.<sup>181</sup> As one of about two non-Muslims out of a crowd of around 300 in attendance, I was lucky enough to be 'intimately introduced' to the subject of 'Islamic Ethics' by Ramadan himself in the company of 'warm' fellow students, an intergenerational arrangement which Brown himself would have appreciated. I would not hesitate to recommend Ramadan's *Introduction à l'Éthique Islamique*<sup>182</sup> (2015) to anyone interested in understanding more about the history of Islamic ethics. I would also add that the lived experience of being there gave me more than the book alone did, or ever could have. But as Ramadan, after singing the justified praises of much of the Islamic tradition in ethics for a day and a half, turned his attention to the state of cultural and ethical collapse in many contemporary Muslim communities and their - in his view - excessive 'haramisation' and 'halalisation' of ethical discourse (turning everything into a question of 'what is technically prohibited' and 'what is technically allowed' rather than pursuing the deeper modes of trust and ethicality that the Islamic tradition has over the centuries sought to promote), I raised my hand to suggest that perhaps the whole problem was the excessive reliance on the status of the Qur'an as revelation, and that a more relaxed attitude to the scripture might be the best way for the contemporary Islamic world to salvage its kernels of deeper ethical insight and export them beyond the *Umma* to the rest of the modern world. Taken aback by a question from the floor from a seeming non-believer, and donning the protective armour with which he has deflected thousands of questions from Western audiences he perceives, not without reason, as more or less hostile to his agenda, Ramadan made it absolutely clear in his answer that 'demoting' the Qur'an and Hadiths to the status of 'world literature' was not the answer, and that his own faith could not abide or survive such a 'fall'. I was shocked by this 'revelation', but this is the world in which we live: the most prominent and progressive Muslim thought leader in the West, whose views are too 'liberal' to be welcomed in many Muslim-majority countries, is himself, for all his apparent theological sophistication, a card-carrying literalist who *needs* to believe; without his 'tranquil abode' in scripture, his trust in life would, by his own admission, evaporate. Such literalism is, in my view, a startlingly and unnecessarily brittle basis for Basic Trust; convincing Muslim 'believers' that there might be a better, more critical, honest, humble, and open way

---

<sup>181</sup> By December 2017, when this manuscript was submitted for publication, allegations of sexual harassment and violence were swirling around Tariq Ramadan in France and Switzerland. This chapter was first drafted in late 2016, before these allegations came to light. Whatever the outcome of ongoing legal proceedings, I find, as I reread this chapter in light of the recent reports, that it can sustain any verdict, even as I remain personally attached to the principle of the presumption of innocence, which is a feature of all Common Law systems (including my native New Zealand).

<sup>182</sup> Tariq Ramadan, *Introduction à l'éthique islamique (Introduction to Islamic Ethics)*, (Paris: Châtelet, 2015).

to identify as Muslim in the 21st Century - without forcing anyone to turn her back on her entire heritage, and on the contrary allowing her to escape from a siege mentality and embrace the true dialogical meaning of that heritage - is the ongoing challenge of Hans Küng's World Ethos Project.

### Towards a Literary Islamic Theology: Navid Kermani

In contemporary Germany, no one has done more to battle against this unnecessary (if historically understandable) siege mentality in mainstream Islamic theology than Navid Kermani. In *Zwischen Koran und Kafka* (2014), Kermani presents an alternative history of Islamic civilisation in which literature, rather than jurisprudence, assumes centre stage. 'Muhammad was born into a world which had an almost religious awe for the poetic word,'<sup>183</sup> Kermani argues, and this is precisely why, in order to add something radically new and post-tribal to this desert conversation,

the Qur'an necessarily, for fear of being mistaken for just another [tribal] poem, had to be seen to take a [formal] distance from poetry. 'And the poets! Those who err follow them' (26:224). [...] This was no merely literary duel. It was a question of leadership, and not just the leadership of a single tribe, which earlier poets had managed. The Qur'an radically challenged the entire tribal culture of the Arabian Desert and its attendant polytheism, insofar as it defended a principle of unity, the unity of God as well as of human society. The poets, on the other hand, represented the tribal order of the pre-Islamic age like no other social group.<sup>184</sup>

The ambivalent relationship with 'poetry' in the Islamic tradition, therefore, as well as the poetic magic of the Qur'an itself, 'the sheer aesthetic effect of its melodic recitation'<sup>185</sup> ('the famous Sirens in Book XII of Homer's *Odyssey* could scarcely have been more seductive'<sup>186</sup>), perhaps partially explains the particular difficulty of the Islamic theological mainstream - well represented by Jack Brown and Tariq Ramadan, as well as by the likes of Tim Winter and Lejla Demiri in the European Anglosphere - to accept the incorporation of the Qur'an, with whatever relative stripes of distinction, into the rank and file of World Literature alongside the Bible, Confucius and modern Nobel Prizewinners like Svetlana Alekievich. And yet, the Qur'an is arguably the Abrahamic Holy Book with the most 'literary' credentials of all:

The phenomenon of the 'aesthetic' conversion, as often reported in the annals of Islam even in recent centuries, is not really observable in the Christian tradition. The beauty of the divine revelation is not typically at the forefront of the Christian experience, rather the ethical message enshrined in it.

---

<sup>183</sup> See Navid Kermani, *Zwischen Koran und Kafka: West-östliche Erkundungen (Between Qur'an and Kafka: East-West Explorations)*, (München: C.H. Beck, 2014), p. 21.

<sup>184</sup> Kermani, *Zwischen Koran und Kafka*, p. 23.

<sup>185</sup> Kermani, *Zwischen Koran und Kafka*, p. 24.

<sup>186</sup> Kermani, *Zwischen Koran und Kafka*, p. 25.

The doctrine of *iʿjaz* (the seeming perfection of the Qurʾan's very language) could not be any clearer for a Christian: 'I believe in the Qurʾan because its language is so perfect that it could not possibly have been dreamed up by a human poet.'<sup>187</sup>

From very early in the Islamic tradition one finds examples of 'an interweaving of theology and literary studies which in the contemporary Arab world is basically unthinkable. [...] Until well into the 11th Century, intellectuals such as al-Mutanabbi and al-Maʿarri challenged the idea of the superhuman perfection of the language of the Qurʾan.'<sup>188</sup> Precisely because '[Arabic] poetry was in a certain sense a much more dangerous and direct rival to the Qurʾan than the texts of other religions, which held their place at the horizon of the Islamic faith', it remains difficult for the contemporary Islamic theological mainstream to engage in the 'Promethean undertaking of modern poetry, namely to supply a "new sacred" above and beyond what our religious institutions currently offer.'<sup>189</sup> There are exceptions, Kermani argues, which prove this rule:

Among those in the Arab diaspora who feel a duty to take up this old, new task, the Syrian poet Adonis occupies a special position. [...] On the one hand he identifies with the role of the poet in the pre-Islamic tradition, whose prophetic claims were diminished by the advent of Islam; on the other hand, he is an heir to mystic poets such as al-Hallaj and al-Niffari from the 10th Century. Such mystics had added a certain metaphysical seriousness to the already somewhat secularised poetry of the age, for which the invocations of angels, demons and Satan were more formulae than heartfelt realities.

This ambivalence in the relationship between Qurʾan and poetry is especially clear in the work of Adonis. He replaces the God of the working week with a dead God; but he is at the same time a poet who prizes the Qurʾan as the source of all that is modern in Arabic poetry. Indeed, the Qurʾan has enriched Arabic poetry more than any other text.<sup>190</sup>

Kermani goes even further than this, describing the Islamic tradition itself as one of 'revolt against God'. He takes Attar's *Book of Suffering* as a prime example:

The traveller passes by the prophets - Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus - but only Muhammad gives him a wink in the right direction: the answers are to be found not in the world, but in oneself.

'What you have sought is in you;' the soul says, and calls the traveller to drown in him.

'Up to now we have had the journey *to* God,' the poet says at the end. 'Now the journey *in* God is to begin.'<sup>191</sup>

---

<sup>187</sup> Kermani, *Zwischen Koran und Kafka*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>188</sup> Kermani, *Zwischen Koran und Kafka*, p. 28.

<sup>189</sup> Kermani, *Zwischen Koran und Kafka*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>190</sup> Kermani, *Zwischen Koran und Kafka*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>191</sup> Kermani, *Zwischen Koran und Kafka*, p. 46.

Understanding the major and minor religions of our common human heritage as metaphorical 'journeys to God', and World Literature at its best as a 'journey in God', as Lejla Demiri's '[invitation to] humanity to consider its diversity not as a problem, but as a range of signs of God's glorious creative inventiveness'<sup>192</sup>, now seems possible without forgetting the status of the Qur'an as one possible ladder or enabler of the 'journey in God' and without losing respect for the historical role of the Qur'an, and of Islamic civilisation as a whole, in humanity's conversation with itself. 'Attar - and this is crucial in order not to misunderstand the *Book of Suffering* as a negation of religion - does not demand heresy. He describes a particular emotional state of an individual enjoying a relationship of trust with God: "He who burns with love for Him is pure." Critique and rebellion are included in this picture.'<sup>193</sup> Kermani calls his literary theology a 'counter-theology, which does not remove the borders with atheism but makes them permeable'<sup>194</sup>:

Even Camus's atheism takes the world as a whole as the object of a higher authority. Following Dostoyevsky, he regards this atheism as a metaphysical revolt which presupposes the existence and relevance of the Hebrew Bible insofar as 'this is what generates the energy for the revolt in the first place'.<sup>195</sup>

We are a long way from the theological literalism of Jack Brown and Tariq Ramadan here: what is worth defending at all costs is not the undeservedly privileged epistemological status of the original (and allegedly final) 'revelation', but rather the contemporary literary and cultural project of building on it in a climate of free exchange, critical and artistic inquiry, and Basic Trust in the outcome. Making such an intergenerational project more attractive than the tattered security blanket of *i'jaz* should not be difficult, but if even individuals as humane and civilised as Jack Brown still need this particular 'tranquil abode', then perhaps the rest of us just need to roll our sleeves up and get busy providing more attractive alternatives. It is in precisely this sense that the World Ethos Project, if it is to survive, has all its work ahead of it.

---

<sup>192</sup> Lejla Demiri, 'Theology of Coexistence', What Can Christianity and Islam Contribute?', Rezension der 'Theologie des Zusammenlebens' Tagung, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen, 15/04/2016.

<sup>193</sup> Kermani, *Zwischen Koran und Kafka*, p. 56.

<sup>194</sup> Kermani, *Zwischen Koran und Kafka*, p. 60.

<sup>195</sup> Kermani, *Zwischen Koran und Kafka*, p. 68.



## 5. Beyond Fairness: Erich Fromm and the World Ethos Project

*The task we must set for ourselves is not to feel secure, but to be able to tolerate insecurity. [...] Love is possible only if two people communicate with each other from the centre of their existences, hence if each one of them experiences himself from the centre of his existence.*

Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*

### Introduction

Erich Fromm (1900-1980) and Hans Küng were not known to be great friends or allies; the juxtaposition of the Weltethos Institut and Erich Fromm Institut on Tübingen's Hintere Grabenstraße owes itself to the idiosyncracies of *Weltethos* (and Fromm) donor Karl Schlecht, who sees the two as contributing to the same overall trust-building project. The third member of this 'Karl Schlecht trio' is the China Centre Tübingen, which works closely with Tu Weiming's World Ethics Institute at Peking University; the Fromm Institut serves as a metaphorical bridge between the 'thin' contractarianism of the defenders of the letter of the *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* and Tu's 'spiritual humanism', a 'thicker' understanding of the World Ethos idea.

Fromm's brand of post-Freudian psychoanalysis is far from fashionable or cutting-edge in the brave new 21st-century world of cognitive neuroscience. This does not necessarily mean, however, that Fromm's humanistic insights in works like *The Art of Loving* (1956) and *To Have or to Be* (1976) have lost their relevance; one is at least obliged to ask whether the donor's vision of a common project across these three seemingly disparate institutes is a realistic one, and whether a kernel of wisdom for the World Ethos project can be extracted, nearly four decades after his death, from Fromm's vast corpus.

### Torpedoing the Golden Rule: Fromm's 'Humanistic Protest' Against Capitalism

In the course of his mid-century critiques of 'capitalism', Fromm targeted the embrace of the 'Golden Rule' by purveyors of interreligious and intercultural dialogue - a movement which reached its apotheosis with the 1993 *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* - as a form of counterproductive cynicism:

'I'll give you just as much as you give me,' whether of material goods or love: so runs the highest maxim of capitalist morality. One could even say that the development of this ethic of 'fairness' is the distinguishing ethical contribution [to humanity] of capitalist society.

[...] This fairness ethic is easily assimilated to the Golden Rule: 'Don't do to others what you don't want them to do to you' can easily be interpreted as 'Be fair to others in your dealings with them.' The original folk formulation of the biblical Commandment, however, is 'Love thy

neighbour as thyself'; in reality, the Judeo-Christian command to love one's neighbour is something utterly distinct from an ethic of fairness. To 'love one's neighbour' means to feel responsible for her and united with her, while a fairness ethic implies that one feels neither responsible nor emotionally invested, but rather separate and distant; it means that one respects one's neighbour's rights, but not that one loves her. It is no coincidence that the Golden Rule has become the most popular religious maxim of our day; since one can understand it in the sense of an ethic of fairness, it is the only religious maxim that everyone can understand and is ready to practise. But if one wants to practise *love*, one must understand the difference between love and fairness.<sup>196</sup>

Fromm highlights here the eternal problem of reducing ethics to maxims or principles: the outward endorsement of principles, even of the Golden Rule itself, alone tells us nothing about moral *motivation*. A World *Ethos*, while much less than a totalitarian attempt to control the hearts and minds of the global population with a new religious dogma or doctrine, is nevertheless a humanistic and 'spiritual' project in the sense that it transcends self-centred fairness to encompass an active form of love. Karl Schlecht himself sees this *ethos* as the key to a more humanistic (and productive) global economy of self-motivated workers: those capable of loving others will love the jobs they do because they are motivated to serve the objects of their love, not in the perverted, fascistic sense of '*Arbeit macht frei*', but in the sense of autonomously chosen responsibility, of 'wanting to do what one ought to do' in Fromm's idiom. The vitality and challenge of the World Ethos Project lies first and foremost in generating the wanting, not in defining the oughts.

Fromm takes great pains, however, in *To Have or to Be*, to describe the ways in which modern 'capitalism' actively sabotages this love project. By reducing the individual to her exchange value on the 'personality market', capitalism risks alienating the individual from her own self and her own life, making it impossible to achieve K ung's *Grundvertrauen* or *Lebensvertrauen* (Basic Trust in life or reality), and by extension, making it impossible for her to care deeply about those beyond herself:

Since the person stuck on the personality market does not have a deep attachment to herself or others, nothing really affects her, not because she is selfish as such, but because her relationship with herself and others is so thin. This perhaps also explains why such individuals tend not to worry about nuclear or ecological catastrophe even when confronted with the facts. That they have no fear for themselves might perhaps be explained in terms of virtues like courage and selflessness; their attitude to the destinies of their children and grandchildren, however, excludes such an interpretation. Their cavalier attitude to such matters is a result of a lack of emotional attachment, even to those nearest and dearest to them. In reality, no one is close to the person trapped on the personality market, least of all her own self.

---

<sup>196</sup> Erich Fromm, *Die Kunst des Liebens*, (M nchen: dtv, 1995 (1956)), pp. 201-202.

The puzzling question why people today buy and consume so readily but set so little store by what they acquire can most convincingly be answered in these terms. The lack of attachment extends to inanimate objects. The prestige and comfort which certain objects bring may indeed in a certain sense be valued, but not the things themselves. They are utterly exchangeable, just like friends and even lovers, because no deeper attachment to them exists.<sup>197</sup>

Fromm's further theorising on modernity's fetishisation of reason at the expense of emotional attachment to one's own life has largely been borne out by recent neuroscience; emotional engagement and rational activity are extremely difficult to combine in the same instant, while the long-term stress of management, research and other logistical tasks may even lead to the physical atrophy of empathy modules in the brain.<sup>198</sup> No less a mind than Charles Darwin is singled out by Fromm as a victim of this alienation:

[Darwin] writes in his autobiography that he found great enjoyment in music, poetry, and painting until the age of 30, and then for many years lost his taste for these pursuits: 'My mind seems to have turned into a kind of machine, filtering general laws out of giant samples of data. The loss of these hobbies represents a net loss of happiness which possibly harms the intellect and quite probably the moral substance of character, for it weakens the emotional side of our nature.'<sup>199</sup>

The greatest scientists, however, from Darwin himself to Einstein, Heisenberg and others, succeeded in maintaining 'an engagement with philosophical and religious questions' despite their other daily responsibilities. Education must do more to lead ordinary people out of the dangerous state of emotional retardation in which (in the Marxist language popular in Fromm's day) 'the individual is alienated from her work, her self, and her fellow human beings':

The dominance of cerebral, manipulative thinking advances parallel with an atrophy of the world of feeling. Since this world is not cultivated and not needed, but is rather [seen as] an obstacle to optimal functioning, the emotional lives of the individuals confined to it remains stunted, locked in a stage of perennial childhood. The result is that those trapped in the 'personality market' are noticeably naïve in matters of the heart. They often fall prey to 'emotional types' themselves, but in their naïveté fail to distinguish between real spiritual leaders and charlatans. This

---

<sup>197</sup> Erich Fromm, *Haben oder Sein: Die seelischen Grundlagen einer neuen Gesellschaft*, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1976), p. 146.

<sup>198</sup> See Jerry Useem, 'Power Causes Brain Damage', <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/07/power-causes-brain-damage/528711/>, July/August 2017 (accessed 19/8/2017). I am also thankful to fellow Kiwi Gareth Craze for his outstanding paper on 'Corporate Social Responsibility and Dehumanisation' given at the *Philosophy of Management Conference* at Webster University, St. Louis, on 14/7/2017, in which he explored some of the latest neuroscientific data on the relationship between empathy and the exercise of rationality and its implications for management philosophy.

<sup>199</sup> Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, p. 147.

perhaps explains why so many hucksters today enjoy such success with their books of self-help spirituality and pseudo-religion; it may also explain why politicians who succeed in expressing strong emotions are capable of exerting such influence over the prisoners of the 'personality market', and why they struggle to tell the difference between the truly pious and the public relations product who merely fakes it.<sup>200</sup>

Just as Marx intended his now-famous remark about religion as an 'opium of the people' as an invitation to 'break the chain and cull the living flower', so too does Fromm proclaim a 'humanistic protest' against the state of emotional retardation made pervasive by the 'personality market' of late capitalism. While Küng himself was no card-carrying socialist, Fromm's description of a certain strand of mid-century socialist humanism could be seen almost word for word as a forerunner to Küng's *Projekt Weltethos*:

[This] protest from the Left can be described as *radical humanism*, even if it was expressed in both theistic and nontheistic language in different contexts. [Such] Socialists believed that economic development was unstoppable, that one could not hope to return to earlier forms of social organisation, and that the only viable option was to press forward with the construction of a new society in which individual human beings were liberated from alienation, slavery to machines and a destiny of dehumanisation. [Such] Socialism represented a synthesis of the religious tradition of the Middle Ages with the scientific thinking of the Renaissance and its new attitude to political engagement. Like Buddhism, it was a 'religious' mass movement which, even if it used a share of profane and atheistic language, aimed at freeing human beings from selfishness and greed.<sup>201</sup>

Küng's *Weltethos*, while obviously and avowedly less than a comprehensive 'religious' doctrine for the whole world, nevertheless contains a strong thrust of this humanism, according to which, in Fromm's formulation, 'the goal of history [is seen as] making it possible for human beings to devote themselves to the study of wisdom and the understanding of God, and to free themselves from [the desire for] power and luxury'.<sup>202</sup> As well as Marx himself (who 'proceeded from economic categories of thought to "religious", psychological and anthropological themes' and, like Fromm, regarded 'having and being as two different forms of human existence'<sup>203</sup>), so too is the theologian Albert Schweitzer, with his concept of 'reverence for life' (*Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben*), engaged by Fromm as an ally in the mid-century humanistic struggle against modern alienation.<sup>204</sup> Hans Küng, with his concept of Basic Trust in life

---

<sup>200</sup> Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, p. 147.

<sup>201</sup> Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, p. 151.

<sup>202</sup> Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, p. 152.

<sup>203</sup> Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, p. 153.

<sup>204</sup> Fromm, *Haben oder Sein*, p. 158.

(*Lebensvertrauen* or *Grundvertrauen*), is the natural 21st-century heir to this tradition.<sup>205</sup>

### Concluding Remarks: A World Ethos and 'Spiritual Humanism(s)'

Along the lines of Fromm's 'humanistic protest', Tu Weiming has defended the idea of 'spiritual humanism' (in Chinese, *jingshen renwenzhuyi*) as an extension of Küng's *Weltethos* idea for a 21st-century global audience keen to transcend the 'thin' Western contractarianism which is perceived - as this book endeavours to show, partly fairly - as having been attached to the 'Global Ethic' initiative. This paradigm shift 'from Global Ethic to World Ethos' is, as the title suggests, the central theme of this book; Tu Weiming's 'spiritual humanism' will take centre stage, as Küng's *Grundvertrauen* has done here, in my *next* book, which I look forward to beginning in 2018. Broader questions concerning the role of psychology and the social sciences in the future of the World Ethos project, however, need to be addressed here, and Fromm is a good, if outdated, entry point for doing so.

Like Fromm himself, Küng is committed to a certain equanimity regarding the results of scientific research: the whole idea of Basic Trust in life implies trusting the results of free empirical and intellectual inquiry. Also like Fromm, however, Küng aimed at more than mere description in his own work: the descriptive fact that all the world's major religions and spiritual traditions contain traces of a common *ethos* is secondary to the normative imperative to improve the practice of these traditions, both internally and in their external relations with other traditions in the context of 21st-century globalisation. Out of this scrum of civilisations, a new common humanism or common bandwidth of friendly sister humanisms unitable under the banner of a World Ethos may or may not emerge; efforts must be made, however, to ensure that it does. Küng's *Weltethos* project is, like Fromm's 'humanistic protest' and Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto*, an attempt to influence history rather than merely to describe it. Fromm's language may be dated, and decades of subsequent empirical research may have either confirmed or cast doubt on many of Fromm's specific empirical claims, but as with those of Freud before him, 'whatever one might think of the particular empirical claims that Freud advanced – notions such as the Oedipus complex, the mechanisms of defence, and the theory of dreaming'<sup>206</sup> – there is, in the words of David Livingstone Smith, 'another, relatively unrecognised aspect' of Fromm's thinking. While Freud bravely challenged the prevalent 'mind-body dualism' of his day, Fromm, like Hans Küng himself, challenged the need for anti-humanistic separatisms of all kinds, arguing instead for a humanistic unity, by definition pluralistic and flexible rather than dogmatic and preachy in its use of language, but at the same time unmistakably anti-relativistic, a new, globalised cultural order in which attachment, reverence and trust in life would triumph over alienation, indifference and fear of life.

As Fromm's title in *The Art of Loving* suggests, however, this is a humanistic and aesthetic challenge, not primarily a scientific one: a scientific spirit of open and

---

<sup>205</sup> See the first chapter of Hans Küng, *Was ich glaube (What I Believe)*, (München: Piper, 2010) as well as the first chapter of the present volume for an extended discussion of Küng's concept of *Lebensvertrauen*.

<sup>206</sup> David Livingstone Smith, 'Freud the Philosopher', <https://aeon.co/essays/from-philosophy-to-psychoanalysis-a-classic-freudian-move>, 10/8/2017 (accessed 19/8/2017).

honest empirical inquiry is always necessary, but it is not sufficient to love well. Far from being the passive application of a scientific theory, Fromm's ideal of a *vita activa*, in which a 'biophilic' attachment to life as a whole is gradually born out of attachments to concrete individuals, is an extension of an existing *ethos* within oneself to one's everyday productive activities. Humanistically cultivating this *ethos* in the first place - through narrative, music, the power of positive example, parental generosity and other such intangibles - is infinitely more important and challenging than scientifically explaining its features or the purported sociological causes of its absence. As Louis Armstrong put it when asked by a journalist to define what jazz was: 'If you have to ask, you'll never know.'

## 6. Jürgen Habermas, the All Blacks and a Beer at the Rugby World Cup

*Kapa o pango kia whakawhenua au i ahau!*  
All Blacks, let me become one with the land

*Hi aue, hi! Ko Aotearoa e ngunguru nei*  
This is our land that rumbles

*Au, au, aue ha!*  
And it's our time! It's our moment!

*Ko Kapa o Pango e ngunguru nei!*  
This defines us as the All Blacks

*Au, au, aue ha!*  
It's our time! It's our moment!

*I ahaha! Ka tu te ihiihi*  
Our dominance,

*Ka tu te wanawana*  
Our supremacy will triumph

*Ki runga ki te rangi e tu iho nei, tu iho nei, hi!*  
And be placed on high.

*Ponga ra!*  
Silver fern!

*Kapa o Pango, aue hi!*  
All Blacks!

*Ponga ra!*  
Silver fern!

*Kapa o Pango, aue hi, ha!*  
All Blacks!

All Black Haka  
'Kapa o Pango'

## Introduction

*If you're going to enhance something, you've got to know the history of it. [...] The jersey doesn't stand up by itself.*<sup>207</sup>

Steve Hansen (All Blacks coach)

My first contact with the work of Jürgen Habermas came as part of a fantastically politically correct undergraduate course on 'Dialogic and Professional Ethics' at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, in the year 2000. The following year I was forced to return to Habermas in more detail at the end of a forbidding year-long 'Readings in 20th Century French and German Philosophy' course taught by an Italian immigrant who did his best to introduce the seemingly impenetrable writings of Husserl, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida and company to students raised in Polynesia on a diet of rugby and agricultural economics. The class broke into three distinct groups: those who just gave up (the immense majority); those who were first humiliated and then seduced by the seemingly absurd complexity of the language used by these 'Europeans'; and those - myself and one or two others - who faithfully did all the readings but ended up increasingly suspicious of the fact that we were too often being spoken *over* instead of spoken *to*.

Arriving in Germany for doctoral study and now a postdoctoral position, I have been forced to confront, with more patience than I have previously been able to muster, the ubiquity of Habermas and his ideas on 'dialogue'. The experience has been akin to that of a Wagner symphony: wonderful moments and dreadful quarters of an hour. Habermas, I now appreciate more clearly, was born into the midst of this 20th-century European cultural pomposity, at once a prisoner of its worst habits and a brave pioneer in the direction of something more universal. His 2015 interview with Michael Foessel<sup>208</sup> finally prompted me to examine my own thinking and feeling on a man whose work, I now understand, cannot simply be ignored, because his shackled verbiage is the currency in which contemporary political debates in 'Europe' are still largely conducted.

## Habermas and Basic Mistrust

Engrossed in reading and writing around Hans Küng's idea of *Grundvertrauen* or 'Basic Trust in life', I was immediately struck, upon returning to Habermas in 2015, by the climate of 'Basic Mistrust' in which he described himself as having come of age:

---

<sup>207</sup> Gregor Paul, 'Steve Hansen on His All Blacks Inspiration', [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/rugby/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=80&objectid=11909578](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/rugby/news/article.cfm?c_id=80&objectid=11909578), 23/8/2017 (accessed 15/10/2017).

<sup>208</sup> Michael Foessel and Jürgen Habermas, 'Critique and Communication: Philosophy's Missions (A Conversation with Jürgen Habermas)', (<http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2015-10-16-habermas-en.html>), 16/10/2015 (accessed 15/10/2017).



In light of the fractured history of German democracy, we attempted at the time to comprehend the incomprehensible regression into the abyss of fascism. This infected my generation with a deep self-distrust. We began to search for those nagging, anti-Enlightenment genes that had to be hiding in our own traditions. *Before* any preoccupation with philosophy, that was for me the elementary lesson to be learned from the catastrophe: our traditions were under suspicion – they could no longer be passed on without being subjected to criticism, but only acquired reflexively. *Everything* had to be passed through the filter of rational examination and reasoned approval!<sup>209</sup>

The obfuscatory language of Heidegger and others did indeed contain hidden irrational monsters, but so too would the post-1968 French assault on reason led by, among others, Michel Foucault. The appeal of this relativist irrationalism to the 'neoliberal' forces unleashed on the Western world in the last quarter of the 20th century - 'the potential alliance between postmodernity and neoconservatism' in Foessel's handy summation<sup>210</sup> - does not need the language of a Habermas to be made accessible on the global street: a philosophy of radical suspicion and distrust of *everything* ends up tacitly licensing the powers that be to do whatever they want.

In seeking to recover the simple handmaiden virtue of reason - the benefits and limits of which are easily demonstrable to children - from its prewar and postwar enemies among Europe's thinking-and-drinking classes, Habermas nevertheless falls into the trap of making reason the *master* of his universe rather than his faithful servant. When you feel that you can't just automatically trust *anything* because it might turn out to contain the poisons of fascism and imperialism, then a hypertrophied faculty of reason - trying to take on the obfuscators rather than just (to use a nice simple rugby metaphor) sidestepping them and moving on to face the next would-be tackler - starts to make sense as a response to cultural crises, because one can never be sure that merely sidestepping one's opponents will ever be enough: they might always run you down unless you remain continually armed and ready with a fend. It was this continual refusal ever just to sidestep obfuscation and complexity altogether and to speak in a language at least *trying* to be accessible to a mass audience that I had first objected to as an undergraduate in New Zealand. Take the following hardgoing passage:

We must recognize that any criticism of a hypocritically selective application of universalist standards must appeal to the standards of this very same universalism. To the extent that the discourse on moral universalism is carried out at the conceptual level of Kantian arguments, it has become self-reflective: it self-consciously realizes that it cannot criticize its own flaws but by an appeal to its own standards. It was Kant who overcame the historical kind of so-called "universalism" that is centred upon itself and limited to its own fixed perspective. Carl Schmitt had in mind this political "universalism" which was typical of the ancient empires. For these empires, only barbarians lived beyond the borders. From that rigid perspective one's own supposedly rational standards

---

<sup>209</sup> Habermas, 'A Conversation with Jürgen Habermas'.

<sup>210</sup> Foessel, 'A Conversation with Jürgen Habermas'.

were applied to everything foreign without taking into consideration the perspectives of the foreigners themselves. By contrast, only those standards can withstand criticism that can be justified from a shared perspective developed in the course of an inclusive deliberation requiring the *mutual adoption of the perspective of all those affected*. That is the discourse-ethical interpretation of a universalism that has become self-reflective and no longer assimilates the other to oneself. Universalism properly understood proceeds from the premise that everyone is foreign to everyone else – and wants to remain so!<sup>211</sup>

‘What’s that in Scouse?’, a humble Merseysider may quite justifiably ask; or in the global language of Facebook and YouTube comments sections: ‘WTF?’ Here, for the record, is one humble rendition: ‘It’s dangerous to assume that you already have all the answers and that everyone else is shit.’ Habermas, however, wants more than this: he wants to construct a *theory* of that danger, an impregnable rational fortress of explanation of why this is so, rather than just a simple, common-sense learning from experience that most healthy, well-adjusted 10-year-olds can already manage. This theory - ‘a theory of that for which there can be no theory’ in Roger Scruton’s immortal phrase<sup>212</sup> - is known as the *theory of communicative action*, and remains Habermas’s most influential contribution to European intellectual life. Here he goes again, summarising his most famous book on the subject:

With *The Theory of Communicative Action*, therefore, I’m attempting to explain the base for critical standards that are often hidden in pseudo-normative assumptions. My proposal is to seek out the traces of a *communicative reason rooted in processes of communication* in social practices *themselves*.

In the routines of their everyday actions, the acting parties mutually presuppose that they are acting responsibly and speaking about the same objects. They conventionally and tacitly presuppose that they mean what they say, that they will keep the promises they make, that the claims they make are true, that the norms they tacitly assume to be valid are indeed justified. [...] These naive *everyday* communicative actions operate in a space of reasons which remain latent in the background as long as the reciprocal claims to validity are accepted as credible. But criticizable claims to validity can be negated at any time. And every “no” interrupts the routines; every contradiction mobilizes latent reasons. I term as “communicative reason” the capacity of social actors to operate in this space of reasons with a critical probe instead of fumbling blind. This ability manifests itself in saying “no”, in loudly protesting or in quietly annulling an assumed consensus. [...] All social orders and institutions are established on the basis of reasons.<sup>213</sup>

---

<sup>211</sup> Habermas, ‘A Conversation with Jürgen Habermas’.

<sup>212</sup> See Roger Scruton, ‘Terry Eagleton in Conversation with Roger Scruton’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOdMBDOj4ec&t=303s>, 13/9/2012 (accessed 15/10/2017).

<sup>213</sup> Habermas, in ‘A Conversation with Jürgen Habermas’.

Translation? 'No feelings can be trusted. The right to say *no*, to distrust anything and everything if one can appeal to reasons for doing so, is sacred and inviolable.' I could never really understand why one would need to jump up and down about this or build a theory for it; why not simply claim this 'right to say no' as and when one needs it, like the New World 'pragmatists' Habermas claims to admire? But when one is raised in a climate of Basic Mistrust, then I suppose it's hard to take even the normal human 'no' reflex to injustice for granted.

Reason, quite obviously, does not go all the way down; I enjoy moments of stability and optimism about the future, even beyond my own death, because I have been well loved, well fed and relatively well educated, not because there is any rational argument to be made for the logical necessity of such a future. To paraphrase the simple, bottom-up language of Hans Küng, 'How can a person who has not been loved properly by a single human being ever hope to build a relationship with God?'<sup>214</sup> Many believe that Habermas has now understood this point, and accepted that Christianity has made much of what 'Europeans' now cherish possible. Actually, he still, in 2015, misunderstands the positive aspect of Christianity's contribution to Western civilisation:

This curious ability to lead to a decentred view of the world and of ourselves, by the way, was acquired by medieval Christian philosophy during the course of long-lasting discussions about "faith and knowledge". Philosophy can enlighten us regarding an illusionary self-conception by making us aware of the meaning that an increase in knowledge about the world has for us. In this way, post-metaphysical thinking is dependent on scientific progress and new, culturally available perspectives on the world, without itself becoming another scientific discipline, though it remains an academic activity pursued in the scientific spirit. Within universities philosophy has established itself as a subject, but it belongs to the scientific expert culture without assuming the exclusively objectifying perspective of a discipline that is defined by the focus on a methodically limited subject area. On the other hand philosophy, unlike religion, which is rooted in the cult of religious communities, must fulfil the task of rationally improving the self-understanding of mankind through arguments alone that, according to their form, are permitted to lay fallible claim to universal acceptance.<sup>215</sup>

'Through arguments alone' - to the bitter end, only reason can be trusted. Rather than freeing the humanities in general and philosophy in particular from the nagging pressure to be insular, 'scientific' and cold in the manner of physics and biology (which have very good reasons to be so), Habermas wants philosophy to retain the arrogant aura of inward-looking specialist authority - present, it must be said, on both sides of the Anglo-Continental divide - that I found so infuriating in my philosophical studies as an undergraduate. To refuse this apparent 'rigour' would allegedly be to leave oneself vulnerable to seduction by fascist demagogues, when in fact it is the very use of inaccessible philosophical language which drives people away from the humanities in droves in the first place and ends up leaving the powers that be with

---

<sup>214</sup> Hans Küng, *Was bleibt: Kerngedanken*, (München: Piper, 2013), p. 25.

<sup>215</sup> Habermas, 'A Conversation with Jürgen Habermas'.

more room to do what they want: without working on what Martha Nussbaum calls the ‘political emotions’ of everyone, the ‘love’ necessary for ‘justice’ will never exist in sufficient quantities.<sup>216</sup>

Habermas, however, wants to ground the whole edifice of 21st-century global politics ‘self-understanding’, which philosophical rationality alone, not art or beauty, can produce:

I furthermore regard the function of self-understanding as *vital*, for this was always coupled with a socially integrative function. This was the case as long as religious worldviews and metaphysical doctrines stabilized the collective identities of religious communities. But even after the end of the "Age of Worldviews", the pluralized and individualized self-understanding of citizens retains an integrative element in modern societies. Since the secularization of state authority, religion can no longer meet the requirement of legitimizing political rule. As a result, the burden of integrating citizens shifts from the level of social to the level of political integration, and this means: from religion to the fundamental norms of the constitutional state, which are rooted in a shared *political* culture. These constitutional norms, which secure the remainder of collective background consent, draw their persuasive power from the repeatedly renewed *philosophical* argumentation of the rational law tradition and political theory.<sup>217</sup>

Instead of accepting that philosophy should involve at least some *philo*, and that the humanities are not cold sciences but warm ovens lovingly baking the emotions we need in order to live well together and realise our highest selves in a transcendence of mere selfhood, we are left in the cold draught of Habermas’s ‘critical social theory’, which refuses itself the luxury of enjoying any emotions whatsoever, and instead furiously pursues pseudoscientific, ‘rational’ and ‘theoretical’ solutions to everyday moral and political problems rather than fighting the battle where it ought to be fought: in the hearts of ordinary people everywhere as well as in the heads of a privileged few.<sup>218</sup>

### A Beer Invitation

As my beloved All Blacks prepare to win the Rugby World Cup for the second consecutive time, I would like to end with some practical wisdom acquired from the bitter experience of previous World Cup failures: we may not win this Saturday, or the final next Saturday, but if we do lose, it will not be because we haven’t tried our best or prepared in the best way possible. The fear of losing is gone, because even if we lose, we win by having been true to our best selves. This is the opposite of

---

<sup>216</sup> See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, (Cambridge: Bellknap, 2013).

<sup>217</sup> Habermas, ‘A Conversation with Jürgen Habermas’.

<sup>218</sup> Thomas Nagel offers a handy summation of the problem in ‘Pecking Order: John Gray’s *The Silence of Animals*’, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/07/books/review/john-grays-silence-of-animals.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=2&ref=books&pagewanted=all&\\_ga=2.235844888.1491819291.1491819291.1491819291](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/07/books/review/john-grays-silence-of-animals.html?pagewanted=1&_r=2&ref=books&pagewanted=all&_ga=2.235844888.1491819291.1491819291.1491819291), 5/7/13 (accessed 15/10/2017): ‘Moral and political progress is inevitably more difficult than scientific progress, since it cannot occur in the minds of a few experts but must be realized in the collective lives of millions; but it does happen.’

rational 'self-understanding'; it is the felt realisation that things, perhaps one big thing, matter *beyond* ourselves and beyond the result, which we cannot 100% control. This Basic Trust in ourselves and our place in the world is there now; we don't actually have to win to prove it to ourselves or anyone else anymore. Perhaps only a few diehard New Zealand rugby fans could really understand what I mean, and perhaps only a European raised in the shadow of Nazism can fully understand what Habermas wants to achieve when he appeals to the rational sanctity of 'dialogue' and the Other's insurmountable otherness, or whichever trustless formulation of such inaccessible language one prefers. *Of course* it is absurd to think that 'only barbarians live beyond the borders' of oneself or one's country, just as it is absurd to think that only angels (or monsters) live within; a critical spirit is just what is needed to distinguish the good and the bad within and without, and such critical work requires positive examples and practice - in short, a healthy education. But I am lucky enough to be able take such faculties of reason more or less for granted as part of the package of Basic Trust bequeathed to me by my ancestors and the accidents of my fate; Jürgen Habermas, it seems, was never so lucky, and seeks, in reason, solutions to insecurities that must be found elsewhere. You don't overcome fear by building a fortress of reason within it; you fight fear by reaching for a higher emotion, a higher honour. Intellectuals from all over the world - Hans Küng, Naguib Mahfouz, Andrei Tarkovsky, Tu Weiming, Martha Nussbaum and others - have taught me this, but the All Blacks have taught me this too, *haka* and all. The *haka* may look like exactly the kind of display of dangerous blood-and-soil patriotic emotion against which Habermas has spent his life warning, but that would be utterly, utterly to misunderstand it: our 'becoming one with the land' and our 'supremacy' on the field mean nothing except as a path to heaven above, a tiny inkling of which we find in ourselves, like Confucians, by performing the ritual of the *haka* before the game and then in the even more important ritual of the beer with the opposition afterwards. Perhaps Habermas, instead of lamenting that Foucault and Derrida and Bourdieu are no longer in Paris to share lunch with him, might join me for a beer on my pilgrimage to London to watch the All Blacks next weekend, or closer to home in Tübingen for the semi-final against Nelson Mandela's famous Springboks this Saturday. The All Blacks' tradition of doing the same with their opponents after a game now matters more to us, their loyal supporters, than winning itself; if professional rugby players from Britain's far-flung abandoned colonies can manage to share a beer after 80 minutes of trying to smash the living daylight out of each other, then doesn't that teach us more about 'dialogue' than reason or theory ever could?

### Implications for a World Ethos

After reengaging with Habermas, I was able to confirm one important fact to myself about Hans Küng's World Ethos Project: clear philosophical thinking is more often an effect of the existence of this *ethos* than it is a cause of it. As such, a philosophy which sees the causal arrow the other way round is doomed to frustration: *needing* philosophy, or the philosophical method, to ground a Global Ethic (or a Habermasian Constitutional World Republic) is effectively the same as needing a specific religious dogma to do so: it is a fundamentalism rooted in Basic Mistrust in oneself and one's place in the wider world. One can learn from the Western philosophical tradition as

one can learn from the Confucian or Islamic civilisational traditions: by cherrypicking the gifts of inspiration one finds there. K ung's real project is neither theological, nor philosophical, nor psychological in a 'scientific' or 'public' ('Global Ethic') sense: it is 'humanistic', intimate, 'private' *experience* which generates a World Ethos, experience which K ung himself first enjoyed through contact with the narrative traditions of Christianity (and first and foremost the story of Jesus himself), and then in his contact with foreign religious and literary traditions.

Habermas was, by his own admission, all but denied this privilege of relaxed contact: he was unable to enjoy the fruits of his own cultural tradition with any degree of trust whatsoever, so how could he ever really push beyond them to enjoy foreign adventures in such a spirit? The experience of the Second World War had been so traumatic for him that he was forced, like all trauma victims, into dwelling on it and seeking to overcome it from within before being able to move on. As long as Habermas's conclusion - 'we were duped because we were insufficiently philosophical and too susceptible to the seductive pleasures of narrative' - remains the default German attitude to the history of National Socialism, the development of a culture of Basic Trust in life within Germany, and in the Europe which Germany so heavily influences, will in my privileged view as an outsider be thwarted: if the intimate, private sphere of contact with art and music can no longer be trusted (as Adorno's famous anecdote of the Auschwitz guard listening to Beethoven before work also seems to want to suggest), and if the only hope of our living together peacefully is publicly accountable philosophical reasoning or 'critical theory', then one can perhaps formulate a common 'ethic' or 'theory of communicative action' to which lip service will sometimes be paid if one is lucky, but never a common *ethos*.

The Habermasian architecture of the European Union was initially rooted in a common, traumatic narrative experience - the experience of the collective disaster of the Second World War and the desire never to repeat it on European soil. As that narrative fades, however, and is replaced by fears of dark-skinned refugees, internal populist struggles and lost influence on the global stage, the realm of Habermasian 'public reason' more and more resembles a hollow echo chamber. Nazism was toxic because of the *kinds* of narrative experiences it offered - of eternal empire and eternal life for an eternally superior race - not because it offered narrative experiences as such; K ung's beloved Christianity likewise presents stories rather than arguments alone, and it is the *stories* which move and civilise (compared to arguments, which primarily clarify and only indirectly inspire). To deny stories this power, and to privatise the aesthetic or literary dimension of existence on the grounds that it is a threat to a 'rational' public order, is to miss the point of a humanistic education: the goal is the *formation du go t*, the cultivation of taste in the direction of what Elaine Scarry has ingeniously called 'opiated adjacency', the self-marginalising effect of all contact with true beauty:

Beauty interrupts and gives us sudden relief from our own minds. Iris Murdoch says we undergo "an unselfing" in the presence of a beautiful thing; "self-preoccupation" and worries on one's own behalf abruptly fall away. Simone Weil refers to this phenomenon as a "radical decentering." I call it an "opiated adjacency," an awkward term but one which reminds us that there are many things in life that make us feel acute pleasure (opiated) and many things in life that make us feel

sidelined, but there is almost nothing—except beauty—that does the two simultaneously. Feeling acute pleasure at finding oneself on the margins is a first step in working toward [justice].<sup>219</sup>

Nazism was aesthetically tacky before it was philosophically or strategically mad: the real way to combat such tackiness is by exposure to narrative alternatives - direct tastes of something better - rather than hypertechnical and pseudowatertight philosophical argumentation. The dignity with which Habermas conducted his struggle against the demons of his own heritage will survive much longer than any ideas contained in his philosophy: if he was unable to reach the port of Basic Trust himself, his story may still be an inspiration to others on their own private journeys, though perhaps not always in the way he himself would have intended. After initially cowering in insecure antipodean awe at Habermas and his highfalutin European philosophical ilk, I was pleased to realise that, in fact, these ‘Europeans’ were not really any better than I was - no worse either, but not fundamentally better (as I had always secretly feared). Such experience of recovered equality in this direction is just as important to the development of a World Ethos as the experience in the other direction: the very idea of a World Ethos consists in the fact that inspiration can be found at home but also beyond home, and in principle everywhere, both in cultures one grew up perceiving as superior and in cultures one grew up perceiving as inferior. Neither of these is a threat to one’s own place in the world; on the contrary, they secure it by freeing us from morbid thoughts of our own insecurities and delusions of cultural grandeur respectively.

Hans Küng’s *Projekt Weltethos* emerged at precisely the time (1990) when the liberal Western model of privatising questions of meaning, and leaving the public square to reasons rather than stories, had reached its high-water mark; a quarter-century on, few would argue that ‘arguments alone’ can satisfyingly manage the growing pains of globalisation and digitalisation: an *ethos* is required which intrinsically motivates people to want to take the perspectives, or rather the experiences, of others - experiences which are themselves never merely rational - as extensions and improvements of their own experiences, culminating in an ‘opiated’ feeling of ‘adjacency’, or in other words, a spiritual readiness for sacrifice which contact with beauty engenders. As Michael Lind argues, ‘the difference between the natural sciences and the humanities is the difference between motion and motive’<sup>220</sup>: no amount of empirical research or disinterested philosophical argumentation can do this work of taste formation on its own. Such research and such argumentation can be beautiful, as Habermas’s own work sometimes is (amid all the verbiage!), but it does not have a monopoly on aesthetic value; and when it *is* beautiful rather than merely useful, it is primarily for what it *attempts* rather than what it achieves, as the great 20th-century narrativiser and dramatiser of human philosophical endeavour, Jorge Luis Borges, spent his lifetime celebrating.

---

<sup>219</sup> Elaine Scarry, ‘Poetry Changed the World’, <http://bostonreview.net/poetry-arts-culture/poetry-changed-world-elaine-scarry>, 1/7/2012 (accessed 23/12/2017).

<sup>220</sup> Michael Lind, ‘Let’s Abolish Social Science’, <https://thesmartset.com/lets-abolish-social-science/>, 25/8/2015 (accessed 23/12/2017).

## 7. Two Brothers, One *Ethos*: Christopher Hitchens, Peter Hitchens and the Meaning of Duty

### Introduction

The Hitchens brothers - Christopher (1949-2011) and Peter (1951-) - have defined the terms of public debate on the meaning of 'Basic Trust in life' in the Anglosphere in the early 21st Century; at the very least, they have defined the terms of my own private debate on the subject. One hates 'religion' for its totalitarian requirement to love the source of one's fear; the other views it as the only bulwark against such totalitarianism. These brothers have far more in common with each other than either has cared to admit in public; their hilarious pretence otherwise has only added to the drama of their public disagreement over God. One senses beneath the surface of this family an extraordinary capacity for human warmth and sincerity; one sorely wishes that one could have enjoyed a Campari with their mother Yvonne, described by Christopher as 'the gin in the Campari' before her tragic suicide in an Athens hotel in 1973, in order to understand something of the source of this creativity. Condensing ten years of almost daily engagement with one or other of these men into ten pages is both the easiest and hardest task of this book.

### Christopher: Wine, Women, Song, and Above All, Friendship

The place to start on Christopher, after the hundreds of thousands of words I have consumed by and about him, is an article by Hendrik Hertzberg that I chanced on today and had never read before:

There must be a hundred people who regarded him as among their ten closest friends, a thousand who saw him as one of their closest hundred—and all of them are correct, a tribute to Christopher's emotional largesse as well as to his Dickensian energy level.<sup>221</sup>

The crux of Christopher's argument against 'religion', crystallised in *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2005), is that 'faith' in a higher authority than life itself literally poisons the well of Basic Trust in life as described by Hans Küng<sup>222</sup>; critics such as Terry Eagleton<sup>223</sup>, who argue that Christopher and his New Atheist friends Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins (author of the recent *Science in the Soul* (2017)) make straw men of theologians from Thomas Aquinas down to Hans Küng himself, miss the point that most self-identifying religious 'believers' are not sophisticated theologians; the real target of Christopher's ire is less the individual who professes direct knowledge of God's will than the silent liberal majority who automatically and lazily accord respect to such 'people of faith' without thinking

---

<sup>221</sup> Hendrik Hertzberg, 'Hitchens, Athens, 1984', <http://www.newyorker.com/news/hendrik-hertzberg/hitchens-athens-1984>, 23/12/2011 (accessed 20/9/2017).

<sup>222</sup> See Hans Küng, *Was ich glaube (What I Believe)*, (München: Piper, 2010).

<sup>223</sup> See, for example, Terry Eagleton, 'The Liberal Supremacists', <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/apr/25/liberal-islam>, 25/4/2009 (accessed 21/8/2017).



through the implications of their condescending concessions. Christopher himself was not above engaging in debate with intellectual lightweights, from actress Whoopi Goldberg to the rapper Mos Def ('Mr. Definitely, can I call you that?'), in a tone that always assumed a certain equality of human condition with his interlocutor. Christopher's famed attachment to alcohol was also a means of facilitating this exchange among equals: the worst thing about fundamentalist religion was its presumption of privileged access to a realm which, as alcohol helped to remind Christopher, was hopelessly out of reach for all human beings; all of us may enjoy discrete private access to a 'numinous' realm by virtue of our contact with art, literature, nature and members of the opposite sex ('the eternal subject'), but such transports have nothing whatsoever to do with 'revelation' in the Abrahamic sense.

Christopher's great literary hero, George Orwell, provides the template for his engagement with religion: all 'faith' in a higher authority, as distinct from Basic Trust in life itself, was akin to a 'celestial North Korea', a totalitarian nightmare of abdication of personal responsibility and embrace of a paternal figure 'who won't go away', one who secures our survival (and perhaps, if we are lucky, even our own instant sense gratification), but destroys the meaning of our own personal struggle for identity and meaning. Hitchens himself, tubed up and about to die in a Texas cancer hospital, produced 3000 words on G.K. Chesterton which astounded his visiting friend, the novelist Ian McEwan<sup>224</sup> - by no means the best work of his long career as a journalist and literary critic (understandable), but a testament, to the end, of his trust in life. Christopher needed no promise of a future 'theme park in the sky' to appreciate the moments of breathing he had been granted: his 'need' to be a writer - he said repeatedly that 'wanting' to do it was not enough - did not get in the way of his friendships; indeed, the two passions - for the company of conversation and the solitude of the plume respectively - fed each other. 'What kind of sicko needs more than this?' This was the tone of Christopher's engagement with 'religion'.

Hertzberg summarises all this in his 2011 tribute to him in honour of Christopher's kindness during their trip together to Athens in 1984, curtailed by Hendrik's father's illness:

But if our friendship had cooled a bit—medium cooled, as he might have said—it remained forever sealed: not with a kiss (though he still greeted me with the trademark Hitchens lip-smooch), but, for me, with a memory, the memory of his stalwart tenderness during that final twenty-four hours in Athens.<sup>225</sup>

### Peter: 'What We Do Here Matters Somewhere Else'

Peter Hitchens recounts his sudden conversion from atheism to Christianity via contact with an artwork in a remote French church which aroused in him 'the terror that I might one day be judged'.<sup>226</sup> The patent injustices of this life require us to trust

---

<sup>224</sup> Ian McEwan, 'Christopher Hitchens, Consummate Writer, Brilliant Friend', <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/18/opinion/christopher-hitchens-consummate-writer-brilliant-friend.html?mcubz=3>, 16/12/2011 (accessed 21/8/2017).

<sup>225</sup> Hertzberg, 'Hitchens, Athens, 1984'.

<sup>226</sup> See Peter Hitchens, 'The Rage Against God', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vuuJKLSG3dw&t=21s>, 12/3/2013 (accessed 21/08/2017).

in a form of justice beyond the immediate; no one could reach a mature, adult stage of 'Basic Trust in life' without the sense that 'what we do here matters somewhere else', and that the wicked and the lucky will ultimately, somewhere, be brought back to account. Our desires for truth and justice are intimately linked, part of the same overall spiritual striving to make our lives hang together and make sense, whatever happens to befall us. Many atheists, by contrast, privileged inhabitants of 'leafy suburbs' on Peter's account, seek actively to tear down this overall narrative picture of the meaning of life in the name of short-term, hedonistic gratification: if there is no higher morality, then I can do what I please from one moment to the next. If everyone started believing this, Peter argues, society would collapse entirely; the choice between 'religion' and 'atheism' on these terms is really about whether one prefers to live in a world of long-term justice or short-term gratification. Though it by no means requires self-denying asceticism in one's daily routines or an abolition of the present, 'Basic Trust in life' as a whole can only ever mean the former; meaningless and cynical consumerism with no thought for the morrow and no wider attachments beyond oneself is exactly what the likes of Hans Küng and Erich Fromm, and even *Christopher Hitchens*, spent their lives opposing.

Peter's conviction, however, that those who do not officially recognise a higher Moral Law, *external to themselves*, will fiddle with their own self-developed codes to suit their short-term interests seems like exaggeration for journalistic effect (in this case, the effect of dramatising the short-termist 'selfism' which he sees as having taken over from Christianity as Britain's moral compass since 1968, or indeed since 1914). It is surely, however, because we come, via strong family attachments and further humanistic education, to value justice for ourselves and others that we then seek it in the form of a higher, longer-term spirituality or *ethos*. Works of art can and do reinforce our attachment to the world and sharpen our hunger for justice, but this sharpening process can only happen inside ourselves, on a foundation of strong attachments in early life; it is not external to us. In other words, it is not because one literally believes that the Ten Commandments were sent down by God that one should honour and fear them (this 'life-fearing' definition of religion as 'faith in unlikely, but ultimately psychologically satisfying, wish-fulfilling stories' was Christopher's main target in *God is Not Great*); it is rather because one has already internalised and personalised the value of these maxims for oneself. Only once one has given up the terrified literalism of the textual fundamentalist, who 'needs' the story of the transcendent origin of the source to be true, can one begin the journey of Basic Trust in life itself. Peter himself has always claimed that his attachment to Christianity was cultural rather than epistemological: given that we can't know directly about the beyond of 'life', our choice about what to 'believe' is really a choice about what to live and hope for now<sup>227</sup>: British Christianity, with its hymns and hedgerows, offers Peter far more than Mick Jagger and Miley Cyrus.

Christianity for Peter, indeed, is part of a broader (and fast-disappearing) civilisational unit - Britain - which he considers his home, and to which he feels viscerally attached. This attachment enabled curiosity for foreign lands (witness his years as a foreign correspondent in Moscow, Washington and far beyond), but the nation-state remains for Peter 'the largest unit at which it is possible to be effectively unselfish'; the joy of crossing borders does not cancel or outweigh one's love of

---

<sup>227</sup> See Peter Hitchens, 'God Does Exist', *Oxford Union*, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnIH4gomOqc> (accessed 8/8/2017).

home; on the contrary, the former is directly correlated with the latter. A 'World Ethos' for Peter is by definition only livable by citizens who regard themselves first and foremost as unique individuals with roots in individual countries; 'humanity' as a whole is too abstract, too devoid of roots and history to elicit the kinds of sympathies that make meaningful sacrifice possible. 'Globalism' is thus seen as a route to 'selfism' by stealth; by seeking to deprive individuals of their attachments to their native heritages, one achieves the effect of alienating people from their lives as a narrative whole and driving them into hedonistic consumerism.

Such defences of the nation-state, however, seem a trifle anachronistic. Communications technology has made physical borders less relevant than ever: I can now access Chinese music, Arabic poetry and Polynesian dance from the comfort of any Internet connection in the world; just as Roger Scruton<sup>228</sup> enjoyed a cosmopolitan education in the 'Britain' of his day (from Greek and Roman poets to the *Thousand and One Nights* etc.), a curriculum which grew out of Britain's historical and colonial contacts with the world beyond itself, today I can read and hear cultural material instantaneously from all four corners of the Earth. Attachment to individual stories and quests for justice remains the central vehicle through which such a culture is transmitted, but a new generation is confronted with exponentially more avenues for cultural exploration than its predecessors. Peter may be right that this overabundance of choice in a globalised world leads to the triumph of lowest-common-denominator, hedonistic, short-termist 'selfism' over the more patient cultivation of attachment and virtue, and he may thus feel justified in doubling down on Britain's own immense cultural heritage - the heritage of his own youth - as an antidote to this disease, but there seems no reason to think that a new generation of those seeking to fight the same fight would not just as well follow Christopher's example instead, and build a life in a foreign country with a library of (e-)books from all over the world.

### A Common Ethos

*Is there any point in public debate in a society where hardly anyone has been taught how to think, while millions have been taught what to think?*

Peter Hitchens

For both brothers, then, it is attachment to great individual people and great individual stories which deepens their Basic Trust in life; their overhyped disagreements about 'God' and 'religion' recede quickly to the background in this Küngian framing. While both carved out careers as journalists, both also turned their hands regularly to literary and cultural criticism, primarily with the goal of propagating such *Lebensvertrauen* among their readers. Peter, for example, tackles the BBC Police drama *Line of Duty*.

---

<sup>228</sup> See Roger Scruton, 'Terry Eagleton in Conversation with Roger Scruton', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOdMBDOj4ec>, 19/9/2012 (accessed 21/9/2017).

At the heart of each story is one simple thing, and that is the thing that makes it so alluring and persuades me to watch it again and again. We know enough of the truth to know that there is a terrible villain abroad getting away with wickedness, though not enough to be exactly sure who it is or how he or she is doing it. In most cases he or she is succeeding in this by twisting or actively destroying the truth. In almost all cases the villain is a much-liked and indeed likeable and credible character, with whom we may in the past have sympathised.

And this is especially serious because the wrongdoer involved is a police officer, in a position of immense trust, empowered to ruin the lives of the innocent and to protect the guilty. How horrible to think that this is going on, or could. How reassuring to believe that cunning, witty, attractive and brave people are working night and day to detect and prevent it.

It's the desire for truth that keeps us watching, you see, a feature of the human spirit that I think we all possess, regardless of our own honesty, along with its close cousin, the longing for justice, even when we are ourselves unjust. And perhaps *because* we are or have been unjust.<sup>229</sup>

Later in the same *Mail on Sunday* column, he extends this principle to the case of the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Civil War:

I'm quite prepared for this to end with the case against Assad being proven beyond doubt. If it is, I'll be the first to condemn him. But all I ask of everyone else is that they are prepared to accept that, until it is proven they should withhold judgement. Careful readers will have noticed that I have not endorsed any version of these events, but mainly warned against the one which has become conventional wisdom.

It is the most basic rule, at home and abroad, and it involves never being afraid of the truth, and also saying sorry when you're wrong. That is why I'm persisting with this, this Maundy Thursday, even though it sometimes feels very lonely and I know I might be wrong. Something very deep inside me, not attributable to any virtue on my part but deep in my actual being, impels me. I hope it impels you too, at this odd time of year, when we commemorate a show trial, in which the manipulated Jerusalem mob demands - and gets from supposedly responsible authority - the release of the guilty and the death of the innocent.<sup>230</sup>

It is when Christopher and Peter engage in literary criticism, however, that their disagreements about religion really fade away to nothing. Here is Peter on the English poet Philip Larkin (1922-1985):

---

<sup>229</sup> Peter Hitchens, 'Line of Duty - Should AC12 Be Sent to Syria?', <http://hitchensblog.mailonsunday.co.uk/2017/04/line-of-duty-should-ac12-be-sent-to-syria-.html>, 13/4/2017 (accessed 21/9/2017).

<sup>230</sup> Peter Hitchens, 'Line of Duty - Should AC12 Be Sent to Syria?'

Larkin is religious precisely because he very much did not mean to be, but he was. He was of God's party without knowing it.

I can think of few more profoundly religious lines than these: 'The trees are coming into leaf, like something almost being said'.

Almost? He knows perfectly well that something is being said, and has – I suspect – a pretty good idea of what it is.

He shoves in a cautious 'almost', too, in 'An Arundel Tomb': 'Our almost-instinct, almost true: What will survive of us is love'.

But in either case do you recall the hesitant 'almost' - or the unqualified and beautiful statement?<sup>231</sup>

Here is Christopher saying the same thing in secular terms about Larkin's *Lebensvertrauen*. The poet's affirmation of life comes at the end of a long and squalid journey through postwar Britain, during which 'he was in constant search of material featuring schoolgirls, flagellation, and sodomy':

Even "The Whitsun Weddings," in which he manages to write with some *tendresse* about a famous northern-English nuptial tradition, closes with an extremely melancholy metaphor of energy mutated into futility, or possibly potency into liquefaction: "A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower / Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain." And as for the thought of parenthood, not just by or from oneself, but even *of* oneself, we need look no further than the celebrated poem that probably convinced his admirer Margaret Thatcher that he wasn't the family-values type. "This Be the Verse" opens by saying, "They fuck you up, your mum and dad / They may not mean to, but they do"; and it closes by advising, "Get out as early as you can / And don't have any kids yourself." There are virtually no references to children in Larkin that are not vivid with revulsion, the word *kiddies* being the customary form the automatic shudder takes.

No keen analyst is required to unravel this. Larkin had not only a bombastic fascist for a father, but a simpering weakling for a mother. Sydney Larkin had the grace to die early but his widow, Eva, lingered on, querulous, demanding, and hypochondriacal (and extremely unwell), for decades. She may not have meant to make her son's life a nightmare of guilt and annoyance, but she did.

[...] Larkin, who once told an interviewer, "Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth," found his poetic promptings in the overcrowded, overworked, underfed society that he so much purported to resent. Not only that, but his chosen career as a librarian led him to live in Belfast, Ireland's (and Britain's) most immiserated and forbidding city, at the cusp of the 1940s and '50s.

[...] It is inescapable that we should wonder how and why poetry manages to transmute the dross of existence into magic or gold, and the contrast in Larkin's case is a specially acute one. Having quit Belfast, he removed himself forever to Hull, a rugged coastal city facing toward

---

<sup>231</sup> Peter Hitchens, 'A Whitsun Address' <http://hitchensblog.mailonsunday.co.uk/2017/06/a-whitsun-address.html>, 5/6/2017 (accessed 21/8/2017).

Scandinavia that, even if it was once represented in Parliament by Andrew Marvell, in point of warmth and amenity runs Belfast a pretty close second. Here he brooded biliously and even spitefully on his lack of privacy, the success of his happier friends [Kingsley] Amis and [Robert] Conquest, the decline of standards at the university he served, the general bloodiness of pub lunches and academic sherry parties, the frumpy manipulateness of womenfolk, and the petrifying imminence of death (might one say that Hull was other people?). He may have taken a sidelong swipe at the daffodils, but he did evolve his own sour strain and syncopation of Wordsworth's "still, sad music of humanity." And without that synthesis of gloom and angst, we could never have had his "Aubade," a waking meditation on extinction that unstrenuously contrives a tense, brilliant counterpoise between the stoic philosophies of Lucretius and David Hume, and his own frank terror of oblivion.

[...] We might agree to find it heartening that, in consequence of a dead-average middle-English Sunday stroll, as the other half of an almost passionless relationship, Philip Larkin should notice the awkwardly conjoined couple on an ancient stone coffin lid and, without forcing, let alone bullying, the language, still tentatively be able to find: 'Our almost-instinct, almost true: What will survive of us is love.'<sup>232</sup>

No one is a prisoner of her circumstances: even the miserable, cynical and fearful Philip Larkin is eventually 'ambushed in the heart' and accorded a vision of life as a whole making sense.

It is also no coincidence that Christopher and Peter, both winners of the Orwell Prize, celebrate the great anti-totalitarian author of *1984* and *Homage to Catalonia* as well as his contemporary Aldous Huxley for their defences of human freedom in the face of sweeping technological and political change. Christopher, the author of *Why Orwell Matters* (2002), celebrates George's peerless energy in fighting the forces of darkness and Basic Mistrust:

At various points in his essays—notably in "Why I Write" but also in his popular column "As I Please"—George Orwell gave us an account of what made him tick, as it were, and of what supplied the motive for his work. At different times he instanced what he called his "power of facing unpleasant facts"; his love for the natural world, "growing things," and the annual replenishment of the seasons; and his desire to forward the cause of democratic socialism and oppose the menace of Fascism. Other strong impulses include his near-visceral feeling for the English language and his urge to defend it from the constant encroachments of propaganda and euphemism, and his reverence for objective truth, which he feared was being driven out of the world by the deliberate distortion and even obliteration of recent history.

As someone who had been brought up in a fairly rarefied and distinctly reactionary English milieu, in which the underclass of his own

---

<sup>232</sup> Christopher Hitchens, 'Philip Larkin, The Impossible Man', <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/05/philip-larkin-the-impossible-man/308439/>, May 2011 (accessed 21/8/2017).

society and the millions of inhabitants of its colonial empire were regarded with a mixture of fear and loathing, Orwell also made an early decision to find out for himself what the living conditions of these remote latitudes were really “like.” This second commitment, to acquaint himself with the brute facts as they actually were, was to prove a powerful reinforcement of his latent convictions.

[...] By declining to lie, even as far as possible to himself, and by his determination to seek elusive but verifiable truth, he showed how much can be accomplished by an individual who unites the qualities of intellectual honesty and moral courage. And, permanently tempted though he was by cynicism and despair, Orwell also believed in the latent possession of these faculties by those we sometimes have the nerve to call “ordinary people.” Here, then, is some of the unpromising bedrock—hardscrabble soil in Scotland, gritty coal mines in Yorkshire, desert landscapes in Africa, soul-less slums and bureaucratic offices—combined with the richer soil and loam of ever renewing nature, and that tiny, irreducible core of the human personality that somehow manages to put up a resistance to deceit and coercion. Out of the endless attrition between them can come such hope as we may reasonably claim to possess.<sup>233</sup>

Peter, meanwhile, reminds us that Huxley had once embraced an idea of life as the very hedonistic, soma-induced eternal present which his novel *Brave New World* parodies:

‘I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; consequently assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption...

Most ignorance is vincible ignorance. We don’t know because we don’t want to know. It is our will that decides how and upon what subjects we shall use our intelligence. Those who detect no meaning in the world generally do so because, for one reason or another, it suits their books that the world should be meaningless...’

[...] ‘De Sade’s philosophy,’ Huxley writes, ‘was the philosophy of meaninglessness carried to its logical conclusion. Values were illusory and ideals merely the inventions of cunning priests and kings. Sensations and animal pleasures alone possessed reality and were alone worth living for. There was no reason why anyone should have the slightest consideration for anyone else.’<sup>234</sup>

The Hitchens brothers show that, whatever one’s attitude to ‘God’, Basic Trust in life cannot be found by immersion in ‘animal pleasures’ for their own sakes. Totalitarianism as a political system reduces human beings to animals in precisely

---

<sup>233</sup> Christopher Hitchens, ‘The Importance of Being Orwell’, <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2012/08/christopher-hitchens-george-orwell>, 9/7/2012 (accessed 21/8/2017).

<sup>234</sup> Peter Hitchens, ‘Why Some People Want God Not to Exist: Aldous Huxley Speaks’, <http://hitchensblog.mailonsunday.co.uk/2015/08/why-some-people-want-god-not-to-exist-aldous-huxley-speaks-.html>, 17/8/2015 (accessed 21/8/2017).

this sense, denying them the 'qualitative freedom'<sup>235</sup> necessary to construct narrative arcs of meaning for themselves and their own lives, and forcing them instead into momentary hedonistic pursuits (both Orwell and Huxley famously targeted 20th-century totalitarianisms for precisely this reason). Just as the fundamentalism which removes meaning from this life and places it squarely in an afterlife destroys all hope of Basic Trust in life itself, so too does an animal relativism which denies human or humanistic identity over time destroy the whole idea of moral responsibility based on trust that 'what we do here matters somewhere else'. It matters here too, however; getting this balance, this *ethos*, right, in the face of threats from fundamentalists and relativists respectively, was the Hitchens brothers' common anti-totalitarian preoccupation. Christopher himself, a resolute supporter of the disastrous American war in Iraq after 2003 (which he dramatised as an anti-totalitarian struggle, and which Peter had the better sense to see early on for what it was), reserves his most powerful defence of this *ethos* for a fallen American soldier, Mark Daily, moved to enlist by Christopher's own writings in defence of the war. Christopher was invited by Mark's family to speak at the scattering of Mark's ashes along the Oregon coastline in 2007:

A sergeant's wife had written a letter to [Mark's family] to tell [them] that her husband had been in the vehicle with which Mark had insisted on changing places. She had seven children who would have lost their father if it had gone the other way, and she felt both awfully guilty and humbly grateful that her husband had been spared by Mark's heroism. Imagine yourself in that position, if you can, and you will perhaps get a hint of the world in which the Dailys now live: a world that alternates very sharply and steeply between grief and pride.

[...] Everyone was supposed to say something, but when John Daily took the first scoop from the urn and spread the ashes on the breeze, there was something so unutterably final in the gesture that tears seemed as natural as breathing and I wasn't at all sure that I could go through with it. My idea had been to quote from the last scene of *Macbeth*, which is the only passage I know that can hope to rise to such an occasion. The tyrant and usurper has been killed, but Ross has to tell old Siward that his boy has perished in the struggle:

Your son, my lord, has paid a soldier's debt;  
He only lived but till he was a man;  
The which no sooner had his prowess confirm'd  
In the unshrinking station where he fought,  
But like a man he died.

This being Shakespeare, the truly emotional and understated moment follows a beat or two later, when Ross adds:

Your cause of sorrow  
Must not be measured by his worth, for then

---

<sup>235</sup> See Weltethos Institut Director Claus Dierksmeier's *Qualitative Freiheit: Selbstbestimmung in weltbürgerlicher Verantwortung*, (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016) for a philosophical discussion of the role of 'freedom' in *Weltethos* discourse.



It hath no end.

I became a trifle choked up after that, but everybody else also managed to speak, often reading poems of their own composition, and as the day ebbed in a blaze of glory over the ocean, I thought, Well, here we are to perform the last honors for a warrior and hero, and there are no hysterical ululations, no shrieks for revenge, no insults hurled at the enemy, no firing into the air or bogus hysterics. Instead, an honest, brave, modest family is doing its private best. I hope no fanatical fool could ever mistake this for weakness. It is, instead, a very particular kind of strength. [...] To borrow some words of George Orwell's when he first saw revolutionary Barcelona, 'I recognized it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for.'

[...] As one who used to advocate strongly for the liberation of Iraq (perhaps more strongly than I knew), I have grown coarsened and sickened by the degeneration of the struggle: by the sordid news of corruption and brutality (Mark Daily told his father how dismayed he was by the failure of leadership at Abu Ghraib) and by the paltry politicians in Washington and Baghdad who squabble for precedence while lifeblood is spent and spilled by young people whose boots they are not fit to clean. It upsets and angers me more than I can safely say, when I reread Mark's letters and poems and see that—as of course he would—he was magically able to find the noble element in all this, and take more comfort and inspiration from a few plain sentences uttered by a Kurdish man than from all the vapid speeches ever given. [...] Orwell had the same experience when encountering a young volunteer in Barcelona:

[...] But the thing I saw in your face  
No power can disinherit:  
No bomb that ever burst  
Shatters the crystal spirit.<sup>236</sup>

---

<sup>236</sup> Christopher Hitchens, 'A Death in the Family', <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2007/11/hitchens200711>, 3/10/2007 (accessed 21/8/2017).

## 8. *Weltethos* As a Living Thing: Roger Scruton's *The Soul of the World*

*There is an artistic dimension unique to poetic language, a quality which we need, in our current stage of cultural development, more than ever before. It helps us to bear the world and to understand it better. This dimension consists in the fact that poetic language has a magical ability to reach our hearts directly and automatically, in its very materiality, sounds and echoes, rhythms and images, without any need for an extrinsic explanation.<sup>237</sup>*

Adonis

### Introduction

Roger Scruton's *The Soul of the World* (2014) is, already in its title, the most direct cultural echo of Hans Küng's *Weltethos* in the Anglophone cultural sphere in the last 25 years. Scruton's unashamed embrace of a certain 'spiritual humanism' at the expense of fashionable postmodern ambivalence to questions of religion already places him in the ballpark of Hans Küng and Tu Weiming; unlike Küng, however, he comes to religion from culture rather than the other way round. Rather than fearing, as Küng did in his delicate position as a renegade Catholic theologian, to seem either too religious or not religious enough depending on his audience, Scruton is unequivocal and straightforward in his defence of a 'transcendental' dimension: 'when we lose our sense of that thing, and of its eternal, tranquil watchfulness, all human life is cast into shadow.'<sup>238</sup> *The Soul of the World* is a sustained, book-length attempt to bring this dimension back to life for post-1968 generations raised on a diet of polite, indifferent relativism on such matters.

### Defending the Sacred Without Defending Fundamentalism: The Meaning of Basic Trust

Scruton challenges his 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader to retain 'faith' in the sacred or transcendental without taking the dangerous idea of 'taboo' too literally or seriously:

Consider the examples familiar to us: the Eucharist, and the instruments associated with it; the prayers with which we address God; the Cross, the scroll of the Torah, the pages of the Koran. The faithful approach these things with awe, not because of their magic power, but because

---

<sup>237</sup> Adonis, 'A Cultural Black Hole', (12/5/2016),

<http://www.alhayat.com/Opinion/Adonis/15560183/مدارات-ثقافي-ثقب>, (accessed 25/8/2017).

<sup>238</sup> Roger Scruton, 'Scientism in the Arts and Humanities',

<http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/scientism-in-the-arts-and-humanities>, Fall 2013 (accessed 25/08/2017).

they seem to be both *in* our world, and also out of it - a passage between the immediate and the transcendental.

[...] That indeed seems to be a feature of the sacred in all religions. Sacred objects, words, animals, ceremonies, places, all seem to stand at the horizon of our world, looking out to that which is not of this world, because it belongs in the sphere of the divine, and looking also *into* our world, so as to meet us face-to-face. Through sacred things we can influence and be influenced by the transcendental. If there is to be a real presence of the divine in this world it must be in the form of some sacred event, moment, place, or encounter; so at least we humans have believed.<sup>239</sup>

While this may seem to be an Abrahamic prejudice, Scruton is keen to universalise or anthropologise it:

There is truth in Durkheim's view that sacred things are in some way forbidden. But what is forbidden is to treat a sacred thing as though it belonged in the ordinary frame of nature: as though it had no mediating role. Treating a sacred thing in this day-to-day way is a *profanation*. One stage beyond profanation is *desecration*, in which a sacred object is deliberately wrenched from its apartness and trampled on or in some way reduced to its opposite, so as to become mean and disgusting.

[...] Frazer and his contemporaries were highly impressed by the Polynesian concept of *taboo*, a word that has since entered every language. Objects, people, words, places are taboo when they must be avoided, when they cannot be touched, approached, or perhaps even thought of without contagion. A taboo can be *placed* on something, like a curse; and it can attach itself to any kind of thing - object, animal, food, person, words, places, times. The idea goes hand in hand with the complementary notion of *mana*, which is the spiritual strength residing in things and radiating from them, by virtue of which they can effect changes in the human environment. There is a whole worldview contained in the ideas of *taboo* and *mana*, and it is not surprising that the early anthropologists tried to generalise those ideas to cover all religions.<sup>240</sup>

The primary challenge of *The Soul of the World* is therefore cultural rather than theological or scientific: Scruton's 'way of understanding the person employs concepts that have no part to play in the explanatory sciences, and situates people - both self and other - on the edge of things'.<sup>241</sup> Culture, to repeat, is the path to religion, or at least to a 'spiritual humanism' or *ethos* which takes the idea of the transcendental seriously without needing to define access to it in the form of a closed, tabooed canon. Wagner is one possible route:

---

<sup>239</sup> Roger Scruton, *The Soul of the World*, (Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 15.

<sup>240</sup> Scruton, *The Soul of the World*, pp. 15-16, 16-17.

<sup>241</sup> Scruton, *The Soul of the World*, p. 96.

In the hands of Wagner, Feuerbach's vision of the gods, as projections of our mortal passions, acquired a new and redemptive significance. Only what is already spiritually transcendent, Wagner's music suggests, can be projected in this way onto the screen of Valhalla. Because the gods live from our moral sentiments, they are redeemed through us and dependent upon our spiritual passions. And those passions contain their moral value within themselves. Religion does not detract from the redemptive power of our emotions, but endows the moral life with a narrative that reveals its inner truth.<sup>242</sup>

Rembrandt is another:

How can the person, whom I know as a continuous unity from my earliest days until now, be identical with this decaying flesh that others have addressed through all its changes? This is the question that Rembrandt explored in his lifelong series of self-portraits. For Rembrandt the face is the place where the self and the flesh melt together, and where the individual is revealed not only in the life that shines on the surface but also in the death that is growing in the folds. The Rembrandt self-portrait is that rare thing - a portrait of the self. It shows the subject incarnate in the object, embraced by its own mortality, and present like death on the unknowable edge of things.<sup>243</sup>

As well as physical love ('the pleasure of the kiss is a matter not of sensations, but of the I-You intentionality and what it means'<sup>244</sup>; a lover's gaze is 'an intrusion into the world from a point beyond its horizon, and a summons to me to account for myself as a free subjectivity'<sup>245</sup>) and physical laughter ('the important point is that, while smiling and laughing are movements of the mouth, the whole face is infused by them, so that the subject is revealed in them as "overcome"'<sup>246</sup>), the arts in general, and music in particular, are equally direct potential transmitters of this *ethos*. Love, laughter and art, however, can all be faked; beyond the myriad deceits of love,

laughing and smiling can also be willed, and when they are willed, they have a ghoulish, threatening quality, as when someone laughs cynically, or hides behind a smile. Voluntary laughter is a kind of spiritual armour, with which a person defends himself against a treacherous world by betraying it.<sup>247</sup>

The arts too can degenerate 'to the point at which even the *St. Matthew Passion* and the *Rondanini Pietà* have nothing more to say to us than a shark in formaldehyde'<sup>248</sup>. It is therefore of paramount importance for the spiritual health of a society that, as

---

<sup>242</sup> Scruton, *The Soul of the World*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>243</sup> Scruton, *The Soul of the World*, p. 97.

<sup>244</sup> Scruton, *The Soul of the World*, p. 99.

<sup>245</sup> Scruton, *The Soul of the World*, p. 100.

<sup>246</sup> Scruton, *The Soul of the World*, p. 100.

<sup>247</sup> Scruton, *The Soul of the World*, p. 100.

<sup>248</sup> Scruton, 'Scientism in the Arts and Humanities'.

Confucius himself also busily emphasised, it finds ways to celebrate the right art and the right music:

A false sentiment is not just one that conceals a pretense. It is one that is wrongly directed. False sentiment is self-directed rather than other-directed. We can recognise in gestures and facial expressions the physiognomy of the self-directed person, the insincere sympathy that is counting cost and benefit, the pretense at compassion that is enjoying the suffering over which it pores. Surely, then, we can recognise this in music too? It is not absurd to hear narcissism in the slimy melodies and unctuous harmonies of the late Skryabin, or an insincere sweetness in the 'Agnus Dei' from Duruflé's *Requiem*. These are things that we hear not by noticing analogies but by entering into the intentionality of the musical line, hearing its aboutness, and coming to understand that it is directed not to the other but to the self.

It seems to me, therefore, that it is reasonable to attribute moral qualities to instrumental music. Nor should we balk at the suggestion that music can achieve the kind of emotional authority that we attribute to Shakespeare and Racine - that clear outlining of a moral possibility, which is also a validation of human life. The great works of music involve large-scale musical *argument*. They venture forth into difficulties and trials, which put their material to the test, so to speak, and show that melodic, harmonic and rhythmical elements can be enhanced by trials.<sup>249</sup>

Scruton takes great pains to argue that his 'soul of the world' is not some kind of 'reward at the end of the game' for honouring a covenant or 'Golden Rule' contract with the creator, but is rather a gift revealed to us in moments of direct artistic or humanistic contact; it is the source of our desire to be moral in the first place, rather than the promised pot of gold at the end of a dark rainbow of mistrust in daily life:

The moment of forgiveness brings to the fore another religious truth, which is that sacrifice achieves reconciliation only through the sacrifice of self. This is the truth made vivid on the Cross, and subsequently embedded in all the sacred rituals of the Christian religion. Although I disagree with Girard's account of the sacred, I agree with him that the Cross marks a transition into another order of things, in which victims are no longer required. In this new order it is self-sacrifice that underpins the moral life, and for the Christian the most vivid of all occurrences of the sacred is the Eucharist, which commemorates God's own supreme self-sacrifice for the sake of humankind. From this we are to learn the way of forgiveness.

The covenant demands that each person honour his obligations and receive his rights. But no one has a right to forgiveness, and no one, in the scheme of the covenant, is obliged to offer it. Forgiveness comes, when it comes, as a gift. True, it is a gift that must be earned. But it is earned by penitence, contrition and atonement - acts that cannot be

---

<sup>249</sup> Scruton, *The Soul of the World*, pp. 172-173.

terms of a contract, but which must themselves be given if they are to rectify the fault.<sup>250</sup>

Humanistic experience - whether in love, laughter, literature or the other arts - teaches us directly and 'automatically' to cultivate our emotions in this direction; this still requires effort and discipline, but such experience also *inspires* effort and discipline. Instead of needing 'religion' as a light at the end of the tunnel of our lives, it becomes the source of our Basic Trust in life itself:

The afterlife, conceived as a condition that succeeds death in time, is an absurdity. For succession in time belongs within the causal envelope, in the space-time continuum that is the world of nature. If there is any message to be extracted from my arguments, it is that the idea of salvation - of a right relation with the creator - in no way requires eternal life, so conceived. But it *does* require an acceptance of death, and a sense that in death we are meeting our creator, [...] to whom we must account for our faults. We are returning to the place where we emerged and hoping to be welcomed there. This is a mystical thought, and there is no way of translating it into the idiom of natural science, which speaks of before and after, not of time and eternity. Religion, as I have been considering it, does not describe the natural world but the *Lebenswelt*, the world of subjects, using allegories and myths in order to remind us at the deepest level of who and what we are. And God is the all-knowing subject who welcomes us as we pass into that other domain, beyond the veil of nature.

To approach death in such a way is therefore to draw near to God: we become, through our works of love and sacrifice, a part of the eternal order; we 'pass over' into that other place, so that death is no longer a threat to us.<sup>251</sup>

### *The Soul of the World and a World Ethos*

Roger Scruton, like Peter Hitchens (and, indeed, like Hans Küng), makes no secret of his Christian cultural affiliations; in the end, however, he accepts that these are no more than 'allegories and myths [...] to remind us at the deepest level of who and what we are'. This is a far cry from a 'profanation' or 'desecration' of the Christian (or any other religious) message; it is also a long way from a pre-modern 'tabooising' of the Eucharist, an 'exclusivising' which, for all its deep anthropological roots, is beyond a certain point of intercultural experience simply incompatible with the development of Basic Trust in life itself. Access to Scruton's 'soul of the world', like Küng's *Weltethos*, does not require Christianity, but it does presuppose a certain emotional disposition which requires, for its cultivation, contact with at least some of 'the best that has been thought and said in the world'.<sup>252</sup> This may, Scruton argues, take the

---

<sup>250</sup> Scruton, *The Soul of the World*, pp. 181-182.

<sup>251</sup> Scruton, *The Soul of the World*, p. 198.

<sup>252</sup> Scruton, 'Scientism in the Arts and Humanities'. See also Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4212/pg4212.html>, 1st ed. 1869 (accessed 25/8/17).

form of Greek mythology, Arabic poetry, Chinese philosophy, Christian teaching, Polynesian dance or myriad other manifestations both old and new; it is nevertheless a recognisably common *ethos* of self-sacrifice made possible by a sense of Basic Trust in life as a whole.

It is sustained contact with foreign civilisations - in a word, 'modernity' - which allows us to overcome the pre-modern logic of taboo and to discover the source of trust, inherent in the world itself as well as beyond it, in its myriad local and foreign guises. The contact, however, must be positive; negative experiences (disease, war, colonisation) can lead (and in the case of mainstream Islamic theology, for example, *have led*) to hyper-tabooisation of one's own tradition and demonisation of everything foreign. The experience of cultural *superiority*, moreover, may be just as dangerous and toxic as that of inferiority; both extremes (the fundamentalism of those who secretly perceive themselves as inferior and the condescending relativism of those who secretly consider themselves superior) end up poisoning the well for oneself as well as others. The novelty of Scruton's argument consists in its focus on aesthetic experience as the path to such Basic Trust; in an age where the scientific method has raised living standards exponentially for millions of people (even as millions of others lag trapped behind), Scruton insists that real 'trust in life' has relatively little to do with temporary comfort or the means of achieving it, but with the deep resolution within oneself of the problem of death. It is the discovery of the 'soul of the world' - not just in one story but in multiple and ever-multiplying narratives - which makes this possible. The meaning of the best stories, even the most religious, is always that there are more stories to be discovered on and beyond the horizon. One might be tempted to say that the *Thousand and One Nights* is a better model for this than the *Qur'an*, but that would be to misunderstand the latter: Adonis, for example, sees evidence of God exemplarily correcting and updating Himself in the Holy Book(s), and argues that the Arab poetic tradition, in which the Qur'an may still be the most valuable jewel, is based, like all other 'cultures' worth the name, on 'questions rather than answers'.<sup>253</sup> It is Scruton's 'soul of the world' - K ung's very 'World Ethos' - which gives us the trust in life to be able explore the world and to ask these questions ever anew, instead of limiting ourselves to a fearful clinging to answers which age with every dawn.

---

<sup>253</sup> Adonis, 'I Was Born for Poetry', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldLr4M1cP28&t=134s>, 15/1/2015 (accessed 25/8/2017).

**A World Ethos in Action:  
Non-Fictional Accounts from Biography to Journalism**



## 9. Teaching Our Children to Love Life: The World Ethos of Abdulhamid al-Ansari and Friends

### Introduction

The work of Abdulhamid Al-Ansari, former Dean of Islamic Law at Qatar University and fortnightly columnist with *Al-Ittihad* newspaper in the United Arab Emirates, belongs to an underappreciated constellation of reformist Gulf Arab intellectuals including Saudi author Ibrahim al-Buleihi, Kuwaiti liberal activist Ibtihal al-Khatib and others who have bravely challenged the traditionalist monopoly on public opinion in recent years. This piece draws highlights from Ansari's contributions to *Al-Ittihad* between 2015 and 2017 with a view to providing an introduction to his work for the uninitiated reader, before moving on briefly to compare and contrast his overall vision with that of Buleihi and Khatib. The picture which emerges is of a united call for a new *ethos* in the Arab world, one which, instead of fostering resentment and inferiority complexes, corresponds to the idea of Basic Trust in life (*Grundvertrauen*) at the heart of German theologian Hans Küng's 'World Ethos' endeavours. This 'biophilic' spirit of 'saying Yes to life', as Küng, Ansari and friends argue, is recoverable in a host of major and minor spiritual traditions - including the rich heritage of Islamic civilisation - and is the basis for productive individual behaviour and constructive intercivilisational dialogue.

### Tackling a 'Culture of Hatred' with a New *Ethos*: Ansari's Recipe for Love and Trust

A quick sample of Ansari column titles provides a healthy overview of his thematic concerns: 'Terrorism and Mistaken Religious Principles' (7/10/15), 'Towards a Modern Understanding of *Jihad*' (21/10/15), 'Terrorism: The Explosion of Religious Principles' (10/2/2016), 'The Materialist Interpretation of History' (20/4/2016), 'Our Youth and a Culture of Life' (29/6/2016), 'Towards a Reformed Religious Discourse' (10/8/2016), 'Gulf Identity in a Changing World' (30/11/2016), and 'A Culture of Dialogue: A Global Necessity' (11/1/2017). Ansari's central challenge is to replace a discourse of Islamist exceptionalism, dominant in Gulf public life and rooted in dialectics of superiority and inferiority with regard to non-Arabs in general and Westerners in particular, with a more truly Islamic openness to dialogue with other civilisations from a solid base of curiosity, respect, and trust in the outcome. The *jihad* at the heart of Islam is not a military obligation but a moral one, a constant struggle for self-improvement on all fronts:

We need to announce a break from this aggressive, military concept of *jihad* and teach our students that the true *jihad*, the bigger challenge for our age, is to master the weapons of science, humanistic learning, technology, creativity and discovery. The *jihad* of individuals within society ought to be confined to the spheres of production and development, to dedication to the mastery of one's work. 'Military' *jihad* must be limited to the regular army...

We must abandon the traditionalist concept of *jihad* and remove it from our curricula. [...] It is time for us to hold accountable all preachers who lead our youth to perdition with slogans of '*jihad*'.<sup>254</sup>

The challenge of getting people to 'love' their work, not as slaves but as free individuals, is a central concern for Küng's World Ethos project, and in particular for World Ethos donor Karl Schlecht, for whom Erich Fromm's concept of *biophilia*<sup>255</sup> ('love for life') is as much a point of reference as Küng's *Grundvertrauen* (Basic Trust in Life) and *Ja zur Wirklichkeit* ('Yes to Reality').<sup>256</sup> Ansari seeks precisely such a cultural transformation in the Persian Gulf:

Our Islam actually supports a culture of love for life and opposes a 'culture of death'. Our religion is one of joy, good cheer, affection, tolerance, sowing seeds of decency, making people happy, helping them. It is also one of enjoying life, affirming it, with gratitude to the benefactor on high who makes it all possible. A culture of love for life means a love of goodness, tolerance, living together, constructive dialogue, the welcoming of contact with foreigners, the will to disseminate values and virtues, a disposition towards intimacy and benevolence even with those who may be different from us in their religious and political affiliations. Islam is a religion of equality, renounces violence, hatred and fundamentalism, and views all human beings as one family.

A 'culture of death', however, has grown in the hearts of a number of our youth, a culture which 'hates life' and places no value on the life of the individual human being. This licenses the spilling of Muslim blood and the sacrifice of individual Muslim lives in the service of vain projects like 'the restoration of the Caliphate' and 'world domination', beatifying with hypocritical slogans ('defence of the dignity of the House of Islam') and distorted religious concepts ('*jihad*') those who blow themselves, and others, up. What a counterproductive waste of a Muslim existence - turning oneself into a human bomb and destroying life! This 'culture of death' is hostile to life in general and individual lives in particular, destroying all plans for construction and development, bringing disasters on our societies, cultivating the illusion that we are a 'targeted people' faced with imaginary and permanent enemies, and opposing any form of opening up to the cultures of the world and cooperation between nations.

Those among our youth who have rushed to their deaths have done so because we failed to make life a place they wanted to stay. Our educational, religious and cultural institutions all failed in making them love life; we taught them how to die in the (false) service of God, but we did not teach them how to live, build, produce, develop, innovate in the

---

<sup>254</sup> Abdulhamid al-Ansari, 'Towards a Modern Understanding of Jihad' (Nahwa Mafhumun 'Asriyy lil-Jihad'), *Al-Ittihad*, 21/10/15.

<sup>255</sup> See Erich Fromm, *Die Kunst des Liebens (The Art of Loving)*, (München: dtv, 1995 (1956)).

<sup>256</sup> See Hans Küng, *Wozu Weltethos? Religion und Ethik in Zeiten der Globalisierung (Whither the World Ethos? Religion and Ethics in the Age of Globalisation)*, (Freiburg: Herder, 2002), p. 21.

(true) service of God. How can a deprived being, surrounded by a climate of extremism, misery and hatred, shackled by a long list of taboos (music, poetry, art etc.), and obliged (by a pseudo-creed of 'loyalty') to disavow all those of different religions (and even those who follow different doctrines of the same religion), be expected to love life? How can such a being build or produce anything of value when it is besieged, from the day of its birth, with warnings about the enemies that it must avoid, intimidated by broadcasts of suffering and horror, and threatened by authorities watching over its every breath? How does a person create anything in such an atmosphere of gloom and militancy, with social media voices telling him to kill intellectuals, artists and innovators? Our youth need a culture which gives them a shot at loving life.<sup>257</sup>

In 'Terrorism Rides Roughshod Over Sanctities' (13/7/16), Ansari makes a homespun diagnosis of the psychological and domestic situation of these youths, blaming a generation of parents without absolving the perpetrators of their responsibility: 'Those youths who have preferred death over life have developed hating personalities; they knew how to seek a quick death and a promised paradise, a path they chose as a result of misery in this life. They cannot have enjoyed the warmth of a true family, the tenderness of a mother or the mercy of a father.'<sup>258</sup>

Ansari is effectively positioning himself as a 'World Ethos' ambassador in the Gulf, using his platform at the Emirati newspaper *Al-Ittihad* to highlight efforts at reform in this direction. One example is the emergence in the UAE of an 'Islamic jurisprudence which looks forward to the future' instead of focusing on the glories, real or imagined, of the past (thereby abolishing both past and future in an eternal present): 'The secret of the renovation of life and the development of civilisation and the progress of humankind can be summarised in one word: innovation,' Ansari approvingly quotes Emirati vice-President Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum as saying, before concluding that 'looking forward to the future, planning for the requirements and challenges of changing times, is in reality an authentic feature of our civilisation, our history, our heritage.'<sup>259</sup> This call for a new, old *ethos*, however, extends far beyond the academy and religious institutions to include all areas of civil society; in 'The Emirates and the Humanisation of Media Discourse' (18/5/16), Ansari praises the UAE for its pioneering commitment to development in a range of areas from the economy to education and healthcare, before focusing on efforts to combat extremism in traditional and social media. Without wishing to airbrush the mistakes or shortcomings of the autocratic Emirati government, Ansari is keen to focus on the light of the Emirati example in the surrounding darkness of much of the 21st-century Arab world, and to get right to the heart of the civilisational question at stake in contemporary Arab politics, a question which, despite appearances of Arab exceptionalism, is in reality a burning issue for the entire world. In 'A Culture of Dialogue: A Global Necessity' (11/1/2017), Ansari argues that

---

<sup>257</sup> Abdulhamid al-Ansari, 'Our Youth and a Culture of Life' (*Al-Shabab wa Thaqafat ul-Haya*), *Al-Ittihad*, 29/6/16.

<sup>258</sup> Abdulhamid al-Ansari, 'Terrorism Rides Roughshod Over Sanctities' (*'Al-Irhab Yatatawalu 'ala al-Muqaddasat'*), *Al-Ittihad*, 13/7/16.

<sup>259</sup> Abdulhamid al-Ansari, 'The Emirates and an Islamic Jurisprudence which Looks Forward to the Future' (*Al-Imarat wa Fiqh Istishraf al-Mustaqbal*), *Al-Ittihad*, 15/6/16.

there is a human civilisational inheritance which we must work to preserve. [...] We must not leave the public square to those who seek to lead us to confrontation and destruction and the cutting of bridges, those who seek to sustain hatred and enmity. A culture of fruitful dialogue is based on the ability to admit mistakes to oneself and others and to seek to correct them via constant and conscious introspection, without yielding to the temptation to blame others for one's own shortcomings. Winning an argument is less a sign of successful dialogue than understanding and taking seriously the argument offered by the other side.

In order to expand our spheres of deepest concord, our political, religious, academic, artistic and business leaders need to increase their exchanges with one another.<sup>260</sup>

Such an individual *ethos*, Ansari argues further in 'Why Has Democracy Not Taken Hold in the Arab World?' (9/3/17), is ultimately required to achieve any kind of stable or just political order:

Democracy is a culture, a set of values and practices with which an individual is raised from birth, before it is a political system. It doesn't start with a transparent ballot box, but with equal education open to the cultures of the world, humanistic religious discourse, legislation which does not discriminate and a judicial culture with a conscience, formal equality of opportunity, and after all this, or perhaps before it, an active and energetic civil society which embraces and guards this *ethos*.

There is no magic solution to the problems of Arab society, only a hope of living up to the Quranic verse which reminds us that 'God does not change anything in society until individuals change themselves.' The change starts within each of us, in our views and perceptions and ideas and feelings, leading to the formation of an individual personality capable of citizenship, a refinement of behaviour and an attraction to all that is human and good.

We need to build these [personalities] in ourselves and in those around us, in our homes, schools, clubs and associations. If this *ethos* takes hold at the grassroots of our societies, the corresponding 'political system' will emerge as a result.<sup>261</sup>

### Buleihi and Khatib: The Connection Between 'Exceptional Effort' and 'Psychological Openness'

---

<sup>260</sup> Abdulhamid al-Ansari, 'A Culture of Dialogue: A Global Necessity' ('Thaqafat ul-Hiwar: Dururatun 'Alamiyya'), *Al-Ittihad*, 11/1/17.

<sup>261</sup> Abdulhamid Al-Ansari, 'Why Has Democracy Not Taken Hold in the Arab World?' (Limadha lam Tatarassakhu al-Dimuqratiyya 'Arabiyyan?'), *Al-Ittihad*, 9/3/2017.

*Education can only achieve progress if it is accompanied by the renaissance of an ethos. [...] Ideas change society, not information. There is a difference between culture and civilisation. As long as human beings have existed, they have had cultures. Even when we were living in caves, before the age of agriculture, we had cultures, but not civilisation. Civilisation is the ethos which has been bequeathed to humanity as a whole.*<sup>262</sup>

Ibrahim al-Buleihi

Ibrahim al-Buleihi takes a much tougher tone with his fellow Arabs than Ansari, never shying away from describing the 'backwardness' of contemporary Arab culture. For Buleihi, all progress, such as that delivered by the European Renaissance and Enlightenment, requires 'exceptional effort' (*juhdan istithna'iyyan*) and the energy of 'automatic attention' (*al-ihtimam al-tilqa'iyy*) which can only be generated by free human beings who are committed spontaneously to a task for its own sake rather than threatened with punishment for non-compliance. In *The Genius of Automatic Attention* (2017), Buleihi presents his version of history as essentially one of stasis punctuated by pioneering, tireless, intrinsically motivated individuals; he heavily criticises the Arab tendency to regard 'unchangeability' as a mark of civilisation and to behave as 'free riders' on the back of foreign innovations which required exceptional effort to produce, from cars and aeroplanes to the air-conditioners and oil extraction machines on which the Gulf economy so desperately depends.<sup>263</sup>

Ibtihal al-Khatib, meanwhile, focuses on the political and psychological landscape of the contemporary Gulf, describing Western societies as 'psychologically more open' (*akthar infitahan nafsiyyan*), composed of individuals more willing to engage in self-criticism and to accept the criticism of others, and therefore better able to maintain political structures which are based on merit rather than hierarchy, and economic arrangements in which Buleihi's 'genius of automatic attention' is given the freest possible rein.<sup>264</sup> Khatib has devoted much of her intellectual energy to the promotion of a 'secular' political culture in her native Kuwait; one need not agree with her politically, however, or accept that the Arab Gulf can or should import Western political institutions, to agree with her on the broad psychological underpinnings of political health: like Ansari and Buleihi, Khatib focuses on the dangers of 'fundamentalist' thinking which abolishes the future and prevents the self-criticism necessary for genuine, productive enthusiasm.

Ansari, Buleihi and Khatib all show by their own example that this enthusiasm is possible within the framework of Islamic civilisation, even if they all argue that urgent cultural reforms are needed, both at home and abroad, before such an *ethos* could hope to take root in the Arab world. Buleihi in particular has criticised postwar UNESCO efforts to preserve the 'pluralism' of the postcolonial world rather than

---

<sup>262</sup> Ibrahim al-Buleihi, 'Why Are Arabs and Muslims Backward?' (Limadha al-'Arab wal-Muslimun Mutakhallifun?'), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KTm\\_ig49JwY&t=508s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KTm_ig49JwY&t=508s) (accessed 28/4/17).

<sup>263</sup> Ibrahim al-Buleihi, *The Genius of Automatic Attention* (*'Abqariyyat ul-Ihtimam al-Tilqa'iyy*), (Dar al-Tanwir lil-Tiba'a wal-Nashr, 2017).

<sup>264</sup> Ibtihal al-Khatib, 'Freedom: A Right and a Burden' ('Hurriyya: Haq wa 'Ib'), *HIKMA-Talk*, 14/5/16, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y29Sx\\_i4-Bg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y29Sx_i4-Bg) (accessed 11/3/17).

focusing on the promotion of a certain form of character education which makes 'the genius of automatic attention' possible everywhere<sup>265</sup>; the anthropological, 'heritage sites' approach to global cultural management has thwarted the emergence of a genuine World Ethos by denying Buleihi's premise concerning the exceptional nature of human innovation, focusing instead on a psychologically dangerous and condescending 'respect for identity'. Khatib and fellow brave Kuwaiti female intellectuals like Sheikha al-Jassem stress that such 'spiritual paths' as those proposed by Ansari and Buleihi are not proper to a state, which, 'unlike a woman'<sup>266</sup>, cannot be 'offended' as it is not a person with an identity but a political architecture which allows individuals to realise themselves and to follow their own 'spiritual paths' in a climate of freedom<sup>267</sup>; yet even avowed secularists like Khatib and Jassem argue, with Ansari, that such an architecture can only really be sustained by a civil-society *ethos* rooted in Basic Trust in life and openness to interaction and critical exchange with other cultures in the first place, the very *ethos* which Buleihi associates with the scientists and innovators (such as his paradigm example Albert Einstein) who through their 'exceptional effort' and commitment to their respective causes act as the drivers of human progress, not only through their own concrete achievements (no pun intended Karl!) but moreover with the flame of inspiration they pass on to others.

---

<sup>265</sup> Ibrahim al-Buleihi, 'A Dialogue on Reason and Backwardness' ('Hiwar fi al-'Aql wal-Takhalluf'), *Sky News*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4YRL8uniRM&t=77s>, accessed 14/3/17.

<sup>266</sup> Sheikha al-Jassem, 'Those Who Believe the Qur'an is Above the Constitution are Betraying Kuwait', *Al-Shahed TV*, 8/3/16, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mf\\_r0hhU1BE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mf_r0hhU1BE), accessed 15/3/17.

<sup>267</sup> Ibtihal al-Khatib, 'Interview with *Al-Arabiya*', 14/3/08, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbLLel5WZqc>, accessed 15/3/17.

## 10. *The Universe or Nothing*: Elena Poniatowska, Guillermo Haro and a World Ethos

### Introduction

Elena Poniatowska's awardwinning biographical novel *El universo o nada* (2013) depicts the life, times and work of her late husband Guillermo Haro (1913-1988), a groundbreaking astronomer and tireless advocate of Mexican economic, social and cultural development. Haro's unwavering energy and commitment to his secular cause, and further still Poniatowska's love and admiration for her subject, mark the book out as a case study in the possibility of non-religious routes to what Catholic theologian Hans Küng has described as the cornerstone of his World Ethos idea, namely 'saying Yes to reality':

We can observe that many non-Christians say Yes to life too, such as it is, and to the idea of a meaning of life. This affirmation is invariably bound up with conceptions of guilt and grace, but does not by definition have, or need to have, anything specifically Christian or Catholic about it. The idea of Basic Trust is therefore, for me, the foundation of a Basic Ethos that can unite us all. For without this 'acceptance' of reality, without this positive, trusting Yes to reality despite all temptations to reject it, no one can behave ethically. Basic morality presupposes a Basic Trust in reality.<sup>268</sup>

The contours of Haro's Basic Trust, as drawn by Poniatowska over 450 tenderly crafted pages in *El Universo o Nada*, are the subject of this piece.

### The Human Link

Guillermo Haro was first and foremost the beneficiary of a gift of trust from his mother Leonor ('the word "fear" did not figure in Haro's vocabulary'<sup>269</sup>), a gift which allowed him the freedom and confidence to explore widely from a secure base of attachment:

Between the ages of six and seven, Guillermo was enthralled 'by the sky and everything around [him], and came to believe that heaven ended at the peaks of the mountains which surrounded the Valley of Mexico'. The answers to his pressing questions came on a train trip to Cuautla, which he spent holding his mother's hand. During this journey he discovered that the world was endless. They came home the same night but this journey would mark him for the rest of his life; years later he would recall this experience when asked about his vocation. Leonor was everything, mother and father, educator and companion; José de Haro was only the man he saw on Sundays.

---

<sup>268</sup> Hans Küng, *Wozu Weltethos? Religion und Ethik in Zeiten der Globalisierung*, Freiburg: Herder, 2002), p. 21.

<sup>269</sup> Elena Poniatowska, *El universo o nada*, (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta Mexicana, 2013), p. 22.

[...] With its jacarandas, tejocote trees, begonias and animals, the orchard at San Lucas was a paradise in which the children sowed, reaped and hung in steady orbit around a providential mother figure.<sup>270</sup>

When Guillermo is eleven, however, his mother dies suddenly of a heart attack. His new life with his Aunt Paz could not be more different: 'Unlike Leonor, her conversation turned around the domestic sphere and family heraldry. [...] It was impossible for a woman like Aunt Paz to imagine the needs of a boy like Guillermo.' While Leonor would show her children 'how certain flowers closed at night while others attracted mosquitoes', Aunt Paz was 'more interested in reading the social pages of *El Universal*, the best and most modern of newspapers, which since 1916 has been teaching Mexicans how to live well.'<sup>271</sup> Despite the life-defining setback of premature separation from his mother, the adolescent Guillermo is still able to affirm that 'there is an organising force; I experience it every day even if I can't explain it to myself'<sup>272</sup>. New friendships with contemporaries such as Hugo Margáin and intellectual bonds with Margáin's father César mark the young man's trajectory: 'What most attracted Guillermo to Dr. César Margáin, Hugo's father, was his learning. [...] With the boys he insisted on the value of books. [...] Don César put Plato and Socrates within reach, but above all he became a father figure, someone Haro could admire, and as such, love.'<sup>273</sup> Later, as Guillermo explored the possibility of graduate study at Harvard with the support of the 'godfather' of Mexican astrophysics Luis Enrique Erro, Poniatowska takes pains to stress the link between intellectual curiosity and stable attachment in Haro's early life.<sup>274</sup> She goes on to make the connection between intellectual curiosity, ethics and *biophilia* even more explicit in her brief portrait of Enrique Chavira, the humble observatory gardener commandeered by the young Haro to act as a research assistant: 'Capable of every form of sacrifice, the young man was one of those who gave more to life than he received from it.'<sup>275</sup> Such individuals, Poniatowska suggests, can be trusted with the moral responsibilities of leadership; technical training is always a secondary undertaking.

When finally at Harvard, despite feeling 'terribly homesick and, for the first time in my life, seriously afraid and conscious of my solitude', Haro himself makes a similar impression on his supervisor Bart Bok ('I have never seen anyone with the strength of character of this little Mexican'<sup>276</sup>), both for his furious commitment to his research and his political engagement. After much soul-searching, the outcome of Haro's stint at Harvard is a refined view of the overall meaning of his life, a burning sense of responsibility to contribute to the development of science and society back in his native land:

Anglo-Saxon politics, as always, defends and fights for its interests in the name of justice and reason, and it is both strong enough and clever enough to impose such an appearance and such a name on its actions.

---

<sup>270</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 14.

<sup>271</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 16.

<sup>272</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 33.

<sup>273</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 20.

<sup>274</sup> See *El universo o nada*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>275</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 75.

<sup>276</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 77.



Meanwhile, we live in hope of handouts, of Protestant, humanitarian protection.

I now feel acutely that we, not only we Mexicans but Latin Americans in general, suffer from a terrible fear of the truth. A terrible and mediocre fear because of a lack of energy, physical and moral weaknesses, and an absence of faith in ourselves. Perhaps because our extreme poverty has so debased us.

[...] I don't know how to qualify this new phase of my life. It is all so unexpected and undeserved. I remember my earlier journeys around Mexico, my special situation, and my terrible days of poverty and anxiety. And now the leap [to Harvard]. This whole thing worries me because at bottom it reflects on my character and on my life as a whole. A life punctuated by the most absurd, unexpected, various and contradictory turns. The worst of all is that these turns do not obey a higher plan, some form of cosmic will or intelligence, but are simply the caprices of a violent fate.

[...] I have tried writing to Erro several times to tell him that I want to come home. I have only been stopped by a kind of self-pity and by the hope that, at least as far as my character and my own mode of being are concerned, this stint may turn out to be of some profit.

Anxiety and concern are rooted in me, and not only with regards to myself, but more importantly concerning the tragedy of misery and weakness which our people constitutes, and which one sees with such contrasting clarity from here.<sup>277</sup>

Already in the book's first hundred pages, Poniatowska has painted the extraordinary strengths and tragic weaknesses of the man whom she will meet for the first time nearly three decades later, and with whom she will fall in love and share the second half of her life. In summary, Haro's ethical awareness flowers like few others in the garden of motherly love until the age of eleven, when his moral development is brutally interrupted by Leonor's sudden heart attack. Unable to return the debt of gratitude to his dead mother, he seeks instead to pay it through tireless service to his native country, prioritising his work over his wives and children, for whom he is tragically unable to play the role of adult caregiver. An unhappy and lonely old age, however, together with the unhappiness Haro causes around him in his family circle (not least to Poniatowska herself), do not cancel the extraordinary moral value of Haro's scientific and social work, made possible by the strong, if short-lived, human link with Basic Trust in his early life. It is, however, the extraordinary selfless generosity with which Poniatowska tells this tale of moral success and moral failure, tracing the complex ebbs and flows of Haro's Basic Trust in life and reality across his lifetime, which is the real story of *The Universe or Nothing*, and a vital and timely contribution to the World Ethos project.

### How Did She Put Up With It?

---

<sup>277</sup> *El universo o nada*, pp. 79, 83.

The short answer would appear to be ‘admiration and love transfigured into admiration and understanding’. With the hindsight of the ending, we can see that some of Poniatowska’s hagiography in the first two thirds of *El Universo o Nada* is in fact a mixture of Haro’s idealised worldview and her own idealised view of him in the first flushes of her love. Here, for instance, she recounts second-hand a conversation Haro has with Harvard Science Director Harrow Shapley: ‘Guillermo, who is young, insists that we live in a good world and that good will is greater than evil’; the problem is that ‘Mexico is enchained by the struggle for survival, by religion, superstition, martyr cults, tradition, and keeping up appearances. But the most forgotten individual Mexican in the most isolated village is capable of asking herself what the universe is and what to do with it’.<sup>278</sup> One is swept along with Poniatowska as she slowly falls in love with a man capable of the following semblance of Nabokovian purity of spirit in a letter to his sister:

In reality we need so little to enjoy authentic moments of true happiness that it amazes me. A pair of concerned eyes, interested in what is around you, a loving and understanding attitude towards the thousands of small details which nature gifts to us, is more than enough to be, at least for a lasting moment, intensely happy. [...] Life fully justifies itself when you can observe the objects of nature with a modicum of intelligence and purity.

[...] Say hi to [your husband] for me and to my ugly nieces as well, and you endure as always one of those good old bear hugs.<sup>279</sup>

It is precisely this seeming ‘purity of spirit’, however - in reality a self-centred nature mysticism more proper to an eleven-year-old boy who can take his mother’s love for granted than to a grown man with adult family ties and responsibilities - which will putrify into frustrated loneliness in Haro’s old age. The ‘abrazote’ or ‘bear hug’ is an afterthought, not the central message of love in this letter; Poniatowska herself will have to grow steadily used to being an afterthought in the life of a man committed first and foremost to the progress of science in his country. The situation, however, as with most eleven year-olds - and without wishing to labour the point or oversimplify the factors contributing to Guillermo’s exceptional but stalled moral development - is neither black nor white; he is neither an adult capable of full and final sacrifice for the concrete beings he loves, nor a child incapable of sensing the importance of ‘growing up’ and accepting the responsibilities of adulthood. He writes again to his sister María Luisa, four months later (i.e. in October 1947, at the age of 34), following a vivid dream about a bird:

Suddenly, with this perhaps childish reaction, this reliving of the child’s life which we all carry inside us, I saw that the bird’s pecking contained a message, a message from very far away. And that was how, without knowing how or why, I ended up thinking about you. It seemed as if the little bird had something very much in common with someone I knew, you, or perhaps Margarita or Leonorcita [María Luisa’s daughters]. It wanted to tell me something, and it was extremely insistent.

---

<sup>278</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 89.

<sup>279</sup> *El universo o nada*, pp. 95-96.

[...] I will admit that I was worried. I have noticed for a while now a strong tendency to let myself get carried away by semi-childish flights of imagination.<sup>280</sup>

The great tragedy of Haro's adult life is his inability to see that these 'semi-infantile imaginative processes' were in fact his adult conscience attempting to call him back from the hellish fate of Dante's Ulysses, encouraging him instead to 'transfigure' the meaning of his existence from one of abstract slavery to science as a motor of national progress to one of service to a family-friendlier brand of humanism:

Nor fondness for my son, nor reverence  
For my old father, nor the due affection  
Which joyous should have made Penelope,  
Could overcome within me the desire  
I had to be experienced of the world,  
And of the vice and virtue of mankind;  
But I put forth on the high open sea  
With one sole ship, and that small company  
By which I never had deserted been.

...

'O brothers, who amid a hundred thousand  
Perils,' I said, 'have come unto the West,  
To this so inconsiderable vigil  
Which is remaining of your senses still  
Be ye unwilling to deny the knowledge,  
Following the sun, of the unpeopled world.  
Consider ye the seed from which ye sprang;  
Ye were not made to live like unto brutes,  
But for pursuit of virtue and of knowledge.'<sup>281</sup>

Instead of heeding the bird's voice and retaining a balanced family life, Haro begins a lifelong Ulyssean quest to build a band of fellow travellers - in this case, Mexican astronomers dedicated to serving the cause of science in Mexico. Large chunks of the book - perhaps too many for the strict literary needs of the story but certainly enough to convey the depth of Guillermo's obsession - are dedicated to the lengths taken by Guillermo throughout his career to promote the training of young Mexican scientists willing to study abroad and return home to serve the cause (and his unreconstructed disdain for those who either failed in their studies or stayed on for a longer taste of the good life to the north, as well as for all those - and there are many who suffer the hilarious fate of a verbal 'Haro-slap' for unprofessional behaviour - who facilitated corruption and scientific mediocrity at home). As early as Chapter 11, and before Haro's 40th birthday, Poniatowska foreshadows her protagonist's final fate as his friendships recede behind the Ulyssean wall of science he has built for

---

<sup>280</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 100.

<sup>281</sup> Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, 'Inferno' XXVI, 94-102, 112-120, <http://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-26/> (accessed 6/2/2017).

himself and his 'willing companions': "You are far above us. We can't get up to your Olympus," Hugo Margáin joked. "Guillermo, solitude is what defines you."<sup>282</sup>

This does not, however, prevent astronomical outsiders like Margáin, and later in the story Poniatowska herself, from expressing genuine admiration for Haro's professional achievements and contributions to Mexican public life:

In May 1951, Haro was elected as Member of the Consulting Council for the Mexican Government at UNESCO. Beyond the spectacular discovery of Herbig-Haro Objects, which made him the only Mexican to join the annals of global astronomy and a prominent member of the scientific community both in Mexico and on the international stage, Haro launched himself into other conquests. Kenneth R. Lang and Owen Gingerich included him in a volume in which only astronomers of the calibre of Edwin Hubble and George Hale were deemed fit to appear. He maintained correspondence with physicists from around the world, and his success gave him even more mental energy. He had, on his own, put Mexico on the map of international science, and he had achieved it without a team, without laboratories, technicians or experts, and even a doctorate of his own. 'Exceptional work, my friend, exceptional,' Hugo Margáin would tell him, unable to contain his pride.<sup>283</sup>

Nor, indeed, does Haro himself see his dedication to his vocation as a Ulyssean 'flight' from responsibility. It is therefore difficult for the reader, made further sympathetic to his cause in the first half of the book via the prism of Poniatowska's admiring gaze, to do so; during a speech in 1954, it is as if Haro is right to defend his creed of *virtute e canoscenza* against the naïve escapists who plague his observatory in Tonantzintla with their visits:

Frequently the visitors in Tonantzintla, after warm conversations about astronomy, and moved by the intimacy of the night, say goodbye by leaving us, as a sign of their appreciation, with a confession which reveals a lack of conformity and a desire for escape, a frustration with the place they occupy on Earth, and a hopeful belief in a vague and happy beyond.

This attitude of the visitor, perhaps indicative of complicated tension knots and cultural scars, expresses itself in an affirmation which she typically formulates as follows: 'How happy you must be, living here among the clouds, moon and stars, separated from this world and its miseries.'

[...] More than once I have felt the need to detain these noble guests in order to explain to them what our point of view really is, what conflicts we endure, what attaches us to the Earth, why we study astronomy in the first place, what the meaning of our work is and what responsibilities we face to the world of which we are part.

[...] Such an explanation clearly entails showing a passionate engagement with the life of ordinary local people and an active feeling

---

<sup>282</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 118.'

<sup>283</sup> *El universo o nada*, pp. 121-122.

of solidarity and willingness to formulate solutions to the great problems facing humanity, which is the essence and justification of all intellectual work.<sup>284</sup>

Just as Dante's Ulysses remains the most ambiguous of the figures condemned to an infernal eternity, so too does Haro's single-minded commitment to 'virtue and knowledge' often appear as the bearer of the highest, noblest and most generous fruits: 'For Haro, the complexes of any human being come from abandonment, ignorance and insecurity, not from her origin. [...] The unique nature of his manner of speaking owed much to his philosophical training, his voracity as a reader and his developed faculties of self-critique.'<sup>285</sup> Haro was not, as we have seen, a fully conscious or fully condemnable, but rather only ever a partial Dantean Ulysses; it is this bittersweet mixture of 'Ulyssean' sin, which comes to the fore in the second half, and the deeper Basic Trust in life which dominates the early chapters, which makes for a compelling story and a compelling object of love - a man caught in a stalled self-critical dialogue between childhood and adulthood. Not for nothing did Haro's colleague Alejandro Cornejo choose precisely the following words in a 2013 interview: 'Haro left a mark on me for my whole life. His words spoke directly to one's brain, however big or small.'<sup>286</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly given his own perennially adolescent nature, Haro was attracted - partially fooled by appearances at the time, and partially proven right in later decades - by a nation caught, like him, in an adolescent phase of development, namely Maoist China. In 1959, he writes: 'In China I spent the most productive and beautiful days of my life, and I could see the gigantic effort which the government and people of China were making for peace and prosperity'; Haro was 'enthusiastic about the prospects for an organised country which put its people to hard work, as the Chinese had. If only there was such a desire for a Great Leap Forward in Mexico.' 'Demoralised' by the postcards widely on sale of 'a Mexican sitting next to a cactus, sleeping under his sombrero with a bottle of tequila by his side'<sup>287</sup>, Haro - 'described as an ogre by colleagues because of his demanding nature'<sup>288</sup> - nevertheless remained, even as he neared his 50th birthday in 1962, relatively upbeat; Poniatowska is still able to describe a reunion with old friend Hugo Margáin from Guillermo's point of view as a 'a true gift from life': 'Hugo remained the same man: warm, available, optimistic. They smoked together and laughed at the same jokes. He was moved to see that their friendship had remained the same as when they were young. With what happiness he called him "brother"!'<sup>289</sup>

Later the same year, however, he is back at his old Ulyssean game in another letter to his sister María Luisa, insisting that 'Mexico's basic problem is the tremendous scientific and technological backwardness we endure'; Haro is convinced that his 'true task' in life 'consists, and will always consist, in helping by all means possible the advance of science and technology in our country. This is the thing for which I feel the most passion and to which I devote myself every day with

---

<sup>284</sup> *El universo o nada*, pp. 144-145.

<sup>285</sup> *El universo o nada*, pp. 155-156.

<sup>286</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 161.

<sup>287</sup> *El universo o nada*, pp. 173-174.

<sup>288</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 180.

<sup>289</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 184.

more determination. I only hope to make a positive contribution to this end.<sup>290</sup> This 'constant preoccupation' extends not only to the *canoscenza* of pure scientific research, but also to the virtuous health of 'the relationship between science and industry' necessary for the economic and social development of Mexico. Complaining about the irrelevance of certain research work conducted at the Colegio Nacional, for example, Haro writes: 'What is the point of these studies? Shouldn't we be engaging in preventive medicine? This ought to be the main emphasis, the main goal, not getting carried away by personal glory.'<sup>291</sup> Haro maintains this position even on decisions regarding his own salary; several times during his professional career he foregoes pay rises beyond the immediate needs of himself and his family in order to free up funds for the institutions he is serving.<sup>292</sup>

Just before the halfway stage in the novel, and before our recidivist Mexican Ulysses and his journey towards a full-time 'world without people' reaches what we later discover to be its inevitable tragic port, the first meeting between Haro and Poniatowska takes place. He refuses to talk to the young female journalist because, like other journalists whose incompetence and lack of dedication to the cause of scientific development in Mexico he abhors, she has forgotten to bring a pen. For the fateful second meeting, however, Poniatowska makes more of an effort:

I tremble on the bus on my way to Puebla. I am carrying a notebook, pencil and pen and have learnt my questions by heart. I get off at the truck terminal in Puebla and walk nine blocks to another station to take the bus to Tonantzintla. The Observatory is located on a hill above the Church of Santa María Tonantzintla. I stop in the chapel to pray to the virgin and the sweet little angels with their watermelons and oranges, so that they might help me to face the Minotaur.

[...] I arrive at the main building and pass beneath a Greek phrase by Aeschylus which Luis Enrique Erro had ordered to be engraved, according to which Prometheus robbed fire from the gods and thereby liberated human beings from the fear of death. 'How?' the chorus in the tragedy asks. 'By giving them a semblance of hope' is the reply.<sup>293</sup>

While Poniatowska uses this reference first and foremost to poke fun at her own situation, it is clear to a rereader of *The Universe or Nothing* that it is Haro himself, the Minotaur within, who is the primary Ulyssean victim of such illusory hopes.

One such '*quimérica esperanza*' was revolutionary UNAM Rector Ignacio Chávez, whose attempts at professionalisation Haro defended against ungrateful student protesters, first with great physical courage and then with unavoidable resignation.<sup>294</sup> Another, beyond even Maoist China, was the Soviet Union itself, embodied in the form of Armenian colleague Viktor Ambartsumian, with whom he spends an extended period in Armenia in 1970: 'It is rare to live together, from day to day, with a person who is intellectually super-gifted. There are times when I think I am living with Galileo. [...] I would like to be somewhat like him. To do some of the

---

<sup>290</sup> *El universo o nada*, pp. 185-186.

<sup>291</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 198.

<sup>292</sup> For concrete examples of Haro's self-sacrificing service to Mexican scientific institutions, see *El universo o nada*, pp. 209, 343-344.

<sup>293</sup> *El universo o nada*, pp. 211-212.

<sup>294</sup> See *El universo o nada*, pp. 220-224.

extraordinary amount of good that he does for his country. It's a shame that we don't have a friend of his calibre in Mexico.<sup>295</sup> Although the Soviet Union offers Haro 'a different air, completely different from the US'; although 'this country is the richest in the world for that which a person really requires'; and despite the fact that in the Soviet Union 'there is a surplus of that which the *gringos* will never have unless they change their system completely', there is still something missing in Ambartsumian's team: 'It is a rare privilege to live alongside a genius and to realise it. [...] But] despite the fact that the other astrononmers here aren't bad, they disappear behind the sweet but imposing figure of Viktor Ambartsumian. I have the impression that he is alone and that, without saying so, he feels it.'<sup>296</sup>

Unlike female colleagues and fellow '*quiméricas esperanzas*' such as Deborah Dultzin, who also receives the Ulyssean message in a letter from Haro ('the most important thing is to live in great happiness and with great energy, loving above all things the intellectual work in which one is engaged; this is what really lasts and what really gives our lives a profound meaning which nothing and no one can touch or disturb'<sup>297</sup>), Poniatowska herself is only ever granted partial entry to the Ulyssean band of companions. On the one hand, as a journalist with a genuine interest in his work, she is one of those who have started 'the path towards a new world, a wonderful and different world [...] for you and for me and for all those who seek to live at our rhythm'.<sup>298</sup> On the other, however, she is a being apart, a Beatrice in waiting as Haro discovers on a lonely flight to Paris:

Throughout the entire flight the image of you accompanied me, an image half yours and half mine. I realised that I had not only invented you, but that you were also something real, apart from me, that you exist without me. I miss you terribly and I love you just as you are, without any addition of my own. What an idiot, what a complete idiot I was to say to you that love is an invention. If it were, I would carry you inside myself, in my bag, stuck on my face and hands, in my head and filling my whole body. But it is not just about that: I miss you physically, I miss contact with you, your little hands, your naughty, sweet, mocking, serious, loving or indifferent eyes. Your rabbit teeth, your smell, your cold nose [...]. I feel like a stray dog, without direction or goal, passing every bridge and tree, sniffing and scratching, putting one paw in front of the other out of sheer inertia.<sup>299</sup>

Caught in Hell like Ulysses, or rather perhaps caught in Purgatory - in this case between a Virgil-like Ambartsumian and the Beatrice figure of the woman who will become his second and final wife - Haro is unable to make the final leap of faith required for salvation and to abandon his creed of *virtute e canoscenza* in the name of a deeper Basic Trust in life which is by no means hostile to these goods, but which sees them in their proper place. The final third of the novel will examine the costs,

---

<sup>295</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 306.

<sup>296</sup> *El universo o nada*, pp. 301-302.

<sup>297</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 283.

<sup>298</sup> *Ei universo o nada*, p. 235.

<sup>299</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 236.

both to himself and others, of Haro's tragic inability to prolong this communion with what appears to have been the one adult love of his life.

### So, Did She Really Put Up With It?

'Not without asking herself whether she had made a genuine mistake.' The final third of *El Universo o Nada* utterly and crucially subverts what the first-time reader, up to now and for the most part, takes to be a grateful hagiography from a loving second wife. By 1970, however, with two young children in tow and a husband absent in Tonantzintla for five days a week, 'the children and I have to decide when we are happier: when he is there, or when he isn't'. Sometimes he would be in a good mood, but not always; 'What have you done?' he would ask regularly in a trustless tone. Finally, Poniatowska was forced to ask herself out loud: 'Is this the meaning of life, to stay stuck to each other until we disappear?'<sup>300</sup>

Despite feeling resentful that she is 'living Guillermo's life' as a mother excluded from the world of astronomy, Poniatowska still finds tears, if perhaps self-interested tears ('now I was the one crying,'<sup>301</sup> she says ambiguously), when he takes up a guest researcher's post for several months in the Soviet Union. Drunken postcards from Guillermo 'change the life' of a bored mother stuck at home, but they do not change the reality of a father's decision to prioritise career over family, even if they still show a man capable of affection:

My dear Paulita, Felipe, Mane, Elena, Paulita, Felipe, Mane, Elena, Mane, Felipe...

Frenetic images and memories of you flood my brain constantly, permanently, obsessively, without respite, diabolically. I love you...

[...] The entire Universe is full of little flowers, little Elenas, little Paulas, little Manes, little Felipes.

[...] Greetings Elena! Greetings Mane-Paula-Felipe! To hell with this boring old Ararat. Let's dance and drink and sing forever, without ever stopping. We have shown that the Universe is happy and infinite and that We are It. Victory always!

[...] The oldest, happiest, stupidest drunk in the Universe loves you (but also the wisest).

The little faces of Paulita, Felipe and Mane multiply like reflections in millions of magic mirrors. In the middle of all this there is you, always. Squidgeable, gorgeous, so viscerally close and yet so far away.<sup>302</sup>

Professional struggles and bureaucratic wrangling in the Mexican scientific community over the coming years, however, will gradually consume - or constitute the pretext for the consumption of - the prematurely aging Haro's trust in reality. Already in the early 1970s, Poniatowska's grip on her husband is slipping; only older male friends like Hugo Margáin can bring him out of his funk:

---

<sup>300</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 294.

<sup>301</sup> See *El universo o nada*, pp. 293-294.

<sup>302</sup> *El universo o nada*, pp. 295-299.



On the way to the cinema on a Saturday night, Guillermo holds another one of his out-loud monologues while I am stuck at the wheel, trying not to get lost. I listen as if he were praying and thus I discover the problems he has on his mind. Do I register them as I ought to? A simple yes or no only spurs him on and feeds his worries and concerns. [...] How do I get him out of this state? Besides astronomy and the development of the nation, there are few themes which interest him.

Guillermo doesn't comment on the film, but returns obsessively to his own thoughts. After coming home from a late *tête-à-tête* meal with Hugo Margáin, he gives me a big smile and says:

- Margáin told me you did a great interview with Carlos Fuentes.<sup>303</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the children bear the brunt of this 'obsession'. Mane, the son from Haro's first marriage, is all but forced by his father to abandon his dreams of the cinema for a career in science<sup>304</sup>, while Paula and Felipe are also frustratingly slow to grow up and adopt their father's crusade: 'When is this kid going to eat by itself? When is it going to walk by itself? When will this kid be able to read?' he asks impatiently. Or a couple of years later: "It's better that she study, she reads aloud very poorly," Guillermo complains. "But sport is very healthy." With Guillermo no buts get through.<sup>305</sup> How demoralising it must be to live with a man who 'frequently cited Tennyson: "I see God in the cosmos, so ordered and so marvellous, I see Him in flowers, I see Him in nature, but I don't see Him among men."<sup>306</sup> The solution to this problem offered by a life of science, however, is the mother of all '*quiméricas esperanzas*': 'Guillermo Haro's obsession with the [new] observatory knows no bounds. [...] From 1966 on, the discovery of Mt. San Pedro Mártir in Baja California occupies all his thoughts. [In 1974] it is still the thing which matters most to him in his life. I suppose it is the same as what happens to a gold digger when he discovers an inexhaustible mine.'<sup>307</sup>

While descending ever more deeply into the dark forest of Haro's obsession, Poniatowska's portrait never becomes wholly one-sided. Haro's moral leadership in the Mexican scientific community is reflected in the loyalty shown to him by many of his colleagues and in the spirit of self-sacrifice they learn from their master.<sup>308</sup> His leadership in the wider community in Tonantzintla is also unreservedly heralded and explained in terms of his solid family beginnings:

The locals who had managed to afford a bicycle would pedal from Tonantzintla to Puebla or Atlixco and sometimes even further. They would routinely forget (or no one would tell them in the first place) to use lights at night, and several had lost their lives as a result. Haro took on the local priest:

- Either you tell them from your pulpit that they have an obligation to use lights or I am going to interrupt the mass.

- Sir, please...

---

<sup>303</sup> *El universo o nada*, pp. 330-331.

<sup>304</sup> See *El universo o nada*, pp. 328-329.

<sup>305</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 286.

<sup>306</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 335.

<sup>307</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 341.

<sup>308</sup> See, for example, *El universo o nada*, p. 344.

- You should have done it years ago, just as you should have told them that wife-beating is a crime.
- It's not a crime - the priest surprised Guillermo by saying. - My father used to beat my mother to straighten her out.
- No wonder you are what you are.<sup>309</sup>

On the same page, however, Elena's plight, and Guillermo's tragic blindness to it, is presented as the other side of the coin of life with this 'impossible' man:

Sometimes I felt like talking about something other than carbon monoxide or hydrogen or iron oxide, so porous and useful, but Guillermo would carry on down his lane and I couldn't bring him back. I remembered my mother, who told me once with a humility that still moves me: 'I can only talk to you about childish things,' as if I were Guillermo Haro. Oh, how I would love to talk to her today about childish things! There is an abyss between the world of science and our everyday lives. With Guillermo the same thing ended up happening as with Mum: I could only talk with him on a limited number of subjects. I wasn't up to the rest; I didn't understand the science.<sup>310</sup>

Even lifelong friendships with the likes of Hugo Margáin, now Mexican Ambassador in London, are increasingly reworked into the schema of Haro's professional obsessions:

In Mexico, Hugo, democracy cannot exist because there is no cultural democracy. What can be achieved if a person cannot read or write? [...] We are a long way from what democracy might mean, and every day we see injustices which the government will do nothing to remedy.

[...] You can't imagine how much I have thought about you, how much I have missed you, and - why not just say it? - the need I have for your direct backing and your contagious and constructive enthusiasm. Regarding your support for our Institute, I think I can say that the first fruits are now being harvested.

[...] I have never felt so acutely the passing of time. It seems that what we are planning to do today and tomorrow should have been undertaken years ago. Still, there are moments of great optimism, and I will keep fighting for as long as my powers allow. I have an enormous desire to see you and talk with you for a long, long time.<sup>311</sup>

Over the final hundred pages of *The Universe or Nothing*, these moments of optimism in the progress of Mexican science will become rarer and rarer. Poniatowska eventually uncovers the source of Haro's fundamental frustration with Mexican scientific development and his misunderstanding of the relationship between the sciences and the humanities:

---

<sup>309</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 347.

<sup>310</sup> *El universo o nada*, pp. 346-347.

<sup>311</sup> *El universo o nada*, pp. 349, 351, 353.

When the children are at their English class, I ask Guillermo, who is in the middle of one of his countless monologues on the backwardness of Mexico, if I can record him:

- We are a long, long way behind even the semi-developed nations when it comes to science education in our country.

- But you have said yourself that there are great people in Mexico: Alfonso Reyes, for example...

- Humanistic works are totalising: they are great canvases to which you cannot add a single brushstroke. A poem, a novel, any literary work is a finished product, but science is an infinite process of development in stages, in which knowledge is passed down a chain. Those who come after me will go much further than I did, just as I went further than those who came before.<sup>312</sup>

Poniatowska's work itself is a strong argument against this view, pointing as it does to the idea of an 'infinite intergenerational process' within the humanities which might be described - if we choose to follow the example of Hans Küng - as an evolving 'World Ethos'. The entire *raison d'être* of *The Universe or Nothing* is to allow future generations of readers to learn from her husband's successes and failures in the humanistic sphere of morality, so that they may go further and be better than he was.

### The Final Descent

Part of Haro's growing frustration with the state of the Mexican scientific community in the 1970s concerned the fact that an increasing number of his colleagues had come to view their jobs first and foremost as 'careers' with job conditions - salary, working hours etc. - to which they enjoyed rights, rather than as a 'calling' to which they owed first and foremost a duty of self-sacrifice.<sup>313</sup> 'When they work twenty hours a day like me, then they can talk about rights. Besides, here they have everything they need,' says Haro of a nascent union movement. 'They should research and publish instead of dedicating themselves to scheming.' While 'the people as a whole' are on his side, 'you, my own colleagues, are going around with party supplies and banners and trumped-up stories. You treat me as if I were a capitalist baron in your factories. Do you have no idea what a sense of vocation is?'<sup>314</sup>

Poniatowska is charitable enough to admit that there is something in Haro's dedication which is exemplary and worthy of emulation, despite the cost to his family and to his own mental health - and finally, to his sense of Basic Trust in reality - of such an excessive sense of material mission: 'Guillermo battled it out like a miner of the sky, his work was hard and black and constant, and like any other office it became his way of life. [...] The lesson which Haro offered - not only to his disciples but also to future generations, was love for the work. [...] Haro planted this seed [in Mexican

---

<sup>312</sup> *El universo o nada*, pp. 356-357.

<sup>313</sup> This question of vocational honour remains a topic of debate for the Humanistic Management Network, in which the *Weltethos* community in Germany is also actively involved. Among other books in the Humanism in Business series, see Wolfgang Amann and Agata Stachowitz-Stanusch (eds.), *Integrity in Organisations: Building the Foundations for Humanistic Management*, (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>314</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 361.

astronomy], and his philosophy is still standing.<sup>315</sup> Poniatowska is not shy to collect testimony from grateful colleagues, including Alejandro Cornejo ('not all countries have the good fortune to get a Guillermo Haro; to have believed in him and to have worked alongside him makes me very proud'<sup>316</sup>) and César Arteaga, who was lucky enough to work on advanced laboratory equipment manufactured in Mexico for the first time ('all this thanks to the vision of Guillermo Haro, who challenged us by asking: 'How are we not going to be able to do this ourselves?''<sup>317</sup>). By the early eighties, however, a septuagenarian Haro is slowing down, growing older and grumpier: 'Guillermo was driven to despair by the lack of conscience of those around him, even if he was still awe-struck by the wonders of nature, the immutable presence of his beloved volcanoes and the odd word he would still listen to.' But all in all, 'Mexico was better when he was young: "We were hungry for growth, everything was going to belong to everyone". Now, everyone was busy defending their right to power and above all to the money which gives power.'<sup>318</sup>

The last happy story in the book is Haro's engagement for the cause of Uruguayan politician Líber Seregni, whom he had befriended during Seregni's sojourn in Mexico in 1945:

Once, when the group suggested that they visit a brothel, Seregni replied:

- It's that I love my wife.

Haro would never forget this response.

In 1977, thirty-two years later, after hearing of his friend's imprisonment, Guillermo tried to reach him and his family by all available means.<sup>319</sup>

When he finally receives a reply, Guillermo sees the same integrity of a man who is 'able to centre his thoughts and hopes on something beyond himself: "I endured long months of solitary confinement, but I was never alone because I was accompanied by my ideas and by the affection and solidarity of hundreds of thousands of local supporters and faraway friends, including yourself."<sup>320</sup> Haro's letter to the Uruguayan Ambassador in 1978 (and ongoing correspondence with Seregni and his family) reflected what Poniatowska unblinkingly calls 'Haro's loyalty to just causes':

In my own case, since I lived together with him in the same room of the same house, I had an extended opportunity to experience that he was a man of genuine moral disposition and an enemy of all violence. I loved him then and continue to love him now as a brother. [...] I would like to make my protest, indignation and desolation absolutely clear for the treatment received by one of the best human beings I have had the privilege of meeting in the years of life I have been gifted.<sup>321</sup>

---

<sup>315</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 371.

<sup>316</sup> *El universo o nada*, pp. 370-371.

<sup>317</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 377.

<sup>318</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 383.

<sup>319</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 386.

<sup>320</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 387.

<sup>321</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 388.

On the home front, however, the departure of Haro's son Mane for graduate study in Paris - in physics, what else? ('you know how important you are to me and the great hope I have for the successful completion of your studies and your future professional success...' <sup>322</sup>) - forces him to confront the ultimately shallow reality of his own choices:

Standing before a print of a Rembrandt self-portrait, old and sad, which we bought in Amsterdam, he stopped for a good while before launching into a monologue: 'I'm similar to this guy, old, alone, disenchanted and grumpy.' He cited Dickens: 'Scrooge was an old man, nobody loved him and he loved no one.' [...] Even the latest developments in the sphere of science disturbed and mortified him. The growth of his children depressed him. [...] He would get angry in order to end up sad. Freudian psychoanalysis, feminist uprisings, the cult of beauty, everything repelled him. [...] Even Russia and China had let him down, instituted death, and made other terrible mistakes; from self-deception they had passed to self-destruction, and he had only wanted to live in a better world. <sup>323</sup>

Retiring from his directorship post at INAOE in 1983 to 'concentrate on research' following protracted bureaucratic wrangling, Haro enters a phase of precipitous decline in the final five years of his life, a spiritual collapse described by Poniatowska in the starkest possible terms: 'Haro was a doer. They say that Torres Bodet shot himself when, having retired from politics, he had no one left to whom he could give orders. There are men who are made to lead, and when they don't have anyone around to lead anymore, go downhill and take everything with them in their path. Guillermo's hill was more like a cliff.' <sup>324</sup> Poniatowska and the children bear the brunt of this fall, culminating in a child-driven separation ('they were afraid their liberty would be non-existent, that their friends would refuse to visit them, that their adolescence and youth would be what he said, not what they wanted' <sup>325</sup>).

Guillermo suddenly found himself alone, finally 'with all the time in the world for his reading, observations and future academic articles. But he felt that something was missing: the colour which the two teenagers brought to his life. [...] They were surprised by the euphoria with which he greeted them when they came back from France.' <sup>326</sup> A final journey to Moscow to receive the Lomonosov Medal in 1985, accompanied by Mane, provides some measure of respite and reconnection with the best of humanity during this final downfall ('do you realise how cultured the young people here are?' etc.), but the overall trend is clear: Guillermo is dying, and he is left with little but to contemplate his irreversible mistakes without ever fully understanding their source:

On March 21, 1988, Guillermo Haro turned 75 and was the most lauded Mexican scientist of all time. When Margáin said so, he listened

---

<sup>322</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 404.

<sup>323</sup> *El universo o nada*, pp. 410-411.

<sup>324</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 423.

<sup>325</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 427.

<sup>326</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 427.

incredulously, as if he were talking about someone else. He did not identify with the picture his friend had painted, and his only response was to say: 'I wish I had been a better father.'

He said the same to Paula during our meal.

- I'm going to die soon and I ask you to forgive me because I have not been a good father.

[...] He was moved to receive letters from Mane: 'You have to come back to work for your country,' he always insisted.<sup>327</sup>

Right to the end, Haro remains caught between the emotions of a father and those of a man with other priorities, ideals which are in themselves admirable: 'I never counted the hours I spent in my office, and I would never dream of looking at my watch while looking into the sky. For God's sake! There is no need to quantify work but to qualify it.'<sup>328</sup> Such values, however, can be highly destructive when carried to pathological extremes: 'The state of the country was his main concern' is the prevailing refrain with which Poniatowska describes her aging protagonist. Haro's tender family feelings are always the dessert, never the central meal of his life, and as old colleagues pass away, he is left with an emptier and emptier plate: 'Guillermo's world always revolved around astronomy, and besides the friendship with Hugo Margáin, he chose the isolation which was now weighing him down. There were days when he would eat hunched over his plate. He didn't want to know anything about anything. Head in hands, he would take off his glasses and close his eyes.'<sup>329</sup>

In the end, the full consequences of Haro's character for those around him are revealed:

Hugo Margáin was right in saying that your great concern was social justice. For us, your wife and children, your judgements were beyond appeal. Criticism came more easily to you than recognition. As Freud put it, you were 'a mass of irritable substance'. Highly flammable, it was enough to light a single match from one of the many cigarettes you smoked. The conifer in your garden kept growing without your noticing, with black holes interwoven among its branches. Even today, the children are still facing their own black holes.<sup>330</sup>

But not even Poniatowska can conclude, following this full disclosure, that the balance of Haro's life's work is negative:

Felipe and Paula, particles of yours, inheritors of your energy, offered a tribute to you [at your funeral], and while they were speaking I realised that children love their parents above all and that nothing of you will be lost. [...] In his farewell in Tonantzintla, the engineer Luis Rivera Terrazas mentioned your 'visceral' love for Mexico. I could not have chosen a better word. Your concern went all the way down to your viscera, and manifested itself in love and pain, two sides of the same

---

<sup>327</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 440.

<sup>328</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 442.

<sup>329</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 443.

<sup>330</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 452.

coin. In a country in which three quarters of the population believes in miracles, [...] you planted the tree of science.<sup>331</sup>

### Lessons for a World Ethos

Hans Küng himself is clear that there is no such thing as a 'perfect' childhood; he counts himself as among the 'countless people who, on a foundation of by no means problem-free, but stable relationship with my mother, father and other close relations, inherited a strong Basic Trust in life'<sup>332</sup>. Guillermo Haro certainly belongs in the same category, as must Elena Poniatowska herself; this fact in no way removes the need for critique, and on the contrary makes such critique of morally exceptional individuals meaningful; no one, and certainly not Hans Küng or Guillermo Haro, is perfect. This is by no means a knockout blow, however, for a World Ethos project; all that is required is that individual examples allow us to refine the contours of an unattainable ideal, or rather, to experience the *ethos* at the heart of all goodness by way of immersion in its concrete forms.

On the question of Basic Trust in life and reality (Küng's *Lebensvertrauen* or *Grundvertrauen*), Haro earns extreme scores on whichever vectors one might choose to measure it. Thanks to a strong early relationship with his mother, he is able to explore the world around him with a fervent and selfless curiosity, a direct contact with nature unthinkable in a less friendly environment. Unfettered by fears of being abandoned by his caregivers or of facing violent sanctions from them, he is able to develop an early sense of a meaning of life beyond his own immediate survival. With encouragement from his mother, he learns to see the natural world in particular as a source of wonder and fulfilment, and will retain access to this stock of boyish joy, despite mounting obstacles, throughout almost all his life. At a key age in his moral development, however, his mother is permanently taken from him; at the age of eleven, Haro is both old enough to be cognisant of his mother's gifts and to transform his gratitude for them into an ethic of service to those around him (almost all of whom, he sees, are forced to grow up less fortunate). The trauma of separation from his mother, however, drives him to attach excessive importance to the specific gifts she bequeathed to him in his first eleven years - first and foremost, a love of observing nature and an excessive faith in the redemptive power of nature and scientific observation of it - and to go entirely without other moral gifts that may have come to him from her later in his development or from other relationships from which he could have benefitted. Intellectual bonds with surrogate father figures like César Margáin, and friendships with peers like Hugo Margáin, Líber Seregni and Viktor Ambudsumian, will follow a similar pattern of trusting idolisation, and ultimately over-idolisation, of the rare good individual; the excessively harsh treatment dished out by Haro to all those who fail to meet these exceptional high standards, however, reflects the wider fact that, beyond his wonderful mother, there were few other adult role models, and indeed a string of disappointments, in his childhood, most notably in the form of his father and aunt.

The World Ethos project, however, is not, and ought never to be, rooted in amateur or even professional psychology. It is a normative rather than - or as well as

---

<sup>331</sup> *El universo o nada*, pp. 452-453.

<sup>332</sup> Hans Küng, *Was ich glaube*, (München: Piper, 2010), p. 18.

- a descriptive enterprise: the goal is both to define *and* to generate the *ethos* at the heart of reality which justifies our Basic Trust in it. Perhaps Haro's own hypertrophied sense of social justice was a result of experiencing the precarity of this *ethos* first-hand: one good person in his life granted him most of his access to it, and there was no guarantee that others would be so lucky. Most in his native Mexico, indeed, were not, and were stuck instead with violence and superstition as their anchors in reality, both of which are inimical to the very idea of Basic Trust, which is the opposite of blind and desperate faith and much closer to optimistic extrapolation from lived experience.

Elena Poniatowska falls in love with Haro's apparent moral energy and urgency. What she learns in her marriage, to her surprise, is that this urgency was actually the result of a uniquely fragile supply line of Basic Trust in reality rather than the uniquely strong package that it at first appeared to be. Her own patience, generosity and moral understanding, by comparison with Haro's, come by the end of *The Universe or Nothing* to look much more like a lasting recipe for human success and the promotion of a World Ethos than pathological fretting about the state of one's native land, whatever the collateral material benefits of such extremes. There is no stronger statement of this in the book than the decision of Haro's son Mane to adopt his stepmother Elena's last name: Emmanuel Haro Poniatowski. The loving depiction of the relationship between Elena and Mane, while never occupying centre stage in *The Universe or Nothing*, does more to pass down the vestal flame of a World Ethos than any of Haro's fulminating 'Mexico monologues'.

In a parallel vein, Hans Küng's work on *Lebensvertrauen* is a much surer footing for the future of the World Ethos idea than the 1993 *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic*<sup>333</sup>, for which he is better known. This document, ratified by religious leaders from around the world but only provisionally so (it is, after all, called a *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* rather than a *World Ethos Declaration*), represents a milestone in the history of interreligious dialogue, and is a humanistic document worth reading in its own right, but there seems little future in measuring works of literature or philosophy against the '2 + 4 formula' of accepted 'consensus values' which the declaration proposes; such an exercise would be dry and pointless. *The Universe or Nothing* forces us instead to reconsider the relationship between Basic Trust in reality and the deeper 'World Ethos' hinted at in the *Declaration*, as well as to reevaluate the practical meaning and applications of this *ethos* in both public and private life, not least its applications in the sphere of 'partnership between men and women', a phrase which makes its appearance towards the end of the 1993 text.

One of Haro's tragic flaws, indeed, is his inability to believe that women could ever be the scientific equals of men. This seems strange when one considers that a woman - his mother Leonor - taught him his earliest lessons about the power of scientific observation, but we can hardly allow ourselves to forget the macho climate of early 20th-century Mexico: Haro grew up and entered a profession surrounded by men who did not trust the intellectual abilities of women. This prejudice is as much a source of suffering to Guillermo and those around him as any other; as Poniatowska says of Haro in 1986, 'before it would have offended him if a woman had beaten him,

---

<sup>333</sup> See Hans Küng et al., *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic*, 1993, [http://www.global-ethic-now.de/gen-eng/0a\\_was-ist-weltethos/0a-pdf/decl\\_english.pdf](http://www.global-ethic-now.de/gen-eng/0a_was-ist-weltethos/0a-pdf/decl_english.pdf) (accessed 19/12/2016).



but now it disconcerted him and seemed to him an incomprehensible enigma'.<sup>334</sup> Haro's *a priori* refusal to let Poniatowska share as an equal in his intellectual life - not in the letter of it, which she herself admits she couldn't understand, but in the *spirit* of it, which she shows she most certainly could - ends up ruining their marriage, and is perhaps the most important 'takeaway' for many readers of this book. The development of a World Ethos - within and among individuals and across religious, cultural, linguistic, gender and class divides - will require a dialogical spirit closer to the example of Elena and Mane than anything the great astronomer Guillermo Haro was able to muster in his remarkable, instructive and imperfect existence. Elena Poniatowska has done the idea of a World Ethos a tremendous service by laying bare the scars and hinting delicately at the intimate achievements of her family life.

---

<sup>334</sup> *El universo o nada*, p. 434.

## 11. Stefan Zweig's *Erasmus*: 500 Years from Reformation to World Ethos

### Introduction

As the world celebrates the 500th birthday of the Reformation in 2017, the *Weltethos* project, set in motion in 1990 by Catholic theologian Hans Küng<sup>335</sup>, is due to take stock of the Reformation's legacy for a world widely perceived to be in 1930s-style crisis. Stefan Zweig's *Triumph und Tragik des Erasmus von Rotterdam* (1934) provides the ideal lens through which to do so: Zweig's Erasmus is the true, if flawed, intellectual hero of the Reformation, and his example a timely antidote to the rising fever of fanaticism in prewar Europe. This short piece revisits Zweig's biography of Erasmus with a view to extracting kernels of wisdom for the World Ethos movement as it faces the challenges - interreligious, intercultural, economic, social, technological - of a third turbulent age.

### Erasmism in the Eyes of Stefan Zweig: A World Ethos *avant la lettre*?

*Pacifying conflicts with a well-meaning mutual comprehension, shedding light on all that is murky, unravelling all that is tangled, fitting back together that which is torn, bringing the individual back to something beyond herself: such was the delicate art to which his patient genius gave force. His admiring contemporaries called this will to understanding, which manifested itself in a thousand fashions, simply 'Erasmism'. As he brought together all forms of knowledge - poetry, philology, theology and philosophy - in his own person, he believed in the possibility of a universal union even among those things which seem to us the least reconcilable; there was no sphere to which his mediating talents did not enjoy access or with which he was not familiar.*<sup>336</sup>

Erasmus is depicted by Zweig as a *homo pro se*, a free individual unwilling to subsume his identity under the banner of any group or logo. This is in no way to suggest a man without deep religious or moral convictions; on the contrary, the individualist Erasmian ideal is precisely what makes true religion and morality possible in the first place:

In the eyes of Erasmus, there was no opposition between Jesus and Socrates, between Christian doctrine and ancient Wisdom; religion and

---

<sup>335</sup> See Hans Küng, *Projekt Weltethos*, (München: Piper, 1990).

<sup>336</sup> Stefan Zweig, *Érasme: Grandeur et décadence d'une idée (Triumph und Tragik des Erasmus von Rotterdam)*, trad. Alzir Hella (Paris: Éditions Grasset, 1935), pp. 16-17.

morality were best seen as part of the same package. [...] Unlike Calvin and his fellow zealots, he did not see an enemy in the Renaissance and its overflow of sensuality, but a freer sister of the Reformation. [...] Since he had charged himself with judging all peoples by the noblest and most cultivated of the individuals within them, all seemed equally worthy of love.

[...] For Erasmus, confronted with the politicians, leaders and other enablers of an impassioned sectarianism, the attitude of the artist or thinker could only be that of an intelligent mediator, of a friend of moderation and the golden mean. The duty of such an individual is not to align himself with one flag or the other, but to fight alone against the common enemy of free thought: fanaticism, in all its forms. She ought to do this not by stepping aside from all parties - the intellectual is bound to sympathise with all that is human - but by rising above them, above the scrum, fighting exaggerations on one side and then on the other and all the while opposing the idiotic, impious hatred which all excess engenders.<sup>337</sup>

Erasmus does not make 'love' the explicit centre of his *ethos*, not because it isn't there, but because the age is one of excessive emotion which has degenerated into fanaticism and hatred; real love is neither the enemy of reason nor the cause of excess. The full Erasmian solution, however, as Zweig's German title suggests, was and remains tragically flawed: Erasmus is typically 'relegated to the background of the giant Reformation canvas' behind more passionate and public figures like Calvin, Thomas More and Luther himself<sup>338</sup> in large part because of a tragic inability to accept the difficult moral responsibilities of leadership: 'By a sort of deep instinct, this man of spirit shunned all external power, all career paths; to live in the shadow of the powerful, without responsibility, to read and write books in the silence of a room of his own, to be neither the boss nor the slave of anyone; such was the ideal life for Erasmus.'<sup>339</sup> Zweig recounts a series of lost opportunities in Erasmus's life, moments where he could have assumed a more active leadership role, none more dramatic than the Diet of Augsburg:

If an Erasmian understanding between the old church and the new doctrine could have been found, the religious, civil and geopolitical war and its horrifying destruction in all domains could have been avoided.

[...] If a man like Erasmus had been at Augsburg to put all his moral authority, love of peace, mediating eloquence and logical talent on the table - someone tied by bonds of sympathy to one side and bonds of loyalty to the other - a union between Catholics and Protestants could perhaps still have been realised, and European thought would have been rescued.

[...] But the destiny of Erasmus repeats itself here with tragic force. If his penetrating insight allowed him to grasp better than anyone the decisive moments in history, he was doomed to let these

---

<sup>337</sup> Zweig, *Érasme*, pp. 17-18, 26-27.

<sup>338</sup> See Zweig, *Érasme*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>339</sup> Zweig, *Érasme*, pp. 49-50.

opportunities slip because of a single weakness: an incurable lack of courage. [...] He simply couldn't bring himself to come and defend his cause, his conviction, in person.<sup>340</sup>

As Cervantes will make immortally clear to the world less than a century later, a Republic of Letters needs quixotic defenders. Erasmus lacked a Dulcinea, an object to get him, and by extension those around him, going: despite the apparent virtue of being 'the least superstitious man of the Middle Ages', the sad corollary of this sobriety was an inability to stand and face evil: 'truth' for Erasmus was 'nothing but clarity', while 'all convoluted mysticism, all pretentious metaphysical speculation caused him physical discomfort'; like Goethe, he 'hated nothing more than the nebulous', and his soul 'did not know the torments which agitated the likes of Luther, Loyola or Dostoyevsky, these crises which have a mysterious relationship with madness and death'.<sup>341</sup>

Although his willingness to flash his pen 'in the service not of hatred and disorder, but of union and concord', earn him 'eternal glory' and usher in a new age in Europe - the age of independent, individual thought - the Erasmian confounding of moral means and ends in the matter of his own physical health and security is not left unjudged by Zweig: while Erasmus, 'like every man who loves to work and takes seriously what he does, [...] did not want to be the victim of a stupid accident or absurd epidemic', and while it was thanks to this obsession with hygiene that he survived to achieve his life's work over seventy years, Zweig still asks himself throughout the book whether Erasmus deserves to be placed in Dantean limbo, 'with the Neutrals, these angels who refuse to take sides in the battle between God and Lucifer, among "quel cattivo coro / Degli angeli che non furon rebelli / Ne' fur fedeli a Dio, ma per se foro"'.<sup>342</sup> At the very least, however, Erasmus was conscious of his own disposition; posterity alone, Zweig suggests, must judge whether this represents wisdom or self-justification. By 'admitting freely that there was no trace whatsoever in his soul of the substance with which nature makes martyrs', Erasmus at least had the courage 'to admit his stay-at-home preferences without blushing (a very rare form of honesty, moreover, in any age). One day when his lack of bravado was mocked, he replied with sovereign poise: "That would a terrible slur if I were a mercenary. But I am an intellectual, and peace is necessary for my work."<sup>343</sup>

Five-hundred years on, not much of that work survives directly in public discourse, even if the Erasmian spirit has inspired countless millions from Montaigne and Rabelais<sup>344</sup> right down to the architects and beneficiaries (including myself) of the European Union's Erasmus-branded student mobility programme. One Erasmian opus, however - *In Praise of Folly* (1511) - is singled out by Zweig as an 'explosion which paved the way for the Reformation' and which, despite its playful style, was 'one of the most dangerous works of its time', not least because it was an example of the self-critical, dialogical spirit which is necessary for all sustained and credible resistance to injustice, and on which the intellectual leaders of the Reformation based their principled opposition to Church hierarchy and corruption:

---

<sup>340</sup> Zweig, *Érasme*, pp. 224, 226, 229.

<sup>341</sup> Zweig, *Érasme*, p. 57.

<sup>342</sup> Zweig, *Érasme*, p. 74.

<sup>343</sup> Zweig, *Érasme*, p. 75.

<sup>344</sup> See Zweig, *Érasme*, pp. 234, 242.

At bottom, this slim book of modest appearance, in which he was better able to show his true self than any other, represented far more than an amusement to Erasmus: *In Praise of Folly* is also a form of self-critique. A man who was seldom wrong about people or their deeds, Erasmus knew the secret cause of this mysterious weakness which prevented him from being a true creative genius; he had too much reason and too little passion in his soul, and he knew that his neutrality and art of placing himself above the fray left him at the margins of social life. Reason is always a regulating force, never a creative force by itself; true creation always requires the presence of a vision. It is because he was extraordinarily free of illusions, however, that Erasmus remained so reasonable, cool and fair throughout his life and never knew the supreme honour of existence: giving oneself up for another, sacrificing oneself. For the one and only time [in his work], one suspects here that he suffered from his wisdom and moderation.<sup>345</sup>

In a world in need of a healthy measure of both cautious cultural diplomats - to minimise unnecessary disputes, misunderstandings and violence - *and* quixotic soldiers armed and ready to fight real injustice, Erasmus was squarely among the ranks of the diplomats:

Nothing was more foreign to [his] character than [the idea of] a rough, iconoclastic attack on the Catholic Church: humanism does not dream of an uprising against the Church, but of a *reflorescencia*, a religious renaissance, a rejuvenation of the Christian idea, a return to its Nazarene purity. Just as the Renaissance constituted a magnificent revivification of arts and letters thanks to a return to the ancient ideal, so too did Erasmus hope to purify the Church, blocked up with materialism, by going back to the original sources, reducing the doctrine to the spirit of the Gospels and the message of Jesus, and newly foregrounding the human figure which had been buried under a mountain of dogma. By tirelessly restating this wish, Erasmus, a pioneer here as elsewhere, marched at the head of the Reformation.

But humanism in its essence is never revolutionary, and if Erasmus, with his questioning, offered the greatest of services to the Reformation and prepared the ground for it, his indulgent and extremely pacific nature recoiled in horror from the possibility of an official schism.<sup>346</sup>

Zweig spends much of the second half of his biography of Erasmus addressing this question of revolution versus reform from the perspective of 1930s Europe. If the weakness of Erasmus is a 'tragedy', the hotheaded aggressivity of Luther is - like that of the unnamed Adolf Hitler - an outright danger. The unacceptable contradiction between the means employed by Luther and the ends he sought to achieve spills over into the sphere of what we today call 'interreligious dialogue'; the Christian

---

<sup>345</sup> Zweig, *Érasme*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>346</sup> Zweig, *Érasme*, pp. 92-93.

message for Erasmus is one which Hans Küng, 500 years later, also isolates in the Catholic tradition and recovers in the best of other religious and spiritual traditions under the umbrella of his World Ethos idea:

Living the spirit of Christ is more important than observing the various rites, fasts, masses and prayers. 'The quintessence of our religion is peace and concord.' Here as elsewhere, Erasmus strives to express a breathing concept in a human language instead of strangling it with formulae. He attempts to deliver Christianity from its purely dogmatic form by reattaching it to human beings; he tries to make all the most fertile elements and moral perfections of [other] religions fit within the frame of the Christian purview; in a century ruled by narrowness of spirit and fanaticism, this great humanist offers a vision which expands the horizon of human possibility to an almost unbelievable degree: 'Wherever you find truth, consider it Christian.' The bridges are laid to all times and all countries.<sup>347</sup>

We might today, under the influence of postcolonialism, prefer a more 'other-friendly' formulation of this quest, but the idea - Küng's 'World Ethos' idea *par excellence* - stands, namely that the 'best that has been thought and said in the world' can in principle be uncovered anywhere, anytime; Christianity, like all other religious and spiritual traditions worthy of the name, is at its best a tool for helping us to explore the world in a spirit of trust<sup>348</sup> and to find and share this universal wisdom via honest and open dialogue, not a series of more or less boring and arbitrary rules about how to live or what to believe:

Those who, like Erasmus, regard wisdom, brotherhood and morality as the highest forms of human achievement and moreover consider these as Christian virtues, would never consign the philosophers of antiquity to a place in Hell like the fanatical monks of the time ('Oh St. Socrates!' Erasmus exclaimed one day in a bout of enthusiasm). but would rather incorporate into the religion all the accumulated grandeur of the human past, 'like the Jews who, fleeing Egypt, took gold and silver vases with them to adorn their temples'. According to the Erasmian idea of religion, no manifestation of human morality, nothing which constitutes wisdom should be separated from Christianity by a rigid barrier.<sup>349</sup>

The 'Reformation' for which Zweig's Erasmus tirelessly argued, in the context of Christian Europe in the early 16th Century, finds a more or less exact global corollary in our post-Cold War context with Küng's attempt to achieve, via a World Ethos, 'peace between the religions':

The Erasmian mission was not to engage in struggle, but on the contrary to postpone until the last possible moment the conflict which already

---

<sup>347</sup> Zweig, *Érasme*, p. 94.

<sup>348</sup> See the first chapter of Hans Küng, *Was ich glaube*, (München: Piper, 2010) for a full discussion of the theme of *Grundvertrauen* or 'Basic Trust in reality' in the context of the World Ethos idea.

<sup>349</sup> Zweig, *Érasme*, pp. 94-95.

threatened to explode. In an era where council meetings were characterised by growing animosity over insignificant doctrinal details, this anchorite, preaching in the desert, dreamt of a final synthesis which would bring together all acceptable forms of spiritual belief, a *Rinascimento* of Christianity which would deliver humanity once and for all from conflict and struggle and elevate belief in God to the level of a Religion of Humanity.<sup>350</sup>

While Küng would balk at the idea of his *Weltethos* as a 'final synthesis' or 'Religion of Humanity' as such, and while the language which Erasmus (like Küng) employs is heavily Christian, the Erasmian principle by definition transcends the West and Christendom. Like all 'moral leaders' capable of generating transcultural appeal and interest (such as Küng with his *Weltethos* and Tu Weiming with his *jingshen renwenzhuyi* or 'spiritual humanism' in our day, and political figures in the recent past such as Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi and Muhammad Iqbal<sup>351</sup>), it was

an innate feature of Erasmian eclecticism that he could express the same single idea in a multitude of ways. [...] He dreamt of an ideal within everyone's reach, an 'internalised' and 'humanised' religion. [...] Erasmus demanded of a new theology that it go back to the inner human wellsprings of true belief, a corner of the heart which retains its divine purity and has not yet been troubled by dogma. With his profound instinct for assessing the needs of the age, Erasmus extolled the paramount importance of this task fifteen years before Luther's arrival on the scene.<sup>352</sup>

Just as Zweig's Spanish contemporary Miguel de Unamuno argued that a 'World Economic Ethos' will only be possible when all economic activity is somehow raised to the status of an 'art' or 'vocation' worthy of intrinsic motivation and the respect of the wider human community<sup>353</sup>, so too did Erasmus see his new 'World Ethos' in the same inclusive vein: 'The people as a whole must come to know it, "the peasant needs [to live it] while pushing his plough, the weaver while she works at her craft"; parents must pass this essential Christian principle on to their children.'<sup>354</sup> Membership of the 'aristocracy of the spirit' promised by Erasmus - and in the last century by the likes of Martin Luther King and Hans Küng - has everything to do with individual character, and absolutely nothing to do with social class or religious, ethnic, gender or professional affiliations. Erasmus was 'the champion, the tireless defender of this liberty, this honesty of the individual artist which, for him, was the first condition of all morality.'<sup>355</sup>

---

<sup>350</sup> Zweig, *Erasme*, p. 96.

<sup>351</sup> See Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Leben ist Brückenschlagen*, (Stuttgart: Patmos, 2011) for a discussion of moral leadership in the context of the World Ethos idea.

<sup>352</sup> Zweig, *Erasme*, pp. 96-97. See also Hans Küng, *Theologie im Aufbruch: Eine ökumenische Grundlegung*, (München: Piper, 1987) for a discussion of the similar theological bases of Küng's World Ethos project.

<sup>353</sup> See Miguel de Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía (Love and Pedagogy)*, (Madrid: Alianza, 2000(1902)), pp. 169-170.

<sup>354</sup> Zweig, *Erasme*, p. 97.

<sup>355</sup> Zweig, *Erasme*, p. 103.

At the same time, however, Zweig remains realistic about the pulling power of this 'World Ethos' message, in Erasmus's era or any other: 'New ideas and feelings are only ever comprehensible to a selected few; the masses cannot grasp them in their abstract form, but only via some tangible and anthropomorphised image; this is why a populace will happily replace an idea with a person, picture, or symbol around which they can faithfully congregate.'<sup>356</sup> This is precisely why the World Ethos project in 2017 is in an important sense caught at a crossroads between a logic of reductionist mass marketing - trying to raise its 'brand profile' beyond the fading star of a more or less bygone generation (Hans Küng) - and a more personalised, Erasmian approach designed, like a Matisse painting, to speak patiently to one person at a time<sup>357</sup>, and to encourage each individual to embark on her own unique and dialogical path of intellectual discovery by mining the deep inner source of her economic and moral creativity. Zweig confronts the 'grandeur and limits' of this personalised, 'aristocratic' ethos by juxtaposing the lofty cowardice of Erasmus and his followers with the demagogic but contagious 'junk energy' of his 'great adversary', Martin Luther, in what amounts to a direct warning to the 'followers' of academic reformers like Hans Küng:

The cause of the rapid decline and tragic fall of [Erasmian] humanism was that if the ideas were great, the men who proclaimed them often lacked energy and reach. These 'cabinet idealists' were, like all 'bedroom reformers', not entirely exempt from ridicule; their spirits seemed cold to outsiders; they were well-intentioned and honest, but they vainly wore their Latin names like carnival masks; a certain professorial pedantry always took the shine off their most brilliant ideas. The pedagogical naiveté of Erasmus's little disciples was almost touching; in many ways they resembled the good-hearted people who still today gather together in philanthropic pursuits aimed at the improvement of society, or the theoreticians who believe religiously in progress, the empty dreamers who, sat in their home offices, sketch a moral universe or commit to paper the structure of an eternal peace while wars rage on around them. [...] They do not know, and do not *want* to know, what moves the man in the street, what shakes the soul of the masses; since they remain confined in their offices, their well-intentioned words remain without real echo. It is because of this disastrous isolation, this lack of passion and popularity, that humanism has never managed to diffuse its ideas, which are nevertheless rich in substance.<sup>358</sup>

'The intellectual has no other task than to research and formulate the truth; it is not his job to fight for it': without diminishing the achievements of Erasmus, Zweig shows the 'decadent' and self-defeating nature of this particular division of labour; Erasmus himself 'has the secret premonition that his spiritual empire, his republic of letters, will not be able to resist the impetuosity of this overbearing figure' of Luther.<sup>359</sup>

---

<sup>356</sup> Zweig, *Erasme*, p. 105.

<sup>357</sup> See Robert Hughes, *Shock of the New* (BBC/Time-Life Films, 1980), Episode 3, 'The Landscape of Pleasure' for a discussion of this aspect of Matisse's work.

<sup>358</sup> Zweig, *Erasme*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>359</sup> Zweig, *Erasme*, p. 149.



The pacifism of Erasmus is not sufficiently self-sacrificing or principled; the self-interested element is simply too strong to be convincing. Luther, by contrast, is guilty of excessive self-righteousness; a 'World Ethos' includes, as in Küng's formulation in the *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic*<sup>360</sup>, a principle of 'truthfulness' (*Wahrhaftigkeit*) which transcends simply telling the truth or attempting to 'be honest' in all circumstances:

'Not every truth ought to be said out loud and straight away. The most important thing is the way you make it known.'

The idea that one might keep quiet about the truth, even just for a minute, in order to gain some sort of longer-term advantage, was completely lost on Luther. For him, the partisan, the most urgent of the duties of conscience was to unleash from the rooftops the smallest quantum of truth from the moment his heart and soul had seized it, even if this might lead to disorder, war, or a collapsing of the entire sky.<sup>361</sup>

By refusing publicly to denounce Luther, however, Erasmus, in whose 'frail hands [...] the entire fate of the German Reformation and the destiny of the world' at one point probably lay, 'offered a crucial service to the Reformation in its decisive hour. Instead of the stones that were heaped on him subsequently, what he really deserved from the followers of Luther was a monument.'<sup>362</sup>

In the end, the 'great debate' between Erasmus and Luther, as dramatised by Zweig in the tenth of his twelve chapters, is less theological than an opposition of vices: self-justifying cowardice versus self-justifying violence. When Luther concludes by saying 'I regard Erasmus as the greatest enemy of Christ that we have seen in a thousand years' or cites the Scriptures to the effect that 'I have not come to bring peace, but the sword', Luther betrays not a reluctant willingness to resort to violence in defence of just causes, but a not-so-secret desire to be a soldier in the first place.<sup>363</sup> Nevertheless, the clash with Erasmus - 'one of the most important ever to take place in German thought between two men of such opposing natures and similar force' - brings out the best in this *homme belliqueux*: 'he shows the contrast which exists between the hypocritical prudence of his adversary and his own honesty, his rectitude, his iron principles'.<sup>364</sup> And yet, rather than settling for pointing out the moral shortcomings of his opponent, Luther undermines his own place in history by insisting on the absoluteness of his convictions: his theology ('without certitude, there is no Christianity') is the polar opposite of the dialogical humanism of Erasmus or Küng, which sees in Christianity (and in Küng's case, in other world religions) first and foremost a catalyst for trusting, self-critical engagement with the world.

The legacy of 'Erasmism', Zweig concludes, will outlive that of 'Lutherism', because in the end, despite the selfish cowardice of Erasmus the man, in his philosophy there is a contagious energy, unleashed by genuine love, which the self-righteous blustering of demagogues like Luther cannot match:

---

<sup>360</sup> See Hans Küng et al., *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic*, 1993, [http://www.global-ethic-now.de/gen-eng/0a\\_was-ist-weltethos/0a-pdf/decl\\_english.pdf](http://www.global-ethic-now.de/gen-eng/0a_was-ist-weltethos/0a-pdf/decl_english.pdf) (accessed 19/12/2016).

<sup>361</sup> Zweig, *Erasme*, p. 159.

<sup>362</sup> Zweig, *Erasme*, pp. 166-168.

<sup>363</sup> See Zweig, *Erasme*, p. 214.

<sup>364</sup> Zweig, *Erasme*, pp. 209-210.

Able and cold calculators will always be able to come and show that the reign of Erasmism is impossible, and the facts may always prove them right. But that does not mean that we will not always need those individuals who lead the way for peoples to see beyond the things which divide them and to renew in the hearts of all people the trust in a higher dimension of humanity. There is a *creative promise* in the legacy of Erasmus. That which shows a spirit reaching beyond itself, to the level of the human family, gives the individual perceiving such feats a superhuman energy.<sup>365</sup>

Here Zweig summarises the essence of the *Weltethos* idea: not a fake new global certainty or consensus compromise on fake local certainties, but a common, trusting, liberating love of world; it is with this energy and this energy alone, Zweig argues, that world-historical problems can be faced. Five-hundred years on from the Reformation, the chief task of the World Ethos project, as the world enters a period in history already drawing parallels with the 1930s-context in which Zweig wrote his *Erasmus*, is to generate this much-needed energy; the challenge of how best to do so will fall to generations carrying the flame of Hans Küng and other artistic pioneers in the sphere of interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

---

<sup>365</sup> Zweig, *Erasme*, pp. 242-243.

## 12. *Moskva, Moskva*: Mikhail Gromov's *Chekhov* and Basic Trust

*The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time.*

Mark Twain

### Introduction

Of the myriad incarnations of the *ethos* of which the world, at its best, consists, and by which it is maintained and improved, Anton Chekhov is perhaps, despite serious competition, Russia's finest. Mikhail Gromov's 1993 biography *Chekhov* coincides with the signing, at the Parliament of the World's Religions, of the *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* drafted by Swiss theologian Hans Küng; 25 years on, we can discern not only that Gromov's *Chekhov* and Küng's *Projekt Weltethos* drive at the same goal of promoting the idea of Basic Trust in life (*Grundvertrauen*, in Küng's German formulation), but also that this goal is central to the continued relevance of both to our troubled time. This short piece is an attempt to juxtapose two names never before juxtaposed - Küng and Chekhov - and to honour both in the process by bringing them together in the same snapshot of possibilities for a new 21st-century post-postmodernity.

### Gromov's *Chekhov*

Mikhail Gromov's extraordinary biography of Chekhov is an attempt to reevaluate the great playwright's legacy in the context of the post-Soviet reality in which Russia and the world still lives. Even more than is normal with great books, the critic is overwhelmed by the desire to translate long chunks of the untranslated text in order to share with the uninitiated reader the same *frisson* of discovery of an unknown, hidden universe of value. The poor taste of such a lazy gesture offers at least some reason to refrain, but in the end, the temptation occasioned by the secret privilege of access proves overwhelming:

What a seductively simple and incorrect answer to the question - to consider Chekhov an atheist! Without faith, without spiritual values which have always been called sacred since there is no other word for them, without reflection on the past and hope for the future, without suffering for loved ones, there is no point living, just as there is no point living without conscience. No illusions will do here: without conscience, law has no power.

'One must believe in God, and if there is no faith there, don't settle for a cheap replacement, but rather search, search, search, on one's own if necessary, one on one with conscience.'<sup>366</sup>

---

<sup>366</sup> Mikhail Gromov, *Chekhov*, (Moskva: Molodaya Gvardiya, 1993), p. 13.

The risk of providing a top-ten list of quotes is swiftly replaced by the urge for commentary: the word 'religion' is among the slipperiest, most dangerous (since most likely to occasion misunderstanding) words in the entire English language. Gromov's Chekhov is both more and less than an atheist; he explodes the entire category distinction:

Chekhov's father was a religious man, but in his faith there was neither broad-mindedness nor warmth of heart. His was a violent conviction, inspired less by faith in eternal justice and goodness than by fear of the punishments of Hell. The children were told in no uncertain terms: there was no leafy paradise waiting for them, but a fiery inferno, and this nightmare was presented to them so matter-of-factly and tangibly that they lost their faith in Heaven. God in this family was terrifying: they feared Him, and to the extent that they dared and were able, hated Him.<sup>367</sup>

Chekhov's greatness and universality consists in his ability to overcome the 'unhappy childhood' imposed on him by a negatively 'religious' and authoritarian father, and to reach the horizon of what Hans Küng calls 'Basic Trust in life' (*Grundvertrauen* or *Lebensvertrauen*), a 'saying Yes to reality despite all temptations to reject it'<sup>368</sup>:

The conflict between parents and children remains a constant theme in Chekhov's work, and Chekhov always takes the side of the children: 'The only youth that can be considered healthy is one which makes a certain peace with the old order but, cleverly or otherwise, still struggles against it. This is what nature wants, and it is on [the intelligence of] this struggle that progress depends.'<sup>369</sup>

Chekhov also provides the bridge from a 19th to a 20th century understanding of morality in Russia, by extension prompting the question of the leap necessary for a globalising world from the 20th to the 21st Century:

In Pushkin, Tolstoy (*Anna Karenina* or *The Kreutzer Sonata*), indeed in all theatre and prose before Chekhov, as well as in Gorky (*The Life of Klim Samgin*), conflicts of conscience not only have concrete reasons: without them there would be no plot. If there is no repentance without sin, then there is nothing to write about unless an obvious sin has been committed. If there was no crime, what's the fuss?

The figure of Platonov was created by a person [Chekhov] who chose to become a rural doctor, wrote the first history of Russian labour camps, and built three schools. He knew that conscience was the property of the soul, connecting each of us with society, with the city, with the world. It might be clean, but it is never quiet: that's the whole

---

<sup>367</sup> Gromov, *Chekhov*, p. 44.

<sup>368</sup> Hans Küng, *Wozu Weltethos? Religion und Ethik in Zeiten der Globalisierung* (Freiburg: Herder, 2002), p. 21.

<sup>369</sup> Gromov, *Chekhov*, p. 77.

point of it. We understood this after the revolution and after the wars which are referred to as World Wars, when the concepts of moral responsibility, conscience and guilt were targeted in their very foundations.

[...] Conscience for Chekhov is as important as fate in the tragedies of antiquity: it is vigilant, omnipresent and omniscient.<sup>370</sup>

This focus on conscience allows Chekhov to subsume the sciences within what Tu Weiming calls a rubric of 'spiritual humanism'<sup>371</sup>: instead of a dualistic, 'two cultures' academic world of empirical science and pseudoscientific hermeneutics, the spirit of empirical, moral and aesthetic inquiry is embedded in a wider intellectual unity. Chekhov was concerned

with the destinies in history of both art and the natural sciences, which have a common nature and a shared goal. 'It may be that, with time and the improvement of methods, they are destined to merge together into a gigantic, prodigious force which we can today scarcely imagine.'

Clearly, Chekhov did not get close to imagining what this universal method of the arts and sciences might look like, or what shape the world would take when it was finally built on a single, both humanistic and scientific, structure. Even today, more than a century on, our artists are no closer.

Much more important, however, is the fact that Chekhov understood with the utmost clarity what would happen to the world if this universal method were *not* found, and if the natural sciences veered from the humanistic path in the course of their development.

Chekhov understood the future of civilisation and culture as the harmonious marriage of humanistic and scientific knowledge of life.<sup>372</sup>

Chekhov, like current World Ethos Institute Director Claus Dierksmeier, identifies this universal *ethos* with the idea of 'qualitative freedom'<sup>373</sup>; Chekhov's ancestors had liberated themselves from serfdom in living memory, and Anton was not about to fall back into the trap of flattering his superiors or, following Tolstoy's late example, denying himself the pleasures of the flesh for the sake of it. Sacrifice for Chekhov needed to assume a more 'modern', tender and generous form, and to guard against all the temptations of 'despotism' by inoculating itself against the old intergenerationally contagious disease. Chekhov's literature in general, and his letters to his brothers in particular, act for Gromov as a 'powerful medicine' in precisely this sense:

'I ask you to remember that despotism and lies ruined our mother's youth. They deformed our childhood to such an extent that it is both sickening and frightening to reflect on it. Remember the horror and

---

<sup>370</sup> Gromov, *Chekhov*, pp. 88, 95.

<sup>371</sup> See, for instance, Tu Weiming, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity: Essays on the Confucian Discourse in Cultural China*, (New Delhi, Centre for Studies in Civilisations, 2010).

<sup>372</sup> Gromov, *Chekhov*, p. 162.

<sup>373</sup> See Claus Dierksmeier, *Qualitative Freiheit: Selbstbestimmung in weltbürgerlicher Verantwortung*, (Bielefeld, Transcript, 2016).

disgust that we felt when Dad raised a riot because of oversalted soup and called Mum an idiot. He has no way of excusing himself for all this...'

One can be a university-educated man like Alexander or a pious religious 'believer' like Pavel, going through the motions of fasting and prayer, and at the same time behave like a tyrant towards one's kin and poison the souls of one's children with fear. Despotism [...] can also be passed down, like a congenital disease; Chekhov, who experienced the disease and survived it, spent as much time thinking about children as he did about their parents.<sup>374</sup>

Chekhov's letters to his brothers confirm his view that only love for life can cure the urge to tyrannise others:

His letters to them are a strong, sobering remedy, capable of setting even the most wayward traveller straight, of giving hope to those who have long since given up on themselves.

'Your tough lot, the dark hearts of your women, the stupidity of your servants, the penal nature of your work, your dangerous lifestyle and so on are no justification for your despotism. It's better to be a victim than an executioner.'

Indeed, [for Chekhov] one must always start with oneself, not with philosophising or clever procrastinating, but by finally refusing to wait until tomorrow. 'As long as we postpone life,' the ancients said, 'it passes us by'.

Life may well be a priceless gift, but it is not a free one: 'Continuous effort, day and night, eternal reading, learning, effort... Every hour is precious.'<sup>375</sup>

Examples of moral leadership may always remain rare, but these are the people who sustain and develop the *ethos* of the world: 'I believe in individual people, and I see salvation in individual personalities scattered here and there, both intellectuals and peasants. There is a force in them, even if they are too few in number.'<sup>376</sup> While a majority may remain deprived of access to this World Ethos, the hope of strengthening and spreading it gives meaning to all those lucky enough to belong to the minority, even as a private contact with nature and the world as a whole rewards those capable of moral self-cultivation:

In Chekhov's stories there is a general pattern: the movements of the human soul elicit a faraway echo in nature, and the more life in the soul - the stronger the will - the louder this symphonic echo is.

[...] L.N. Andreev noted: 'Chekhov animated everything he touched with his eye. His landscapes are no less psychological than his human characters, his people no more psychological than clouds. He

---

<sup>374</sup> Chekhov, *Gromov*, p. 233.

<sup>375</sup> Chekhov, *Gromov*, p. 234.

<sup>376</sup> Gromov, *Chekhov*, p. 263.

writes his characters into being through his landscapes, narrates their past in the form of clouds, depicts their tears with rain.<sup>377</sup>

This ancient Russian spirit of *vseedinstvo* ('the oneness of everything'), which Hans Küng will a century later analogously refer to as *Grundvertrauen* or 'Basic Trust in life', is nowhere better embodied in Chekhov's work than in the climax of *Three Sisters*, where Tuzenbach leaves for his final duel but 'we won't talk about that! I'm happy... What beautiful trees and, in essence, how beautiful the life around these trees ought to be! Look, this tree here has withered a bit, but it still dances in the wind like the others. It seems to me that, even if I die, I will still participate in life somehow. Farewell, my dearest.'<sup>378</sup>

The temporal dimension of this *vseedinstvo* is dramatised by Chekhov in *The Cherry Orchard*, where a tragic absence of *Grundvertrauen* in the majority of human individuals is foregrounded:

Above all Firs, but also Ranevskaya Gayev and and Pishchik personify the past, and any feeling of compassion with them is mixed with a feeling of shame and even pain for the past, which after all needs to be redeemed; this is the highly contradictory, uncertain and complex mixture of feelings known as the 'Chekhovian mood'.

Everyone here is homeless, no one finds her proper place, [...] not even Charlotte: 'Where am I from, and who am I? I don't know...' Neither the old house nor the cherry orchard are needed by anyone, and more important still, they are not even dear to anyone.'<sup>379</sup>

After reading Chekhov, individuals know that they cannot be held responsible for the past crimes of others, and should not waste time with pointless guilt and shame despite the unavoidable human temptation to do so; the only way of embracing transtemporal responsibility is to refocus on the present as a way of securing the future. This extends right to the very end of life:

'[...] Tell Bunin to write and keep writing. A great writer will be made out of him. Tell him so from me. Don't forget.'

'[...] As long as a person lives, he hopes to live. And if that person is Chekhov, then he sharply observes all around him.'<sup>380</sup>

At the same time, however, Chekhov was, in the testimony of his wife Olga Knipper, 'until the last minute stoically calm in the face of death, like a hero':

Anton Pavlovich departed quietly and peacefully for the other world.

'[...] The doctor arrived and called for the champagne. Anton Pavlovich sat up and told the doctor in German, clearly and somehow significantly: *Ich sterbe*.

---

<sup>377</sup> Gromov, *Chekhov*, p. 338.

<sup>378</sup> Gromov, *Chekhov*, p. 349.

<sup>379</sup> Gromov, *Chekhov*, p. 384.

<sup>380</sup> Gromov, *Chekhov*, p. 385, 386, 387-388.

Then he took the glass, turned his face towards me, smiled his always surprising smile, said 'I haven't had champagne for ages', calmly drank it to the last drop, lay down on his left side and soon fell silent forever.'<sup>381</sup>

### Chekhov and Hans Küng: From Global Ethic to World Ethos

Gromov's biography of Chekhov provides a pleasant antidote to any suggestion that there is a strictly deterministic relationship between nurture and Basic Trust in life; the terrifying excesses of Chekhov's father, if anything, serve as the exception which helps to prove the rule of a deeper, dynamic, living *ethos* which all those who engage in moral self-cultivation, given sufficient assistance, might hope to discover and eventually embody. Chekhov's provincial upbringing in Taganrog, encapsulated in his canonical three sisters' famous longing for '*Moskva, Moskva*', was in the end secure and cosmopolitan enough, despite his father's warnings of hellfire, to awaken the taste for dialogue, for contact with a beyond and with life as a whole. The immensely complex psychological preconditions for such an open, trusting and purposeful attitude to life, however, will never be reducible to medical formula; all we have, and will ever have, to explore this terrain is the cultural patrimony handed down by generations of bridgebuilders from a range of linguistic, ethnic and spiritual backgrounds. Chekhov, the intrepid pioneering traveller to Sakhalin and chronicler of injustices there, belongs to this company: the moral and dialogical dimension of his existence, and the risks associated with such foreign contact, come to take precedence over the imperative of local physical survival in a harsh world. When the end does come, it is with a glass of champagne in hand.

While Chekhov moved beyond his father's merchant milieu to pursue careers in medicine and literature and to engage in a range of philanthropic activities, the harnessing of this World Ethos by, in, and for *business* is the central concern of *Weltethos* chief donor and concrete-pump mogul Karl Schlecht. The motivation to engage in customer-driven productivity - the desire to meet the needs of clients via dialogue and with an ethic of sacrifice and service - can in the end, Schlecht concluded from a lifetime in business, be stronger than that of self-centred, *homo economicus*-style profit-maximisation. Profit, good food and the comforts of a smart home are necessary and nice - in short, one need not be Tolstoy<sup>382</sup> - but the discovery of an *ethos* within oneself, via contact with inspirational examples like that of Chekhov, provides access to a deeper stock of motivation which is both its own reward and part of the answer to many of the material and spiritual problems of 21st-century life. A World Ethos is not a new religion, and does not even require that one subscribe to one of the major 'world religions' with which Küng began, but it *does* require a certain attitude to life which may or may not be categorised as 'religious' (Ronald Dworkin, for example, has coined the phrase 'religion without God'<sup>383</sup> to describe the position of the morally serious atheist or agnostic); it is in this sense that it would be wrong, as Gromov argues, to categorise Chekhov as a simple nihilist or relativist just because he takes a deeply critical attitude to his father's fear-mongering

---

<sup>381</sup> Gromov, *Chekhov*, p. 388.

<sup>382</sup> Gromov quotes Chekhov decisively on Tolstoy on pp. 228-229.

<sup>383</sup> See Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God*, (Harvard University Press, 2013).



Orthodox Christianity. Likewise, Küng's contribution to postwar Christian and ecumenical theology was to remind the world that Jesus, as well as the spiritual leaders of the other major world religious traditions, inspired and was inspired by *Grundvertrauen* rather than any literal dread of hellfire or veiled totalitarian threats to 'believe'.<sup>384</sup>

Chekhov himself, in his life and work, provided a similar inspiration for a modern audience, and made explicit the distinction between the ancient tribal morality of our Pleistocene ancestors, with its local conscience for concrete acts of wrongdoing, and the universal *ethos* enshrined in the world's leading religious traditions as they emerged in the Axial Age: a conscience which never rests because it builds a relationship with the world or life as a whole, above and beyond the day-to-day survival concerns of the local tribe.<sup>385</sup> A counterproductive Tolstoyan asceticism in the face of the paralysing enormity of this cosmic responsibility, however, is not Chekhov's answer; something in the 'Chekhovian mood' described by Gromov also pushes beyond the tragic indecision of Shakespeare's Hamlet, just as Shakespeare himself was able to celebrate this post-tribal idea of *Grundvertrauen* by transcending tragic forms and arriving at the 'spiritual humanism' of *The Tempest*. Learning to live in this restless modern state and to affirm life as a whole, despite our inability to fulfil our endless responsibilities, was the common cause of Anton Chekhov and the architects of the *Projekt Weltethos*. This is something much more than consensus agreement on the rules of engagement for globalisation; it is an entire spirit or attitude regarding life and how to live it, in which dialogue and humour eventually supersede all forms of tribal authority. Respect for local law and order is not precluded or improperly diminished, but such order is no longer misinterpreted as absolute; Basic Trust in life itself eventually trumps all attempts by tribal leaders to monopolise public discourse in their own interests. The world's major Axial and post-Axial religions all provide an antidote to this 'crushing tribal group-think', in Peter Hitchens's memorable phrase<sup>386</sup>, but so too does the literary output of Anton Chekhov by reminding us, more than 100 years on, of our true human condition, and showing us that there is nothing to fear in it but fear itself. Mikhail Gromov was right to remind the world with his biography of Chekhov in the aftermath of Soviet collapse that post-Soviet Russia still had the spiritual resources and cultural memory to call on in order to be a net contributor to a World Ethos rooted in Basic Trust in life, and that the totalitarian experiments of Soviet communism had not buried these precious traces.

---

<sup>384</sup> See in particular Hans Küng, *Was ich glaube* (München: Piper, 2010) for a full discussion of the *Grundvertrauen* theme in the context of Küng's life's work and with particular reference to the *Weltethos* project.

<sup>385</sup> Beyond contributions to Christian and ecumenical theology, Küng's *Der Islam: Geschichte, Gegenwart, Zukunft*, (München: Piper, 2004) also depicts Islam as emerging in sublime response to the challenges of tribal politics in the harsh climate of the Arabian Desert, allowing the individual to develop a direct relationship of trust with life as a whole.

<sup>386</sup> Peter Hitchens, 'God Does Exist', *Oxford Union*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnIH4gomOgc&t=5s>, 21/12/2012 (accessed 15/4/2017).

### 13. *Homo Economicus* Finds Love? Svetlana Aleksievich's *Second-Hand Time* and the 'Age of Anger'

*'Oh, you poor thing.'*

*'Don't pity me. I love something.'*

*[...] 'This is the classic Russian type, the Russian individual who, for Dostoyevsky, was as vast as Russia herself. Socialism hasn't changed her, and capitalism won't change her either.'*<sup>387</sup>

#### Introduction

A 21st-century 'World Ethos' without Russia or Russians is as unthinkable as one without China, Arabs or Africans. Such an *ethos* is more than any written or writeable document, more than Venn Diagram-style compatibility or 'consensus' across civilisations on the dreary contours of a lowest-common-denominator 'Global Ethic'; a certain inspiration and interpenetration of ideas will be required to breathe life into the intellectual globalisation of our time. A 'World Ethos' is therefore by definition a form of love: more than the sum of its parts, but also indebted to many great and distinct cultural traditions; it is the mutual dialogical enhancement of an ancient and universal spirit rather than a race to the bottom to form a new UN-sanctioned 'world religion' with the smallest possible number of uncontroversial rules or CSR-amenable management principles for globalisation.

The history of Russian involvement in 'World Ethos' debates, however, can be traced back to UNESCO politics in the early 1950s, by which time

battle lines in the institution were immovable. The Soviet bloc campaigned for Peace, the Nato powers for Freedom. [...] 'Peace,' as a later assistant director general put it, proved 'the issue which more than any other brought out humbug in Unesco. [...] No other word generated so much loose speech or vague suggestions for projects. One of its later variants was the argument that Unesco should promote a movement towards a "universal humanism" – [a project harking back to] arguments for "a Unesco philosophy" in the organisation's early days.' [...] They had not lasted.<sup>388</sup>

The inability of UNESCO to build a 'World Ethos' to buttress ongoing and still scarcely completed projects in the sphere of international relations and international law may be regarded either as inevitable or tragic, but the result of this Cold War impasse of the human spirit was such that, when the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, the loudest voices in the 'World Ethos' echo chamber - Francis Fukuyama with his liberal

---

<sup>387</sup> Svetlana Aleksievich, *Vremya Sekond-Xend (Second Hand Time)*, (Moscow: Vremya, 2016 (2013)), pp. 459-460.

<sup>388</sup> T.J. Clark, 'Picasso and the Fall of Europe', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 38 No. 11, June 2016, (<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n11/tj-clark/picasso-and-the-fall-of-europe> (accessed 19/12/2016)).

democratic 'end of history' thesis in the United States and Hans Küng with his 'Global Ethic Project' in Germany - were Western; 25 years on from the collapse of the Soviet Union, neither has achieved internationally anything like the institutional or popular appeal which many in a first flush of post-Cold War triumph had expected. A decade of wild-West misery in the post-Soviet world, meanwhile, was followed by the sober cultural isolationism of Vladimir Putin, whose Russia has busied itself opposing Western 'cultural imperialism' on the one hand and reasserting its old Orthodox values and right to civilisational independence on the other. And yet the nostalgia for a world-historical role, a voice in the 'World Ethos' conversation, has not died away completely; 2015 Nobel Laureate Svetlana Aleksievich has brilliantly documented the contours of this Russian emotional landscape in *Second-Hand Time*, which is the penultimate destination of this article. It is no coincidence, however, that Aleksievich is moving on from *Second-Hand Time* to address the theme of 'love' in her next novel cycle; as we briefly explore below, perhaps no other civilisation has invested more moral energy than Russia in the quest for a love-centred 'World Ethos'.

As well as five references to 'love' (including one italicised plea<sup>389</sup>) in the text of the 1993 *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic*, the *Urprinzip* of Russian Orthodox spirituality - sacrifice - also makes its appearance:

In conclusion we call on the inhabitants of this planet: Our Earth cannot be changed for the better without a shift in the consciousness of individuals. We are arguing for a collective change in consciousness, for a strengthening of our spiritual powers, [...] for a transformation of hearts. Together we can move mountains! Without a willingness to take risks and a readiness for sacrifice there can be no fundamental change in our situation.<sup>390</sup>

As the *Weltethos* movement has turned its attention to business ethics over the last decade, however (e.g. via the 2009 *Global Economic Ethic* manifesto<sup>391</sup>), the risk of instrumentalisation of the 'Global Ethic' for formalistic purposes – the '2 + 4' structure of the *Declaration* as a manager's dream of quick and easy ethical 'compliance' - has grown; justified fear of appearing to the business community as a cult has inadvertently served to propagate this 'lowest common denominator' myth. Instead, one may ask, as donor Karl Schlecht does, how the *Weltethos* project can inspire entrepreneurs and managers, as well as students of economics, business and all other academic disciplines, to *love* what they do. The 'Global Ethic' enshrined in the '2 + 4 compliance formula' - humanity, reciprocity, non-violence, justice, truthfulness and (gender) partnership - would appear to have little to say about such motivation; a 'World Ethos', by contrast, places such emotions at the centre of attempts to build a qualitatively better world.

### From Russia With Love: Putting the *Ethos* Back into Hans Küng's *Weltethos* Project

<sup>389</sup> Küng et al., *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic*, p. 13. 'We need mutual concern, tolerance, readiness for reconciliation, and *love*, instead of any form of possessive lust...'

<sup>390</sup> Küng et al., *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic*, p. 14.

<sup>391</sup> See Hans Küng, Klaus M. Leisinger, et al., *Manifest Globales Wirtschaftsethos (Manifesto Global Economic Ethic)*, (München: dtv, 2010). For an online English text of the Manifesto, see <http://www.globaleconomicethic.org/02-manifesto-02-eng.php> (accessed 19/12/2016).

The answer to the question of possible Russian contributions to the contemporary 'World Ethos' conversation, then, seems likely to involve some version of famed Russian 'emotionality' as an antidote to the excesses of 'Germanic' contractarianism and fetishes for reason and rule-following which have threatened to dominate discussions in the first 25 years. The most prominent voice on this subject in the Russian literary canon is arguably Leo Tolstoy; at the very least, Tolstoy asked many of the questions concerning love and responsibility with which Russian intellectuals, right down to Svetlana Aleksievich herself, have been forced to grapple over the last century. Beyond his better-known literary gifts to humanity, Tolstoy aimed straight for the goal of a love-anchored World Ethos in *On Life* (1869), where he begins by quoting Kant on the starry sky above and the Moral Law within, as if to dispel the idea that his is a specifically Russian enterprise. He also quickly stresses, however, that a full understanding of the human condition and the meaning of human history, necessary for a 'rebirth of spirit' in the modern age, requires the strenuous exercise of something more than 'reason':

'You must be born again,' Christ said. Not in the sense that someone else is forcing us to embrace a new life, but in the sense that we are unavoidably compelled to seek it. In order to have a life at all [beyond a certain point], we must be born again in this one - via rational consciousness.

[...] Centuries pass: people discover their distance from the starry sky, measure the weights of the planets in it, learn the composition of stars, but the question of how to match their own personal good with the fate of the world, knowing that they themselves are doomed, remains unsolved for most of us, just as it was for people 5000 years ago.

[... One] reason for the poverty of the individual life has been the fear of death. If a person manages to reach a point where [the meaning of] his life is to be found no longer in the service of his own animal personality, but rather in seeking good for other beings, then the fear of death will forever disappear from his eyes.

[...] Fear of death is only the fear of losing one's personal good with the death of one's physical body. Death, for a person who lives for others, could never represent the destruction of good or of life, because the good and the life of others not only are not destroyed by her death, but may very often be strengthened by her sacrifice.

[...] But stronger and more persuasive than the arguments of reason or history is that which, seemingly from another source, shows a person directly what her heart beats for, bringing her into direct contact with goodness itself [...] and expressing itself in her heart as love.<sup>392</sup>

'Reason' only takes one so far; in the end an *ethos* of love, Tolstoy believes, supplants self-interested rationality as the ultimate driver of human or humanistic progress.

---

<sup>392</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *O Zhizni (On Life)*, (1869), [http://rvb.ru/tolstoy/01text/vol\\_17\\_18/vol\\_17/01text/0349.htm](http://rvb.ru/tolstoy/01text/vol_17_18/vol_17/01text/0349.htm) (accessed 12/12/2016), pp. 63, 65, 68.

Vladimir Nabokov prefers the Russian word *istina* to describe the love-based *ethos* at the heart of Tolstoy's efforts:

Essential truth, *istina*, is one of the few words in Russian that doesn't rhyme with anything. It doesn't carry any verbal associations, standing alone and distant with only a vague insinuation of the root of the verb 'to be' in the dark recesses of its immemoriality. The majority of Russian writers have expressed a tremendous interest in trying to discover the exact whereabouts and basic properties of this truth. [...] Tolstoy aimed straight for it. [...] Social codes are temporal; Tolstoy was interested in the eternal demands of morality. The true moral principle that he establishes [e.g. in *Anna Karenina*] is this: love cannot be exclusively carnal because then it is selfish, and being selfish, destroys instead of creating. That is why such love is sinful. To throw his thesis into the starkest possible relief, Tolstoy, with an extraordinary burst of imagination, depicts and places side by side two loves: the carnal love of Vronsky-Anna (in thrall to their emotions, deeply sensual but ill-fated and spiritually sterile), and the authentic love – Christian, as Tolstoy calls it – between Levin and Kitty, which maintains all the wealth proper to any sensuality, but which remains balanced and harmonious within an atmosphere of responsibility, caring, truth and domestic happiness.<sup>393</sup>

Seemingly forgetting Tolstoy's portrayal of Levin and Kitty, Svetlana Aleksievich complained, after completing *Second-Hand Time* in 2013, that positive love stories in Russian literature are hard to find:

We've reached the point [in post-Soviet Russia] that you either still feel you have no choice but to sacrifice yourself in the name of something, as in the recent past, or, as is the case now, to live for the day, to survive for oneself as best one can. Yet surely we should find a more fully human approach. [...] We don't have a culture of joy, of self-realised life. We don't have a culture of love. The next book I'm going to write will be about love, testimonies of hundreds of people. I can't find stories about love by Russian writers which have a happy ending; everything always ends with meaningless death, or with nothing in particular, or, if you are lucky, with a superficial marriage. We haven't enjoyed a life which would have made [real love between people] possible - where should we hope to find such literature or cinema? Animal suffering, struggle and war: that is the life experience on which the lion's share of our art draws.

[...] I used to be more interested in big ideas and events beyond the control of the individual: war, Chernobyl and so on. Now I am much more interested in what happens in the space of each human soul. It seems to me more and more that the fate of the world will be decided in this dimension.<sup>394</sup>

---

<sup>393</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Course of Russian Literature (Curso de Literatura Rusa)*, trad. Maria Luisa Balseiro (Barcelona: Zeta, 2009 (1981)), pp. 268, 279.

<sup>394</sup> Aleksievich, 'Sotsializm Konchilsya. A My Ostalis' ('Socialism Ended. And We Remained', conversation with Natalya Igrunova, in *Second-Hand Time*, pp. 502, 506.

Aleksievich is embarking on this new creative journey both out of a sense of a lost *ethos* of self-sacrifice in post-Soviet Russia, and out of a sense that the Soviet model, for all its healthy emphasis on transcending the self, got the formula badly wrong; the voices of *Second-Hand Time*, mixed in their appraisal of the Soviet experience as a whole, are nevertheless by and large painfully nostalgic for an epoch when one's life at least had an obvious meaning beyond individual survival, as the following three examples suggest:

We speak constantly about suffering... It's our path to knowledge. Westerners seem naive to us because they don't suffer; they have medicine for everything...

[...] I tried speaking about this with my students... They laughed in my face: 'We don't want to suffer. For us life is something different.' They don't understand a thing about the world we lived in until recently; they already live in a new one. An entire civilisation has been thrown on the scrap-heap.<sup>395</sup>

Now we're proud that we'll have everything the same as everyone else. But if we become the same as everyone else, who will be interested in us?<sup>396</sup>

Our young people live in a harsher world than the Soviet world was. I wouldn't wish it on anyone to be born in the USSR and then forced to live in [post-Soviet] Russia.<sup>397</sup>

The exceptions to this rule of nostalgia, such as Alyssa S., are depicted by Aleksievich as psychopathic, 'animalistic' in Tolstoy's sense, unwilling to live, let alone to die, for a cause beyond themselves:

There is no freedom in love. If you find your ideal, he won't wear the right aftershave, he'll love fried chicken and will laugh at your salads, and leave his underwear and socks everywhere. One is forced to suffer constantly. Suffer?! For love?... For this arrangement?... I'm not willing to put in the work anymore; I'd rather just pin my hopes on myself. It's better to maintain acquaintances and business partnerships. [...] Take someone to bed at night perhaps, but live alone.

[...] The world has changed. Now those who live for themselves are the successful, happy people, not the weak and unfortunate. They have everything: money, jobs... Remaining alone is a choice; I hope to find myself on the way. I'm a hunter, not some defenseless game animal. I choose for myself. Solitude is almost synonymous with happiness... It sounds like a revelation, right? Actually, it was to myself that I wanted to say all this, not you...<sup>398</sup>

---

<sup>395</sup> Aleksievich, *Second-Hand Time*, p. 40.

<sup>396</sup> Aleksievich, *Second-Hand Time*, p. 56.

<sup>397</sup> Aleksievich, *Second-Hand Time*, pp. 373, 375.

<sup>398</sup> Aleksievich, *Second-Hand Time*, pp. 361, 364, 365.

From the trauma of war and civilisational defeat - in short, the main thrust of the history of Soviet and post-Soviet Russia as depicted by Aleksievich - little good can come: 'Humanity may be on the path to a just society, but only somewhere in the long term; [in the meantime], there has been tremendous injustice in what has happened in [post-Soviet] Russia.'<sup>399</sup> Both a self-centred focus on past injustices and a self-centred determination to embrace consumerism in the manner of Alyssa S. make the quest for love - and hence for a World Ethos - impossible. And yet in Aleksievich, as in earlier Soviet-era artists like Anna Akhmatova and Andrei Tarkovsky<sup>400</sup> (as well as in émigrés like Vladimir Nabokov), echoes of an *istina*-seeking period in Russian intellectual life - roughly speaking, the century spanning Pushkin and the Silver Age poets and dotted with peaks such as Tolstoy and Chekhov - remain to power her work on to its next port.

### Russian Love for a Global Anger Crisis?

As the world waits for Svetlana Aleksievich's 'love cycle', the question of the applications of a love-based *ethos* beyond the sphere of literature - and in particular, to the reform of global economic and governance systems widely perceived as 'sick' - can be briefly addressed. Although Aleksievich insists she is 'no political scientist and no economist'<sup>401</sup>, in *Second-Hand Time* the outlines of a social order based on a love-centred rather than a profit-centred *ethos* can nevertheless be discerned: Russian capitalism, as embodied by Alyssa S. and countless other 'new Russians' like her, seems to have little to recommend it, but so too did the Soviet system overthrown in 1991 ultimately lack the *ethos* to survive.

'World Ethos' efforts to attend to the spiritual dimension of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and its prolonged aftermath - from Hans Küng himself<sup>402</sup> to Tu Weiming<sup>403</sup>, Claus Dierksmeier<sup>404</sup> and even the evergreen Len Swidler<sup>405</sup> - have focused on a reform of moral priorities within a free-market system. Pankaj Mishra joins them by analysing, at the end of an 'angry' and 'irrational'<sup>406</sup> 2016, the illness of self-centred 'rationalism' at the heart of 21st-century Western culture:

---

<sup>399</sup> Aleksievich, conversation with Natalya Igrunova, in *Second-Hand Time*, pp. 497-498.

<sup>400</sup> See my earlier article 'Through Christendom and Beyond: Andrei Tarkovsky and the Global Ethic Project', in *Andrei Tarkovsky: Klassiker - Класик - Classic - Classico*, (Potsdam: Universitätsverlag, 2016), pp. 237-254 for a discussion of Tarkovsky's place in the Russian 'World Ethos' pantheon.

<sup>401</sup> Aleksievich, conversation with Irina Igrunova, in *Second-Hand Time*, p. 498.

<sup>402</sup> Hans Küng, Klaus M. Leisinger, et al., *Manifest Globales Wirtschaftsethos (Manifesto Global Economic Ethic)*, (München: dtv, 2010).

<sup>403</sup> See Tu Weiming, 'Spiritual Humanism: An Emerging Global Discourse', [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ya-jsyg6c\\_I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ya-jsyg6c_I), 18/12/2015 (accessed 20/12/2016) for an English introduction to the new paradigm in Tu's New Confucian thought expressed in recent Chinese works such as *Wenming duihua zhong de rujia (Confucianism in Civilisational Dialogue)*, (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 2016).

<sup>404</sup> See Claus Dierksmeier, *Qualitative Freiheit (Qualitative Freedom)*, (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2016) for Dierksmeier's most sustained attempt to mount a 'secular' case for the 'World Ethos' idea.

<sup>405</sup> See Leonard Swidler, *Dialogue for Interreligious Understanding*, (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014) for a recent re-statement of Swidler's views on the nature and goals of the 'World Ethos' project.

<sup>406</sup> Pankaj Mishra, 'Welcome to the Age of Anger', <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/dec/08/welcome-age-anger-brexit-trump>, 8/12/2016 (accessed 20/12/2016): 'The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States is the biggest political earthquake of our times, and its reverberations are inescapably global. It has fully revealed an enormous

The largely Anglo-American intellectual assumptions forged by the Cold War and its jubilant aftermath are an unreliable guide to today's chaos. [...] The fundamental premise of our existing intellectual frameworks is the assumption that humans are essentially rational and motivated by the pursuit of their own interests; that they principally act to maximise personal happiness, rather than on the basis of fear, envy or resentment.

[...] The bestseller *Freakonomics* is a perfect text of our time in its belief that "incentives are the cornerstone of modern life" and "the key to solving just about any riddle". From this view, the current crisis is an irruption of the irrational – and confusion and bewilderment are widespread among political, business and media elites.

[...] All of the opponents of the new "irrationalism" – whether left, centre, or right – are united by the presumption that individuals are rational actors, motivated by material self-interest, enraged when their desires are thwarted, and, therefore, likely to be appeased by their fulfilment.<sup>407</sup>

Mishra sees the roots of this faith in reason in an Enlightenment

whose leading thinkers, despising tradition and religion, sought to replace them with the human capacity to rationally identify individual and collective interests. The dream of the late 18th century, to rebuild the world along secular and rational lines, was further elaborated in the 19th century by the utilitarian theorists of the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people – and this notion of progress was embraced by socialists and capitalists alike.

After the collapse of the socialist alternative in 1989, this utopian vision took the form of a global market economy dedicated to endless growth and consumption – to which there would be no alternative. According to this worldview, the dominance of which is now nearly absolute, the human norm is *Homo economicus*, a calculating subject whose natural desires and instincts are shaped by their ultimate motivation: to pursue happiness and avoid pain.<sup>408</sup>

Hans Küng's *Projekt Weltethos* is nothing if not a rebellion against this durable fad: Weltethos Institut Tübingen Director Claus Dierksmeier's recent attacks on the idea of the *homo economicus* have renewed the project's hostility to the idea of axiomatic self-centredness in entirely non-religious terms.<sup>409</sup> Küng's own *Was ich glaube* (2010), moreover, speaks to Mishra's concerns by exploring the theme of *Lebensvertrauen* or 'Basic Trust in life', which Küng regards as the basis of all

---

pent-up anger – which had first become visible in the mass acclaim in Russia and Turkey for pitiless despots and the electoral triumph of bloody strongmen in India and the Philippines.'

<sup>407</sup> Mishra, 'Welcome to the Age of Anger'.

<sup>408</sup> Mishra, 'Welcome to the Age of Anger'. Vladimir Nabokov offers an earlier and savage Russian parody of utilitarian thinking of this kind in *The Gift*, (Paris: Sovremennye Zapiski, 1937).

<sup>409</sup> See Claus Dierksmeier, *Reframing Economic Ethics: The Philosophical Foundations of Humanistic Management*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).



ethicality.<sup>410</sup> If it is to be relevant in 2016 and beyond, Mishra suggests, a 'World Ethos' must serve first and foremost as an antidote to the 'negative emotions unleashed by modernity' on both sides of the Iron Curtain:

[...] One revolution after another [in the last two centuries] has demonstrated that feelings and moods change the world by turning into potent political forces. Fear, anxiety and a sense of humiliation were the principal motive of Germany's expansionist policy in the early 20th century – and it is impossible to understand the current upsurge of anti-western sentiment in China, Russia and India without acknowledging the role played by humiliation.

Yet a mechanistic and materialist way of conceiving human actions has become entrenched, in part because economics has become the predominant means of understanding the world. A view that took shape in the 19th century – that there is "no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest" – has become orthodoxy once again in an intellectual climate that views the market as the ideal form of human interaction and venerates technological progress and the growth of GDP. All of this is part of the rigid contemporary belief that what counts is only what can be counted and that what cannot be counted – subjective emotions – therefore does not.<sup>411</sup>

While Tolstoy argues that a proper ethical understanding of one's responsibilities as a human being cannot be reached without the vigorous exercise of reason - which culminates in the realisation that the satisfaction of one's own material needs or 'animal personality' can never be permanently guaranteed and must ultimately fail (and therefore can never be the basis of a truly just and meaningful social order) - Mishra focuses instead on what his modernist hero Robert Musil described as 'the losses that logically precise thinking has inflicted on the soul': he accepts Musil's critique of 'Enlightenment rationalism', namely that its descendants 'have too little intellect' in matters of the heart. The culmination of decades of neglect of the spiritual dimension of existence (a dimension mocked and dismissed altogether by Aleksievich's Alyssa S.<sup>412</sup>) is for Mishra foreshadowed by Rousseau:

An outsider to the Parisian elite of his time, who struggled with envy, fascination, revulsion and rejection, Rousseau saw how people in a society driven by individual self-interest come to live for the satisfaction of their vanity – the desire and need to secure recognition from others, to be esteemed by them as much as one esteems oneself.

But this vanity, luridly exemplified today by Donald Trump's Twitter account, often ends up nourishing in the soul a dislike of one's own self while stoking impotent hatred of others; and it can quickly degenerate into an aggressive drive, whereby individuals feel

---

<sup>410</sup> See the first chapter of Hans Küng, *Was ich glaube (What I Believe)*, (Munich: Piper, 2010) for a discussion of the idea of *Lebensvertrauen* or *Grundvertrauen* as a prerequisite for individual ethical consciousness and, by extension, a future World Ethos.

<sup>411</sup> Mishra, 'Welcome to the Age of Anger'.

<sup>412</sup> See Aleksievich, *Second-Hand Time*, p. 356.

acknowledged only by being preferred over others, and by rejoicing in their abjection.<sup>413</sup>

Mishra ends his diagnosis of the ills of 2016 with a call for a love-based World Ethos which faces, as Svetlana Aleksievich did in *Second-Hand Time*, the reality that love is a rare and precious thing, a civilisational achievement requiring the cultivation of emotions rather than reciprocal, self-interested rule-following<sup>414</sup> or indulgences of humiliation-fuelled vanity. The age of minimum outward consensus on values, as partially enshrined in the 1993 *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic*, is over; what Stiftung Weltethos General-Secretary Stephan Schlenzog, speaking at the 2016 Weltethos staff Christmas party in Tübingen, described as the 'deeper, spiritual meaning' of the World Ethos idea must now hold centre stage, both in theory and in practice, if the *ethos* described by Mishra - 'a richer and more varied picture of human experience and needs than the prevailing image of Homo economicus' - is to take shape:

For nearly three decades, the religion of technology and GDP and the crude 19th-century calculus of self-interest have dominated politics and intellectual life. Today, the society of entrepreneurial individuals competing in the rational market reveals unplumbed depths of misery and despair; it spawns a nihilistic rebellion against order itself.

With so many of our landmarks in ruins, we can barely see where we are headed, let alone chart a path. But even to get our basic bearings we need, above all, greater precision in matters of the soul. The stunning events of our age of anger, and our perplexity before them, make it imperative that we anchor thought in the sphere of emotions; these upheavals demand nothing less than a radically enlarged understanding of what it means for human beings to pursue the contradictory ideals of freedom, equality and prosperity.<sup>415</sup>

Claus Dierksmeier's model of 'qualitative freedom' is a step in this direction; so too is Tu Weiming's 'spiritual humanism' and Len Swidler's 'deep dialogue'. Svetlana Aleksievich has also made a contemporary Russian contribution to this conversation, and helped to remind her audience, not least in Germany, that Russia can be an exporter, not of sterile, CSR-amenable 'Global Ethic values', but of the true 'World Ethos' idea as originally intended by Hans Küng.

---

<sup>413</sup> Mishra, 'Welcome to the Age of Anger'.

<sup>414</sup> See Erich Fromm, *Die Kunst des Liebens (The Art of Loving)*, (München: dtv, 1995 (1956)), pp. 201-202 for a still-contemporary critique of 'golden rule' moralising.

<sup>415</sup> Mishra, 'Welcome to the Age of Anger'.

## 14. 'Synchronising the Nobility of the World': Alain Finkielkraut and Hans Küng's World Ethos

### Introduction

French philosopher and public intellectual Alain Finkielkraut occupies a place alongside Peter Hitchens in the World Ethos pantheon of this book: he violently denounces the vision of borderless, technocratic 'global citizenship' to which the idea of a 'World Ethos' might seem to lend itself, and argues instead in favour of a deeper *ethos* tied to the 'heritage of the nobility of the world'. The urgent need to 'synchronise' this ethos - to educate everyone to join a single present imbued with a post-ideological attitude to history and a trusting disposition of responsible gratitude for the freedoms we enjoy - is the challenge of his 2015 bestseller *La seule exactitude*, and a rich addition to debates surrounding the future of Hans Küng's World Ethos project.

### *La seule exactitude*

The figure of French journalist Charles Péguy (1873-1914) hovers benevolently over Finkielkraut's book from beginning to end, offering him both his title and his central thesis, namely that it is a mistake, or an 'inexactitude', ever to be either early or late with one's ideas, or in other words not to know everything there is to know about the myriad 'strands' of history which wind together into an ever-evolving present. The art of true and lasting intellectual labour, Finkielkraut follows Péguy in saying, lies in securing the transmission and strengthening of a common *ethos*, passed down from the best of our global ancestors, by freeing one's mind from the grip of a pathological, all-encompassing, one-size-fits-all 'philosophy of history' in order to concentrate on dealing with 'the miseries of the present'. The example of '*citoyen Joindy*' from the 1899 *Congrès général des organisations socialistes françaises*, in the wider context of the Dreyfus Affair, provides Péguy with all the inspiration he needs to leave the old false certainties of historicism behind:

Upon inspection, it was Citizen Joindy who had caused this uproar, and Péguy offered him all his support. He admired this solitary voice in the crowd. He did even more than simply pay homage to him; he seized the chance to break with the entire philosophy of history, which believes in all times and places to have the measure of past, present and future. The Dreyfus Affair had shown just how wrong and inhuman such arrogance could be. What was required at the time was a veritable intellectual revolution: a brand of thought receptive to the new and hostile to the idea of a giant fixed historical panorama; a certain modesty of attention over the pride of philosophy; and a recognition of the unmasterable character of the human world among those confronting it. Being necessarily surpasses ideas because 'everything is immense, except our knowledge'. One must of course understand in order to act, but understanding the reality of the present does not mean squeezing it

into our pre-existing concepts; it means facing it without fixed props. The goal is not to make [the present] fit within a moral schema, but to respond to the questions it poses and the warnings it sends. 'It was not our fault that the whole thing got started, but it is up to us face it': this, for Péguy, is the main lesson from the Dreyfus Affair. Since *anything can happen*, he got over the idea of being able to know everything, and took the philosophical decision to renounce speculative theorising and become a *journalist*.<sup>416</sup>

The need to rediscover 'faith' or 'trust', in a century - the 20th - where the old certainties of organised religion and historical narratives based on progress had given way to a certain vertigo regarding the place of human beings in the cosmic order, drives Péguy to an embrace of contingency; since 'anything can happen', the moral meaning of life is to be located in self-cultivation, in how one copes with this inescapable flux. Finkielkraut himself, taking up Péguy's challenge for the 21st Century and seeking a renovation of the French cultural heritage, focuses on the crisis in French education which, in his eyes, is responsible for rapidly destroying the reservoirs of *Lebensvertrauen* in new generations of French students. The courage to look the present in the face - and therefore, by extension, the courage to face one's own 'demons' from the past - is to be won not in 'self-directed learning' or 'student-oriented learning', but in disciplined engagement with great works of art and literature intimately introduced by those with greater life experience. The French Republic used to believe that

'youth represented an opportunity to leave one's home and live on faraway islands.' It used to be a point of honour that [the Republic] offered its young people that chance. There is no question of such exploration now. All while ardently professing the cult of the Other, the democratic school system proscribes, under pain of boredom, the great changes of scenery which engagement with the great works of the past affords. For teachers who persist in seeing themselves as the 'representatives of the poets and artists, philosophers and scientists - the individuals who have made and maintain humanity' - the new school system unceremoniously orders them to get down from their high horses and choose themes which are familiar to students. Starting from the principle that only the familiar can arouse interest, it leaves dead people in the background. It has even found a marvellous remedy for the old injustices in the curriculum: interdisciplinarity. A recent current affairs show gave the example of a French and Spanish teacher working together on getting their classes to write a tract on the virtues of sustainable development. Where once there were works of art, now there are tracts; what used to be a transmission of knowledge is now the design of play-based, socially engaged projects. In classrooms where teachers could once speak, students now learn about the problems of the planet in small groups huddled around a computer screen. Parents [...] are right to be worried: it's modern and it's for a good cause.

---

<sup>416</sup> Alain Finkielkraut, *La seule exactitude*, (Paris, Gallimard, 2015), pp. 306-307.

They would be wrong in thinking that the past has been forgotten: it has simply been annexed to the present or, more precisely, to the ideology of the day.<sup>417</sup>

Only those who have enjoyed the privilege of 'inhabiting faraway isles' in their educations, Finkielkraut effectively argues, will have sufficient Basic Trust in life as a whole to be willing or able to push beyond psychologically satisfying, binary thinking about social and moral problems. Finkielkraut's paradigm example of an intellectual who lulls his followers into the dangerous shallow waters of 'indignation' is Stéphane Hessel (1917-2013):

Stephane Hessel writes: 'Be indignant and you will show your resistance!' But this is not what resistance is. Resistance is courage.

[...] 'Look around yourselves!' Hessel commands. He thereby invents the tourism of indignation, an ethical promenade without a clear centre. To the young people who, as Primo Levi writes in *The Drowned and the Saved*, do not like ambiguity because their experience of the world is poor, he speaks the binary language they want to hear. With simple words and an angelic smile, he repeatedly conjures the spell that life is evil: since there are only ever two actors on the stage of the world, he invites us at every opportunity to take the side of the crucified, the homeless, the paperless, the defenceless.

Carried by emotion, Stéphane Hessel abolishes questioning.

[...] From the beginning until the very end, this flame danced in his eyes. And if our age raises him to lofty heights, it is because it recognises in him the choice that it has made for intensity over intelligence. This is, in fact, the metaphysical significance of the contemporary cult of youth: the snuffing of the light and the adoration of the fire.<sup>418</sup>

Instead, Finkielkraut hopes to light the candle of a World Ethos within his readers via contact with what he follows Malraux in calling *l'héritage de la noblesse du monde*:

Since the sociologists have moreover taught us that middle-class children had access by right of birth to the culture for which the school system exists to transmit to the largest possible number, the powers that be decided to treat the problem with a scalpel: they have proceeded simply to remove this culture. In other words, the school system has become the permanent 4 August 1789 for what Malraux called 'the heritage of the nobility of the world'. With this heritage obliterated, behold the list of objectives assigned to French classes in the 4th cycle: 'Finding oneself, constructing oneself; living in society, participating in society; observing the world, inventing worlds; acting on the world.' Literature has disappeared, and with it, general knowledge, replaced by a common knowledge made up of all that a 'young person' needs to orient herself in her environment.

---

<sup>417</sup> Finkielkraut, *La seule exactitude*, pp. 276-277.

<sup>418</sup> Finkielkraut, *La seule exactitude*, pp. 38-39.

[...] The idea of a school as a transmitter of knowledge is dead. It has been replaced, in a mixture of bad conscience and commiseration, with the idea of therapy via lies. It will increasingly be in private, out-of-reach establishments that discipline and exactitude, systematically trampled by the merciful zeal of l'Éducation nationale, will find refuge.

[...] The left, for me, is first and foremost this promise to unlock for the greatest number the treasure of the humanities and the heritage of the nobility of the world. What is the left doing now? Just when the managerial right has abandoned this heritage in the name of utility and adaptation to the world to come, the left has replaced heritage with an antiracist catechism and, under the guise of equality, chosen mediocrity for everyone as its ultimate goal.<sup>419</sup>

Reappropriating the discredited Heideggerian categories of 'Being' and 'Other', Finkielkraut concludes that

the loss of Being *and* of the Other is the drama of our distracted modernity. The indissolubly existential and philosophical task which falls to us, in such a situation, is to rediscover the sense of the necessity of the Other by breaking with the credo of interchangeability and rediscovering the true nature of Being by cultivating, for that which we have not ourselves made and for that which was bequeathed to us, the forgotten dispositions of attention, respect and gratitude.<sup>420</sup>

In more straightforward terms, if Nazism represents the excesses of an attachment to the categories of 'Being', 'identity' and 'nature' ('Hitler carried the sacralisation of nature to its most extreme consequences'<sup>421</sup>), the postwar, postcolonial West has also failed to do justice to the 'Other' by reducing her to a function of our own insecurities, an interchangeable source of labour for our own production<sup>422</sup> rather than a source of potential *moral* self-enrichment and a meaningful dialogue partner:

As Pierre Manent says, 'the politically correct is the language of those who tremble at the idea of what might happen if they stopped lying to themselves'.

The misery of the world, [in its very urgency, risks] forbidding any deepening of reflection on the nature of underlying conflicts. The first victims of this sentimentality with scientific pretensions are those that it victimises by proclaiming that their destiny is sealed by an unjust and hostile society. What the children of immigrants imperatively need is to take charge of themselves instead of settling into the warm bath of resentment from an early age. We should stop complicitly supplying them with scapegoats. We need to help Islam to seize this historic

---

<sup>419</sup> Finkielkraut, *La seule exactitude*, pp. 276-278.

<sup>420</sup> Finkielkraut, *La seule exactitude*, p. 131.

<sup>421</sup> Finkielkraut, *La seule exactitude*, p. 124.

<sup>422</sup> Finkielkraut, *La seule exactitude*, pp. 125-126.

moment to put itself in question. The culture of origin can be a resource; why should it remain a prison?<sup>423</sup>

The culture of open dialogue symbolised by the French café and targeted by the Bataclan murderers of 2015 remains, for Finkelkraut, salvageable; the murders actually led to an outpouring of ‘honour’ at belonging to a transmissible cultural tradition, a lived sense of the candle flickering behind the world:

Summarising perfect happiness, the Jews of Central Europe used to say ‘like God in France’. According to Saul Bellow, this expression meant that ‘God would be perfectly happy in France because he would not be bothered by prayers, rites, benedictions and questions of interpretation on delicate dietary matters. Surrounded by unbelievers, He too would be able to relax in the evening, like thousands of Parisians, in His favourite local café. Few things are more civilised, more agreeable than a tranquil café *terrasse* at dusk.’

Even more than the ‘*Je suis Charlie*’ after 11 January, the ‘*Je suis en terrasse*’ after 13 November proclaims that a civilisation has been targeted: the urban civilisation of cafés, intermingling of the sexes and mixing of social conditions. Suddenly, people felt that they were the inheritors of a very definite civilisational tradition.<sup>424</sup>

The categories of ‘honour’ and ‘heritage’ are for Finkelkraut no anachronisms; they are the very centre of any possible ‘World Ethos’. Redefining this principle of ‘filiation’ in a post-biological, post-racial, meritocratic way, however, is delicate business when all talk of ‘blood lines’ bleeds so quickly into fascism:

Péguy, like all the *dreyfusards*, invoked the Rights of Man. He even did so with unique emphasis: ‘A single injustice, a single crime, a single example of illegality, especially if it is officially registered and confirmed, a single injury to humanity, a single injury to justice or law, especially if it is universally, legally, nationally, easily accepted, a single crime is enough to break the entire social pact, the entire social contract.’ But what really distinguishes the author of *Notre Jeunesse* are the keywords of honour and race, and the fact that he recovers from [Corneille’s] *Le Cid* the formula for his *dreyfusisme*: ‘I will give back my blood pure as I received it’: where Zola and Clemenceau took their example from Voltaire in his defence of Calas, Péguy brandishes the emblematic slogan from Corneille’s theatre. One would have expected a reaffirmation of the principles of the Enlightenment, but it is the old code of the aristocracy which appears without warning. To the doctrinaire racists who treat tribal belonging as a given from which no one can escape, Péguy replies that *noblesse oblige* and that Rodrigo, in order to perform his obligation, requires an extraordinary force of spirit. To those who consider the aristocratic conception of humanity and the world to be outdated, he reminds us that the democratic nation makes every citizen

---

<sup>423</sup> Finkelkraut, *La seule exactitude*, pp. 243-244.

<sup>424</sup> Finkelkraut, *La seule exactitude*, pp. 293-294.

an heir. [...] In democratic societies, the honour principle is by no means obsolete; on the contrary, it becomes the affair of everyone.<sup>425</sup>

A putatively 'aristocratic' or 'elitist' World Ethos of the kind proposed by Hans Küng, with his initial focus on the best possible interpretations of the world's 'major' religious and spiritual traditions, is therefore really, if we follow Finkielkraut's logic here, a highly 'democratic' alternative to the anti-democratic logic of postmodern relativist 'consensus'. The whole trick, however, if *la noblesse oblige*, lies in generating 'an extraordinary force of spirit [...] to fulfil this obligation'.<sup>426</sup> This energy is precisely what engagement with the 'faraway islands' of the world's leading religious and spiritual traditions can in part provide. Küng's *Weltethos* project is, like Finkielkraut's own quest for a new 'nobility', far more than a descriptive enterprise; it is an attempt to pool and transmit this *ethos*, this 'aristocratic energy', from one generation to the next ('the left, for me, is first and foremost this promise to unlock for the greatest number the treasure of the humanities and the heritage of the nobility of the world' etc.).

Like Küng's heir at the Weltethos Institut Tübingen, Claus Dierksmeier<sup>427</sup>, Finkielkraut focuses on the place of 'responsible freedom' in this 'democratic' vision: 'Secular morality is the discovery of autonomy. Being autonomous does not mean simply doing as one pleases; it means being responsible [to something beyond oneself] for what one does.'<sup>428</sup> Finding the energy to take on this Confucianesque responsibility for the world as a whole, with its many faraway islands, requires direct contact with a World Ethos recoverable in the *trésor des humanités*, such as that housed under the roof of the Académie Française: 'What [the Academy] embodies, for us, is a certain continuity. I love this continuity, and I love taking an active part in this ongoing story.'<sup>429</sup> No one cultural tradition, however, can ever have a monopoly on this *ethos*, 'because, as Levinas reminds us, in the world there is always a third party. This third party may not be your neighbour, but he is a nearby Other.'<sup>430</sup> Levinas also hinted at the 'World Ethos' idea when he said that 'France was a country to which one could attach oneself with the heart and spirit just as strongly as with [genealogical] roots'<sup>431</sup>; without dispensing with feelings of honour, pride and belonging, but on the contrary freeing them from any racial, ideological or geographical chains, Finkielkraut identifies this World Ethos with a certain idea of 'culture':

An author who has been enormously important to me for a long time, since the end of the '70s, Milan Kundera, wrote in a famous article that when God left the world, it was culture which became, in Europe, the supreme value. And he asked himself whether today culture was perhaps ceding its place. I have tried to continue his investigation.<sup>432</sup>

---

<sup>425</sup> Finkielkraut, *La seule exactitude*, pp. 312-313.

<sup>426</sup> Finkielkraut, *La seule exactitude*, p. 313.

<sup>427</sup> See Claus Dierksmeier, *Qualitative Freiheit*, (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016) for a discussion of what Dierksmeier calls the 'freedom-responsibility nexus'.

<sup>428</sup> Finkielkraut, *La seule exactitude*, p. 65.

<sup>429</sup> Alain Finkielkraut, 'L'Interview', *Stupéfiant!*, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sX5Mq2j6Yo>), accessed 19/4/17.

<sup>430</sup> Finkielkraut, 'L'Interview'.

<sup>431</sup> Finkielkraut, 'L'Interview'.

<sup>432</sup> Finkielkraut, 'L'Interview'.



While the likes of Terry Eagleton<sup>433</sup> suggest that ‘culture’ in Finkelkraut’s high, aristocratic-if-meritocratic sense has been revealed by modern technology and politics to be an unsalvageable anachronism, Finkelkraut seeks to retain an open mind and a quantum of hope while diagnosing the ‘miseries’ of our age. Hans Küng’s attitude to the world’s various religious patrimonies, and his faith in the possibility and necessity of a ‘World Ethos’, find their friend and secular corollary in Alain Finkelkraut’s muscular defence of French cultural universalism. Just as one can be ‘French because universal, and universal because French’<sup>434</sup> in Eduardo Lourenço’s immortal phrase, so too can one be ‘Catholic because universal, and universal because Catholic’, ‘Confucian because universal, and universal because Confucian’, ‘Muslim because universal, and universal because Muslim’ in precisely the same *Weltethos* sense; all that is required (though it requires intensive cultivation) is a psychological architecture of gratitude, trust and belonging which, by definition on our isolated wilderness of a planet, can only ever assume an intergenerational character.

### Alain Finkelkraut, Hans Küng and the Euthanasia Question

Basic Trust in life does not mean clinging to life at all costs; such desperation, whether for oneself or others, in fact reflects the opposite of *Lebensvertrauen*. Finkelkraut and Küng essentially agree on the nature of death; what Basic Trust in life first and foremost allows is a way to face death, not a Nietzschean embrace of pointless suffering. True ‘humanity’ means being given, and then passing on, the chance to experience and contribute to the *ethos* of the world; once that possibility has been taken away from us as individuals, there is no point hanging around:

I think of the Belgian author Hugo Claus, lucidly aware of the stupor to which he was heading, who was able to interrupt the destructive process of Alzheimer’s disease by bringing out the champagne with his wife just before receiving a lethal injection in a clinic designed for this purpose. I would like to be able to benefit from this option myself, if I ever need it, and the doctors who refuse it to me today by draping themselves in the Hippocratic Oath or the Sixth Commandment forget that morality is not worrying about morality: it is worrying about other people. When you can do nothing better for your neighbour than to help her to die, then you must help her to die. ‘It is inconceivable,’ George Steiner writes, ‘to keep a person alive against her will when her only hope is to leave life behind. That seems to me to be the most terrifying sadism.’<sup>435</sup>

The modern promise of a cocktail of anti-depressant drugs and painkillers does not make the situation better; such a ‘pharmacopia’ simply risks turning human beings into ‘molluscs’. ‘One has lost the sense of what it means to be human if one is not

---

<sup>433</sup> See Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*, (Yale University Press, 2015).

<sup>434</sup> Eduardo Lourenço, *A Europa Desencantada: Para uma Mitologia Europeia (Disenchanted Europe: Towards a European Mythology)*, (Lisboa: Gradiva, 2005), p. 20.

<sup>435</sup> Finkelkraut, *La seule exactitude*, pp. 264-265.

horrified by this solace. [...] I would like to be a *Mensch* until the end, and I would like medicine to help me to do so.<sup>436</sup>

This is not an undue selfishness; since ‘anything can happen’, part of the idea of Basic Trust in life means accepting the possibility of slow, violent and lonely death and embracing life as a whole anyway. But wilfully and unnecessarily subjecting oneself and others to this fate, betrays a complete lack of a common *ethos*, a total lack of understanding of what our best ancestors - common and not so common - have bequeathed to us, and which we are free to pass on. Hans Küng himself says so directly in *Glücklich sterben* (2014), his own highly controversial Catholic take on euthanasia:

Should I hope for something full and final, or not? An eternal life, an eternal chill-out, an eternal happiness? This is a question of trust. But, I would also say, it is by no means an unreasonable but a justified and responsible trust. For it is the reality of our lives here and now, a sum of all our positive and negative experiences in this world, our experiences of happiness that we long to prolong, but also of all the unresolved, all the unfinished business left on our table, which gives me sufficient grounds to shout a trusting ‘Yes!’ to some form of life beyond this death. Without such an affirmation this life looks pointless, meaningless and intolerable, or at the very least hopelessly unjust.<sup>437</sup>

‘Some form of life beyond this death’: whether this means some form of post-grave consciousness, an ability to contribute posthumously to the life of the Académie Française, or some other unimaginable fate, the implications for this life are the same: Hans Küng and Alain Finkielkraut agree that it is worth living, until it isn’t. Basic Trust can and should take care of the rest.

---

<sup>436</sup> Finkielkraut, *La seule exactitude*, p. 266.

<sup>437</sup> Hans Küng, *Glücklich sterben*, (München: Piper, 2014), p. 141.

## 15. *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*: Erik Orsenna's *Louis Pasteur* as a Paean to Basic Trust

### Introduction

Erik Orsenna's 2015 biography of the great 19th-century man of science *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie: Louis Pasteur (1822-1895)* tells the story of a young boy raised in a loving family, armed with a solid sense of Basic Trust in life, who went on courageously to tackle the greatest enemy of the 19th Century - disease - wrestling at the frontiers of human understanding like few individuals before him or since. Orsenna's Pasteur is a warrior who achieves immortality, not in the boring sense that we conserve his name in our vocabulary ('pasteurisation') or institutions (the world-renowned Institut Pasteur), but insofar as the *ethos* he embodied, in his own all-too-human way, lives on in our hearts and imaginations, strengthened by contact with his story.

### The Courage to Experiment

Orsenna spends a surprising but justified amount of time in *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie* exploring the psychological roots of Pasteur's self-sacrificing commitment to science. Prior even to Pasteur's fierce attachment to place - from France as a whole to the town of Arbois in particular, where he returned regularly throughout an otherwise itinerant life<sup>438</sup> - it is Pasteur's parents who offer the stable base for exploration which liberates him to pursue a career in science: unlike the parents who place unreasonable demands on their children to succeed in a given sphere, Pasteur's father, despite Louis's early boyhood struggles with mathematics, knew how to help his son find what he loved: 'Without a doubt, no better father than this man. He knew how to listen and to place a supportive hand on the shoulder when the time was right. This was a father who always preferred his son to the lofty ambitions he had for him.'<sup>439</sup> Pasteur himself says so in 1883 at the unveiling of a commemorative plaque at the Pasteur family house in Dole:

Oh mother and father! Oh my dear departed, you who lived so modestly in this small house, it is to you that I owe everything! Your enthusiasms, my brave mother, you passed down to me. If I have always associated the grandeur of science with the grandeur of the nation, it is because I was filled with sentiments which you inspired in me.

And you, my dear father, whose life was as tough as your trade, you showed me what patience could achieve over long periods. It is to you that I owe my tenacity in my daily work. Not only did you have these qualities of perseverance which make lives useful, but you were capable of admiring great people and great deeds. Look up, learn beyond your current station, seek always to improve and ennoble yourself: this is what you taught me. I can see you now, after your day of hard graft,

---

<sup>438</sup> Erik Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie: Louis Pasteur (1822-1895)*, (Fayard, 2015), p. 17.

<sup>439</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, p. 28.

reading battle stories in the evening which reminded you of the glorious epoch to which you were witness. When teaching me to read, you always took the trouble to teach me the grandeur of France.

May you both be blessed, my dear parents, for all that you were, and allow me to extend to you the homage paid today to this house.<sup>440</sup>

Pasteur's marriage to his wife Marie, meanwhile, though less than an equal meeting of 19th-century scientific minds, was nevertheless marked by a similar spirit of love, gratitude and the 'qualitative freedom'<sup>441</sup> of mutual self-sacrifice:

Who can say that they didn't love each other? Some people - some women in particular - will exclaim that Marie lived the life of a slave. This was far from being the case. The couple's friends spoke of a 'good tough woman'. If indifference is always and everywhere the same, the ways of love each follow their own path. What right do we have to forbid one of those, namely that of voluntary servitude? Especially when the master, always affectionate, always respectful, was engaged with trying to understand the mechanisms of life?<sup>442</sup>

Orsenna himself, both in homage to his subject and in allusion to the grandeur and 'goodness'<sup>443</sup> of science as a whole, also takes pains to depict Pasteur as one good man among many, one figure in an unbroken and living chain of human striving. The inspiration for the entire book, indeed, was Orsenna's former colleague at the Académie française, the Nobel Prize-winning biologist François Jacob, who politely reminded him that he might like to make the effort to learn something about the most illustrious man to have occupied his chair at the *Académie*, none other than Pasteur himself:

For thirteen years, every Thursday afternoon, I was lucky enough to have François Jacob in the chair to my right. The Académie française is just like a classroom, [but] François enjoyed a sort of immunity. No one takes issue with a Nobel Prize-winner.

We therefore had, as you will imagine, plenty of occasion to talk.

Or rather, I listened to him, intently.

In whispers, in bits and pieces here and there, he told me about 1940, Chad, Leclerc, the liberation movement...

My ignorance in biology became a source of fascination for him.

'And you call yourself curious!' he would say.

---

<sup>440</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>441</sup> See Weltethos Institut Tübingen Director Claus Dierksmeier's *Qualitative Freiheit: Selbstbestimmung in Weltbürgerlicher Verantwortung*, (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016) for a discussion of 'freedom' in the context of the World Ethos Project. Like Orsenna here, Dierksmeier emphasises that meaningful human freedom entails not just a quantitative, libertarian absence of constraint, but moreover a 'qualitative' embrace of chosen responsibilities.

<sup>442</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, p. 37.

<sup>443</sup> See Daniel Dennett, 'Thank Goodness I'm Alive', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Hlbg4-YNfI>, 6/1/2008 (accessed 29/8/2017) for a discussion of medicine as 'accumulated goodness'. In 2006, Dennett suffered acute heart symptoms which would have killed him in any earlier age; rather than thanking God for his good fortune, Dennett says he owes his life to the countless generations of patient researchers whose efforts combined to make his complex treatment possible.

He was the one who gave me the idea of writing this book.

'Since, by some miserable accident of fate, you find yourself in Pasteur's chair, bury yourself in his world. You will be forced to learn something.'

He was right. I am indeed starting to learn something about what makes us up. And what breaks us down.

My thanks to François Jacob.

You can guess how much I miss this immense neighbour.<sup>444</sup>

Orsenna is just as keen, however, to praise Pasteur's spiritual precursors as his spiritual descendants. Roger Bacon is one such example:

In passing, let us salute this Franciscan monk known as *doctor mirabilis* (1214-1294). He was one of those who opened the door to the Renaissance. Theologian, philosopher, mathematician, physician, astronomer, astrologer, and, naturally, alchemist, he happily transgressed the boundaries of knowledge. Not without risk either: repeatedly condemned for heresy and blasphemy, he spent various stints in prison. An early defender of experimentation as a means of establishing the truth, one can consider him as the direct ancestor of Claude Bernard and Pasteur.<sup>445</sup>

Pasteur himself, meanwhile, could not have achieved his feats of discovery on his own. As well as fertile rivalries with German scientists like Robert Koch, trusted colleagues like Claude Bernard himself helped to make Pasteur's successes possible. The author of the groundbreaking *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale* was 'the irreplaceable partner for exchanging ideas and hypotheses, the reliable ally in battles with other scientists, the steady companion on good days and bad.'<sup>446</sup> And yet Orsenna, like Pasteur's father, never reduces Pasteur or his entourage to disposable pawns in the abstract service of science: each individual life retains its own meaning, its own *ethos*:

Did they talk about their wives?

Compared to Marie, the saint, Fanny [Bernard], née Martin, receives scant praise from that category of historians specialised in the intimate biographies of great scientists. 'Shrew-like' and 'scornful' are the commonest descriptions, even if she is said to have reserved a certain sympathy for animals.

Claude Bernard took advantage of his election to the Académie française to separate from her, to the great relief of all those close to him. The paths of liberty are often inscrutable.<sup>447</sup>

## Nationalism and Vanity or Patriotism and Humility?

---

<sup>444</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, pp. 199-200.

<sup>445</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>446</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, p. 61.

<sup>447</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, p. 61.

Orsenna humanises his hero by hinting at an excessive (by 21st-century standards) attachment to his *patrie*. This *ethos* of national service, however, though extreme and not always endearing, is portrayed as absolutely genuine: one example is Pasteur's 'strict control of dress' among his staff: 'Paul Vidal de la Blache, the future geographer, is thus sanctioned for inappropriate attire [reflecting] the attitude of abandon of someone whose mind is elsewhere than on the job'.<sup>448</sup> Fearing death after suffering a stroke in 1868, Pasteur exclaims: 'I am sorry to die. [...] I should have wished to render greater service to my country.'<sup>449</sup> The Franco-Prussian War only sharpened Pasteur's sense of French national dignity: on the one hand, French humiliation had been caused by 'our country's disdain for great works of the mind, and in particular for the exact sciences'<sup>450</sup>; on the other, the idea of post-Enlightenment France for Pasteur was greater than Napoleonic empire-building: 'To love knowledge is to love France. The good student, and later the researcher, would contribute as much as the soldier to the influence of the nation.'<sup>451</sup> Pasteur's image of international relations was, like the internal politics of the Académie française itself as described by Orsenna, one of constructive collegial rivalries mutually driving the humanitarian and humanistic progress of each and all. He says this explicitly in his 1884 speech at the Congress of Copenhagen:

Friends, if science belongs to no nation, the man of science should be concerned with all that can bring glory to his nation. In all great scientists, you will always find a great patriot. The thought that he is adding to the honour of his country sustains him in his long efforts; the ambition of seeing the nation to which he belongs maintain or improve its station throws him into the difficult but glorious quests for knowledge which bring real, lasting advances. Humanity as a whole benefits from these efforts, which arrive to it from all corners of the Earth. It compares and chooses the best, proudly sucking up all the glories of individual nations.<sup>452</sup>

This French 'warrior for science' only rarely allowed himself the pleasure of a smile:

In the same way that 'a day without work is a day stolen' and 'only work entertains' (two of Pasteur's favourite refrains), even a second of laughter was energy diverted from the essential.

You will say: 'One can make fun of one's rivals.' Pasteur didn't; he simply highlighted their inconsistencies.

Then you will say: 'One can laugh at oneself.'

Some will reply: in order to progress towards the unknown, one must not have any doubts.

But Pasteur never stopped reviewing his hypotheses and methods!

---

<sup>448</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, p. 63.

<sup>449</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, p. 99.

<sup>450</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, p. 103.

<sup>451</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, p. 99.

<sup>452</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, p. 111.

Doubting one's ideas reflects a measure of trust in oneself. It is even the most solid proof of this trust. Those who can't stand being wrong will do their best to hide their weaknesses.<sup>453</sup>

### From Scientific Method to Humanistic *Ethos*

Pasteur's work in bacteriology not only benefitted human beings, but 'armies' of animals as well, whom Pasteur was only reluctantly willing to sacrifice in his continual laboratory experiments:

Those close to our hero [...] offer a portrait of one of the more sensitive human beings; they record his emotion when it became necessary to turn to animals. He always insisted on the use of chloroform to put them to sleep. He never performed the operations himself. How could he have done? Close to fainting, he would block his ears so as not to hear them howling.

Pasteur was, first and foremost, a fabulous *veterinarian*. A benefactor of humanity, to be sure, but also a great friend of the animal kingdom.<sup>454</sup>

For all his 'faith' in science as a method, Pasteur stopped short of assuming that it could ever answer questions of meaning and motivation: 'Describing the presence of germs or their behaviour tells us nothing about the origin of life itself, which remains a mystery. Pasteur always insisted that science and religion belonged to two different spheres.'<sup>455</sup> Orsenna's biography is dedicated less to Pasteur's science than to the broader human questions raised by Pasteur's example: on the one hand, the great scientist reveals himself as an enemy of what we, or he, might call 'sociological' relativism or materialism: in assuming his post at the Académie française, Pasteur reminds his audience and his positivist predecessor, Émile Littré, in a furious speech that 'you rage to leave the most important positive notion of all - that of infinity - outside of your theatre of concern, this notion which has the twin characteristics of imposing itself on us and remaining incomprehensible, and whose inevitable expression I see everywhere. The supernatural is buried at the bottom of all our hearts. The idea of God is a form of the idea of infinity.'<sup>456</sup> On the other, however, Pasteur's relative impatience with the human sciences and humanities earns him the scorn of contemporaries from Victor Hugo to Ernest Renan, who, in Renan's case particularly,

had shown the same rigour and the same courage in his field as Pasteur. Had he not dared to pass the figure of Jesus through the screen of historical critique via the meticulous verification of sources? Had he really existed, this Jesus? Was he a real person or a myth? How much were the first-, second- and third-hand eyewitness reports worth? What

---

<sup>453</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>454</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, pp. 137-138.

<sup>455</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, p. 75.

<sup>456</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, p. 131.

did he really do in his life? Right up to the conclusion, which seems banal today but which, regarding as it did the son of God, caused a riot: “Jesus, this incomparable human being”.<sup>457</sup>

‘In a word, sir, you have this special something in common with Galileo, Pascal, Michelangelo and Molière: namely, genius. But this is not an excuse to pour scorn on disciplines which are not your own,’<sup>458</sup> Renan replies pointedly to Pasteur’s attack on Littré. Hugo, meanwhile, represented the generous and anarchic complement to Pasteur’s empirical rigour:

In Hugo, Pasteur hated the big mouth and effete spirit, the defender of the weakest as a matter of principle and without experiment, at the risk of overturning the social order.

In Pasteur, Hugo hated the conservative, the defender of the *status quo* at whatever cost, the provincial *bourgeois* dazzled by his own success in the wider world.

There is something irreconcilable in these mutual detestations. And yet these two shared what is perhaps the most essential. When the time came, they both experienced the joy of grandfatherhood. And they both shared the same faith in a God who remained mysterious: a superior Being surely exists, but who are we to know it directly?

At bottom, their passion was the same: violent. But it did not have the same object. One cherished human freedom in general; the other focused on science in particular. When, one after the other, the same homage was paid to each with a state funeral, the crowd, equally numerous on both days, paid them the same respect and the same gratitude.

Together, they sum up the best of their century.<sup>459</sup>

Pasteur’s legacy, however, transcends his century, and remains, via the Institut Pasteur and its humanistic philosophy, deeply relevant for our own:

There has never been a character so reputed to be ‘difficult’ who was so consistently surrounded by willing staff.

Never was a team more solidly formed.

Year after year, the best had knocked on Pasteur’s door. Once admitted, they stayed. To contribute to the master’s work. Later, to continue it.

There has never been a more durable team, replenished right up to the present day, generation after generation.

[...] Behind the more famous scientists, there have always been the more modest collaborators who, once in contact with Pasteur and his work, had only one idea: to stay and serve.

This started with the two bite victims who were his first successes in the fight against rabies. Hired as caretakers, Meister and Jupille spent

---

<sup>457</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, p. 132.

<sup>458</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, p. 132.

<sup>459</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, pp. 184-185.



the rest of their lives at the Institut. On 24 June 1940, Joseph Meister preferred suicide to the prospect of a German takeover.

Pasteur was their father; his laboratory, their home; his research, their reason to live.

[...] One is forced to conclude that the greatness of the cause - understanding and defending life - and the breadth of common ambition has been enough to overcome all the petty rivalries and bad moods which invariably surface from one day to the next in any organisation.<sup>460</sup>

Yet again, Orsenna praises other cast members - an obscure 'Monsieur Étienne, Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies at the end of the 19th Century', as well as the great travelling doctor Alexandre Yersin (1863-1943) - for helping to globalise Pasteur's legacy by opening the doors to Pasteur's work in French Indochina.<sup>461</sup> A reflection of the universality of the Pasteurian *ethos* is the fact that only four colonial street names were preserved by the Viet Cong in Saigon in 1975: one was Yersin Street ('In front of the photo of Yersin, there are sticks of incense burning. This man is considered by the Vietnamese to be a tutelary genius.'<sup>462</sup>), another was 'Duong Pasteur, rue Pasteur. It separates the West side of the City Hall from the Museum of the Revolution.'<sup>463</sup>

### Reflections for a World Ethos

It may seem banal to make explicit the connections between Pasteur's work - and the spirit in which he conducted it - and Küng's *Weltethos*; for readers of the preceding chapters, these echoes will already be obvious. A salient feature of Pasteur's spiritual life, however, for want of a better word, was precisely the *Lebensvertrauen*<sup>464</sup> or 'Basic Trust in life' bequeathed to him by his parents, and which allowed him to cling to a sacred dimension of human existence all while devoting his days to empirical research which was, in turns, both labour-intensive and dangerous. Far from viewing science as an alternative to religion, Orsenna's Pasteur sees it as a *result* of 'religion' or 'spirituality' properly understood, a natural outgrowth of a healthy relationship with life itself. Pasteur's goal was not so much 'dominion' over nature, as parodies of the Enlightenment mentality would have it, but rather the passing down of a certain reverence for life itself, a trust in the importance of human (and animal) life which, in Pasteur's case, manifested itself as a thirst for research to halt the tyranny of disease.

World Ethos donor Karl Schlecht, the veritable Pasteur of concrete pumps, has invested several million euros of his own money in the World Ethos idea precisely because he sees it as a vehicle for liberating individual human beings to 'love what they do'. While for Pasteur this had a nationalistic element - service to the nation - for Schlecht it is a spirit of 'personal care' for colleagues and customers in a globalised 21<sup>st</sup>-century economy. At the risk of instrumentalising it, it is neither mad

---

<sup>460</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, pp. 187-189.

<sup>461</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, p. 192.

<sup>462</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, p. 196.

<sup>463</sup> Orsenna, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie*, p. 197.

<sup>464</sup> See Hans Küng, *Was ich glaube*, (München: Piper, 2010).

nor sinister to see K $\ddot{u}$ ng's *Weltethos*, built as it is on an edifice of *Lebensvertrauen*, as a potential motivational asset for modern organisations and the individuals who compose them. In 19th-century France, bacteriology and the French nation were logical targets of service for someone of Pasteur's upbringing; those inspired today by Pasteur's example need not choose the same path. Not for nothing, moreover, is the *Weltethos* Institut T $\ddot{u}$ bingen's neighbour, the China Centre T $\ddot{u}$ bingen (another Karl Schlecht Foundation initiative) also home to the Erich Paulun Institut: Paulun's work as a doctor in Shanghai in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries warrants comparison with the legacy of Pasteur and Yersin in Vietnam, and led directly to the founding of the renowned Tongji University. 'Erich Paulun was an entrepreneur too, just like Hans K $\ddot{u}$ ng,' Schlecht concluded after receiving an honorary professorship from Tongji a century after Paulun's death.

## 16. Clinging to Justice in a Post-Truth World: Robert Fisk, Patrick Cockburn and a World Ethos

### Introduction

For almost four decades, two British Middle East correspondents, Robert Fisk and Patrick Cockburn, have patiently and peerlessly chronicled events in the Middle East for an English-speaking audience. Their dispatches for *The Independent* newspaper over the course of 2016 and 2017 represent the sum of a lifetime of wisdom garnered from frontline reporting in zones of conflict, insights sharpened by the practice of taking philosophical distance from the events of the day.

The World Ethos project inaugurated by Catholic theologian Hans Küng in 1990 has throughout its history placed a high premium on truth, and on taking the *idea* of truth seriously; not for nothing is ‘truthfulness’ (in German *Wahrhaftigkeit*) a core value enshrined in the 1993 *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* provisionally ratified by religious and spiritual leaders from around the world as a roadmap for a future ‘World Ethos’. The exact, lived contours of this *ethos* of truthfulness, however, remain to be fleshed out over time; a series of major international political and media events in 2016 and 2017, moreover, has culminated in the coining of the phrase ‘post-truth era’, providing a serious challenge to the World Ethos movement as it seeks to remain relevant in a fast-changing world. The work of Robert Fisk and Patrick Cockburn provides a timely reminder of what World Ethos-building efforts in 21st-century public life might look like, and why a spirit of truthfulness in both politics and the media is more urgently needed than ever before.

### ‘Justice, Justice, Justice’: Robert Fisk

One could choose hundreds of points of entry to the work of Robert Fisk, but for our purposes here, one from his adopted home, Beirut, will serve:

But for families of those who have no known grave, there is no such compassion. Each week, [the Lebanese newspaper] *L’Orient* carries an article about the missing of the Lebanese Civil War, each story ‘written’ by the missing – presumably dead – victim. ‘We disappeared a few days before my wedding’ in June 1982, Chahine Imad ‘writes’, mentioning the militia checkpoint where he was stopped near the town of Bhamdoun – and never seen again. ‘Don’t let our story end here.’ Each article by the ‘dead’ ends with these same words. Raya Daouari, a 30-year-old widow, was taking her two children to their school enrolment when she was stopped at another militia checkpoint near the Beirut museum. She was never seen again. ‘Don’t,’ she writes, ‘let my story end here.’<sup>465</sup>

---

<sup>465</sup> Robert Fisk, ‘Can Syria Ever Be Repaired When its Long Civil War Finally Comes to an End?’, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/syrian-war-conflic-ends-how-to-repair-country-lessons-from-lebanon-dont-apply-a7729676.html>, 11/5/2017 (accessed 13/8/2017).

Fisk has taken up this responsibility over decades of war reporting, doing what he can to express to a faraway readership the humanity behind the frequently tragic news headlines emanating from the Middle East. Fisk's overall diagnosis of the intercivlisational situation is clear: there is a lack of a common *ethos* uniting 'Muslims' and 'the West'. Indeed, the very fact that we refer to the conflict in these terms shows that we think of it in terms of a religious-secular divide: 'Muslims' have kept their religion, while 'the West' has given up on Christianity in favour of liberalism and human rights. 'Why should a people who believe in God be so dominated by a people which no longer does?' Fisk asks, verbalising the question which, he says, remains constantly at the back of the minds of many people in the Middle East:

I don't think we care about the people as a whole. [...] That's why we still use this disgusting phrase 'collateral damage'. I wouldn't use that about a dog, but we use it, primarily about Arabs. [...] You have a people - Muslims - who have not lost their faith. They still believe in God. They believe the Qur'an is the word of God Himself, as passed on to the Prophet Muhammad. They believe it, and it more or less governs the lives of those people - family [relations], their attitude towards their friends, their attitude towards betrayal, love etc., whereas we in the West have largely lost our faith, whether it's because of the Treaty of Vienna, the First World War - you name it. By and large, not many of us go to church anymore. I think the big question, which involves things like humiliation, is asked now in the minds of many people among whom I live, and in my mind too of course: 'How come a people who have kept their faith have become dominated - culturally, socially, economically, militarily - by a people who have lost their faith?' This question is not asked directly in the Arab or Muslim world - I've never heard it put that way, in any language - but I think it lies as a very basic question, alongside the need for major institutions to take account of history - dignity, freedom (in the most basic sense of the freedom to speak). I don't know how you get to this stage, but I think we have been very much diminished by modernity. [...] We are so addicted to science, the Internet, blogs, websites, Twittering, Twottering, emails, that we have lost our sense that generational problems have to be confronted in a very serious way, not with garbage psycho-babble language, but seriously, in the language of history, and we don't do that. [...]

The debate should be about why ISIS exists, how it started, why we invaded Iraq - let's dig into the history to find out why we got it wrong, and how we can put it right. [...] My God, if we're this far off course, how do you signal the ship to come back?<sup>466</sup>

The important point here is that theology, philosophy and psychology on their own are not enough for the development of a World Ethos: a deep understanding of history, Fisk argues, is absolutely necessary for meaningful dialogue between peoples. This alone allows one constructively and credibly to criticise both one's own 'side' and the crimes and shortcomings of one's neighbours.

---

<sup>466</sup> Robert Fisk, 'Interview with Robert Fisk on What Really Matters in the Middle East', [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uug1D-2\\_O34&t=547s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uug1D-2_O34&t=547s), 4/12/2015 (accessed 13/8/2017).

Fisk, then, seeks a harmonious integration of 'the Muslim world' and 'the West', one which requires an increasingly nihilistic and relativistic West to recover some of its lost sense of the sacred (not least by learning from the Muslim world), and also requires the Muslim world to abandon the 'literalist psychosis' of its mainstream theology (not least by embracing the Western literary tradition). The example of the Abu Zayds - Nasr and Ibtihal - says it all: what is needed is a 'humanistic reinterpretation' of both Western modernity and Islamic theology in the service of a common *ethos*:

Every Egyptian – every Arab, indeed every Muslim in the Middle East – knew the deeply shaming saga of the Abu Zeids, although these people do not speak of it today. He was a professor of Arabic literature at Cairo University, she a lecturer in the history of Spanish art and French civilization, a French diplomat's daughter who graduated from the Sorbonne, both now ordered by the state court to separate on the grounds that Nasr – in a university paper that won him his professorship – denied the reliability of the Quran as a literal text. The man behind the charges was one of Abu Zeid's own academic colleagues, a third-rate television Muslim evangelist who claimed that Nasr had "set himself up as an opponent of all the tenets of religious discourse".

But let's have a look at Nasr Abu Zeid's original sin – which has much to do with Isis and the doctrine of infallibility that every Islamist cultist now flourishes before throat-cutting his way across the landscape. Abu Zeid himself had been a university teacher for 20 years and had published highly respected works on 9th century Muslim theologians and the 13th century mystic Mohieddin Ibn Al-Arabi. But Abu Zeid's 'crime' was to state boldly in his work that "from the minute of its descent from God to the minute the Prophet recited it, the Quran changed from a divine text to a human one..." The professor opposed the literalism with which so many conservative Muslims interpreted the Quran, insisting instead that its teachings should be seen in the context of the Arab world 1,400 years ago and read with enlightenment rather than unquestioning obedience to every phrase.

[...] So how, I asked Ibtihal Abu Zeid, did she – who grew up reading Racine and Balzac – respond to the hatred of Quranic literalists? "Why on earth do you talk about Racine?" she snapped at me. "Why don't you mention Camus or Sartre or Kafka? Their texts are very pale in comparison to what we are going through. The writers of the absurd could never have written this. To think that they missed what we are living through – poor Kafka!"

[...] So the Abu Zeids were forced to flee for their lives from their homeland, just as tens of thousands of Isis victims have fled the cult's literalist psychosis and violence in Iraq and Syria.

[...] Nasr and Ibtihal Abu Zeid flew first to Spain and then to Holland, where Leiden University gave this brave man a visiting professorship. More than a year after I had first met him, I travelled to the Netherlands to speak to him again about his struggle for humanist reinterpretation – which is what he preferred to call his work. We met in

the café of Leiden railway station. “If you consider the situation in the Muslim world, the absolute absence of political freedom and the failure of all the projects which were started by socialism, communism, nationalism...” he began. “Absolute failure! The poor Muslim citizen finally got nothing – and was deprived of his liberty to think – forty years with the absolute absence of democracy, of liberty! Only one voice was allowed. We had to echo the voice: the president, the king, whatever. Obedience to the ruler became some sort of religious conviction. So obedience here is the key word.”

Listening again to Abu Zeid’s words today, they might have been used to condemn Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s Isis pronouncements – or indeed the army of Saudi Arabian imams who preach the Salafist-Wahhabi cause so beloved of Isis. After the disaster of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Abu Zeid said, Muslims were taught that they were defeated because they were not sincere in their religion. “And of course, here comes the discourse of political Islamists to make something that’s called the Islamic renaissance – so there is a renaissance which is opposed to the Western renaissance. Here it comes, the Islamisation of knowledge – instead of the modernisation of Islamic thought!”<sup>467</sup>

It would, of course, be inhuman and hypocritical to try to threaten or force people into ‘Basic Trust’; the only way a *Weltethos* could ever be communicated or diffused is through dialogue and narrative example. Robert Fisk is a monument to the love and patience required for such a complex task, a process complicated not only by theological and philosophical disagreements or gaps in our understanding of human psychology, but also by the need for an acquaintance with the history of peoples and empathic engagement with it. This is the function of journalism, even and especially in the Internet Age:

[...] Whether or not you choose the definition of reporting I’d prefer – to be neutral and objective on the side of those who suffer, rather than the old 50-percent-to-each-side, football-match ‘neutrality’ – it’s the time and length you’ve got to explain an argument and provoke that all-important reflection that matters most.

[...] Print, website or television screen, it’s the ‘writing’ that matters.<sup>468</sup>

### Patrick Cockburn: From *Henry’s Demons* to *The Rise of Islamic State*

Perhaps even more extraordinary than Patrick Cockburn’s matter-of-fact reporting from the Middle East (and Iraq in particular) is his quiet stoicism regarding the mental illness of his son, Henry. He said of his decision to co-write a book on schizophrenia

---

<sup>467</sup> Robert Fisk, ‘In the Age of Islamic Literalism, We Should Remember the Scholar Who Fought Back’, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/nasr-abu-zeid-quran-literal-isis-wahhabism-remember-a7762991.html>, 30/5/2017 (accessed 13/8/2017).

<sup>468</sup> Robert Fisk, ‘How Would Legendary Foreign Correspondent Clare Hollingworth Have Reported on the World of Twitter and Trump?’, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/donald-trump-twitter-social-media-clare-hollingworth-a7524336.html>, 12/1/2017 (accessed 13/8/2017).

with Henry (*Henry's Demons*, 2011): 'If a family doesn't look after its weakest members, what is the point of the family? It seems to me that's what the family is for.'

How could we do something for him, put some success back into his life, something he could be proud of, something where he could say to his friends, 'I've done this!' instead of just being in hospital. And because I write for a living, I thought: 'Well, he knows all too well what it's like to have schizophrenia, and he knows what it's like to be in mental hospitals, and that's something that people are interested in and frightened of but don't really know much about. So I thought, we'll write a book together. [...] I wanted him to write his chapters and me to write my chapters.'<sup>469</sup>

Cockburn says that he and wife Jan 'were lucky enough to come from strong families' and to have each other; 'God knows what it would be like to face this on one's own.'<sup>470</sup> Making a point of sharing their situation with friends, the Cockburns were surprised to learn how many people were dealing with similar problems in their own families, 'silently doing things which were immensely to their credit'.<sup>471</sup> The British idea of 'care in the community' is quickly dispelled in the book (it is families who take on most of the responsibilities), as is the idea of psychiatry as an exercise in winning the trust of patients:

Henry didn't really trust psychiatrists, which I found very easy to understand, because Henry would say to me: 'Why should I trust people who lock me up?!' Various psychiatrists said to me: 'I think I'm developing a really good friendship with Henry.' And I tried to say politely to them, 'No, you're not! He considers you his jailer. He might consider you quite a nice jailer, but you're still a jailer.' It didn't seem to come across to them that it was this disparity in authority which really determined the relationship between him and them. In fact, I would find that he would do things if his yoga teacher or art therapist suggested them, whereas if a psychiatrist suggested something, he would often have a sort of counter-reaction.<sup>472</sup>

During interviews for the book tour, Cockburn also found Henry much more receptive to questions from a respectful interviewer than from mental health professionals. 'I think it's because it was an equal relationship,' Cockburn concludes.

'People don't want tolerance: they want equality,'<sup>473</sup> the Syrian poet Adonis says in an important addendum to contemporary Western-style liberalism. Cockburn has brought this insight into his recent reporting on the Middle East, not least with the much-acclaimed *The Rise of Islamic State* (2015) and *The Age of Jihad* (2016), a clear sequel to Fisk's own *The Age of the Warrior* (2008). Iraq's Sunni community felt marginalised by post-Saddam Hussein political arrangements, Cockburn argues, and, unable to achieve equality via dialogue either at home or abroad, found some

---

<sup>469</sup> Patrick Cockburn, 'Patrick Cockburn, Author and Journalist', [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B\\_mocVSkZkY&t=1172s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_mocVSkZkY&t=1172s), 25/3/2015 (accessed 13/8/2017).

<sup>470</sup> Cockburn, 'Patrick Cockburn, Author and Journalist'.

<sup>471</sup> Cockburn, 'Patrick Cockburn, Author and Journalist'.

<sup>472</sup> Cockburn, Patrick Cockburn, 'Author and Journalist'.

<sup>473</sup> Adonis, 'Roots and Causes of Islamic Violence'.

of its members turning to extremist violence in a bid to win recognition.<sup>474</sup> This does not change the hard fact, however, that equality must be earned; just as Henry showed through his erratic behaviour that he could not be trusted to live on his own as a free member of British society, so too did ISIS behave in a fashion which made it impossible for its neighbours or the rest of the world to trust them. Any 'equality' between the Sunni community of Iraq and the rest of the world must be based on a political, social and cultural arrangement in which the Sunni community does not feel either that the Shi'a-dominated government in Baghdad or the Western powers who put it there are their 'jailers' (the same applies in general to relations between Sunni and Shi'a, and between 'Muslims' and 'the West'). Hans Küng's efforts to build a World Ethos can be understood in precisely these terms: theological literalism and exceptionalism are no basis for equality, and nor are the sectarian power-sharing solutions of countries like Lebanon. The long-term cultural challenge for the world as a whole is to provide the victims of this 'literalist psychosis' with 'something to feel good about', a platform on which to feel equal - or in other words, to feel that one might offer some form of unique human expertise - just as Patrick Cockburn aimed to do for his son.

In the shorter term, however, sensible policies must be developed to combat the threat of immediate violence. Responding to the Manchester terror attacks in May 2017, Cockburn writes in thinly veiled frustration at a lifetime spent observing the consequences of British foreign policy incompetence:

The massacre in Manchester is a horrific event born out of the violence raging in a vast area stretching from Pakistan to Nigeria and Syria to South Sudan. Britain is on the outer periphery of this cauldron of war, but it would be surprising if we were not hit by sparks thrown up by these savage conflicts. They have been going on so long that they are scarcely reported, and the rest of the world behaves as if perpetual warfare was the natural state of Libya, Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, South Sudan, northeast Nigeria and Afghanistan. It is inevitable that, in the wake of the slaughter in Manchester, popular attention in Britain should be focused on the circumstances of the mass killing and on what can be done to stop it happening again. But explanations for what happened, and plans to detect and neutralise a very small number of Salafi-jihadi fanatics in the UK, will always lack realism unless they are devised and implemented with a broad understanding of the context in which they occur.

It is necessary at this point to emphasise once again that explanation is not justification. It is, on the contrary, an acknowledgement that no battle – certainly not a battle to defeat al-Qaeda and Isis – can be fought and won without knowing the political, religious and military ingredients that come together to produce Salman Abedi and the shadowy Salafi-jihadi network around him.

The anarchic violence in the Middle East and North Africa is underreported and often never mentioned at all in the Western media. Butchery of civilians in Baghdad and Mogadishu has come to seem as

---

<sup>474</sup> See in particular Patrick Cockburn, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, (London: Verso, 2016).



normal and inevitable as hurricanes in the Caribbean or avalanches in the Himalayas.

[...] There should be nothing mysterious about the cause and effect which led to the Manchester bombing. Yet the same mistakes have been made by Britain in Iraq in 2003, Afghanistan in 2006, Libya in 2011 and in Syria over the same period.

[...] Atrocities such as Manchester will inevitably lead to friction between Muslims and non-Muslims and, if there are more attacks, sectarian and ethnic antipathies will increase. Downplaying the religious motivation and saying the killers “have nothing to do with real Islam” may have benign intentions, but has the disadvantage of being glaringly untrue. All the killers have been Muslim religious fanatics.

It might be more useful to say that their vicious beliefs have their roots in Wahhabism, a very small portion of the Muslim world population living in Saudi Arabia. Of course, this would have the disadvantage of annoying Saudi Arabia, whose rulers Britain and much of the rest of the world are so keen to cultivate.<sup>475</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

‘ISIS could not exist if it did not have some foundational popularity,’<sup>476</sup> Robert Fisk argued in 2015. Fisk and Cockburn essentially divided their coverage of the ‘war’ with ISIS between Syria and Iraq respectively; the picture which emerges from reading these two men of distinct and complementary temperaments - Fisk bold and emotional, Cockburn understated and matter-of-fact - is one of a war generated by a lack: specifically, a lack of Western attention to historical detail. Part of Hans Küng’s rationale for a World Ethos was one of simple, interconnected necessity: we now live in a world where wars in Yemen, Libya or Nigeria can cause, directly or indirectly, terrorist attacks in Manchester. Yet both Fisk and Cockburn have unique gifts for seeing beyond this sad logic: Fisk’s Lebanon of faded grandiose architecture and even Cockburn’s Iraq of catastrophic bribery and corruption point to a humanity beyond the dehumanising and fundamentalist theology which far too often stands in, in the Western imagination, for Islamic civilisation itself. That the brave individuals in the Muslim world in general and the Arab world in particular who oppose this theology deserve our spiritual and material support should go without saying<sup>477</sup>; giving a platform, however, to all human beings, even the mentally ill, in order that their ‘story does not end here’, is an integral part of any World Ethos Project. Without condescension, Robert Fisk and Patrick Cockburn show us that such engagement with individual human beings is possible, even as one remains rightly concerned and curious about the bigger picture.

---

<sup>475</sup> Patrick Cockburn, ‘To Prevent Another Week of Terror, Our State Must Not Become a Vast ISIS Recruiting Sergeant’, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/manchester-attack-isis-radical-islamist-extremism-britain-terrorism-government-response-where-now-a7759021.html>, 27/5/2017 (accessed 13/8/2017).

<sup>476</sup> Fisk, ‘Interview with Robert Fisk on What Really Matters in the Middle East’.

<sup>477</sup> Weltethos Institut Public Dialogue Coordinator Christopher Gohl, for example, has been active in the German campaign to free liberal Saudi blogger Raif Badawi. Badawi’s face has greeted visitors to Gohl’s office in Tübingen’s Hintere Grabenstraße for the past three years.

**Imagining a World Ethos:  
The Power of Poetry and Storytelling**

## 17. 'The True Miracle': Boualem Sansal, World Literature and a World Ethos

*More than with the invention of the first tools or with the mastery of fire, which gave humanity a modicum of respite and also a glimpse of the future art of war, [...] the true miracle is the advent of literature, the sublime art of transfiguration. Understanding [in the modern era of space exploration] that individual human beings could not live eternally in this world nor escape from it, we had to find a way of seeing the world differently, and via such a penetrating and persuasive gaze, transfigure it and transfigure ourselves.*

*[...] Neither science, nor philosophy, nor politics is able to compete with [religion]. They no longer produce meaning. They observe one-off or recurrent phenomena, and at best produce technical explanations. Literature is faced with an immense, existential challenge. [...] It must respond to the quest for meaning, love, liberty and respect in which humanity wishes to engage itself and to live. Literature has no other function.<sup>478</sup>*

Boualem Sansal

### Introduction

'All totalitarianisms are global', writes Boualem Sansal in 'Écrire dans la violence du monde'; the battle against it is therefore also global in nature. The Algerian author has become a public spokesperson for anti-Islamism in Europe following the publication of his novel *2084: La fin du monde* (2015), the Prix Goncourt-winning tribute to George Orwell's *1984* in which an ideology resembling contemporary Islamism in everything including name comes to dominate the entire known world ('Abistan'). The abolition of past and future, characteristic of all truly totalitarian ideologies, renders the development of a sense of civilisational continuity and conscience - a spirit which theologian Hans Küng has referred to as a 'World Ethos' - impossible. Recovering this lived quality of civilisation in an age threatened on two sides by materialism and Islamism is a task which Sansal reserves for the province of 'literature', which he describes as 'the true miracle' of the 21st Century. We explore these miraculous properties in Sansal's own work, first and foremost in *2084*, thereby highlighting the necessary contribution of literature and a 'literary' theology to the World Ethos idea.

---

<sup>478</sup> Boualem Sansal, 'Écrire dans la violence du monde', *Rencontres Internationales de Genève*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjmBOGi6VxQ> (accessed 31/10/2016).

## 2084: Imagining the Absence of Freedom

*Believers are afraid, and the afraid believe blindly.*<sup>479</sup>

Sansal has obvious difficulty imagining the mental universe of the inhabitants of Abistan, much as contemporary observers of North Korea struggle to place themselves in the shoes of the ordinary North Korean citizen. This does not prevent him, however, from diagnosing from the outside the chief pathology of Abistani pseudo-theology:

In its infinite knowledge of artifice, the System quickly understood that it was hypocrisy which made the perfect believer, not faith or trust, which by its very nature brings doubt along with it as well as the possibilities of revolt and madness. The System also understood that the best form of religion for it would be a well-codified bigotry, set up as a monopoly and maintained by omnipresent terror. Since 'detail is the essence of practice', everything was spelt out, from birth to death, from sunrise to sunset, the life of the perfect believer an uninterrupted set of words and gestures to be repeated. This left no room for dreaming, hesitating, reflecting, disbelieving, possibly believing. Ati [the protagonist] struggled to draw a conclusion from all this: believing was not believing but deceiving, not believing was believing in the opposite idea... [...] Ati shuddered at the difficulty of all this, he didn't know the free world, and simply could not imagine the link which might exist between dogma and freedom, and which of the two might be stronger.<sup>480</sup>

Sansal contrasts the 'hypocrisy' of Abistan's 'security-blanket religion', which covers or smothers everything (or feels that it has to), with the true 'faith' or trust necessary for the life of the mind. Hans Küng achieves a similar feat in the sphere of Catholic and ecumenical theology by describing the common feature of *Grundvertrauen* or 'Basic Trust in Life', a willingness to embrace and explore life such as it is, a courage 'without which no one can live ethically'<sup>481</sup>. A symptom of the absence of this trust is a reluctance to explore beyond the frontiers of what is already known and familiar; the average Abistani neither wants nor is able to imagine the beyond of Abistan: '*Going beyond the limits, what is that? And to go where?*'<sup>482</sup> the narrator asks in italics in a parody of the Abistani mentality.

Ati, Sansal's renegade Abistani hero, has his mind broadened by travel, first to the sanatorium to which the Abistani authorities foolishly consign him ('Ati opened himself up to these questions at the sanatorium, when doubt started to carve out a

---

<sup>479</sup> Boualem Sansal, *2084: La fin du monde*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), p. 29.

<sup>480</sup> Sansal, *2084*, p. 46.

<sup>481</sup> Hans Küng, *Wozu Weltethos? Religion und Ethik in Zeiten der Globalisierung* (Freiburg: Herder, 2002), p. 21.

<sup>482</sup> Sansal, *2084*, p. 38.

path in him'<sup>483</sup>) and then on his future (illegal) quests for truth which result from this first contact with a 'beyond' of his neighbourhood:

He had never thought about it but if someone had asked him he would have said that Abistanis all resembled one another, that they were like him, like the people in his neighbourhood in the city of Qodsabad, the only human beings he had ever seen. And now he saw that they were infinitely various and that, in the end, every individual was a world in herself, unique, unfathomable, a fact which in a certain sense cut through the notion of a 'people', single and solid, composed of twin brothers and sisters. 'The people' was therefore an abstraction, yet another one, contrary to the very principle of humanity [and the 'humanities'], which is crystallised, in its entirety, in the individual, in each individual. It was an exciting but troubling discovery. What was a 'people' then?<sup>484</sup>

This skill of perceiving the frenetic internal life of each human being, an ability made possible by intercultural contact, allows Ati to confront his moral responsibilities, not to any imagined, homogeneous or eternal collective, but to the nuanced reality of each mortal individual. Ati's friendship with fellow renegade Koa, and his remorse at his final betrayal of Koa on their truth-seeking odyssey, represents the essence of the 'civilisation' which Basic Trust in life engenders, and which totalitarian rule-following destroys. Even the language of Abistan, *abilang*, in its fetish for purity creates monsters beyond those of the state of nature:

No one knew how, except by incantation, repetition and the prevention of free exchange among people and institutions, but this language created a force-field around the believer which isolated her from the world and made her deaf to any sound which was not the hypnotic astral chant of *abilang*. In the end, this language turned her into a different being than the product of chance and chaos she was born as, a status for which she now had only disdain. She now wanted to crush these inhabitants of the state of nature if she could not model them in her own image.<sup>485</sup>

'Friendship, love and truth are powerful sources of progress, but what can they achieve in a world governed by non-human laws?'<sup>486</sup> Sansal's narrator asks rhetorically, before answering his own question at the end of the novel: such things matter for their own sakes, and only individuals can lead by example, inspired by the concrete examples of others - in Ati's case, by the whistleblower Nas ('he had admired Nas, a man of good will from whom he had learned the disposition of spirit which compels one to tell the truth and denounce falsehoods at whatever personal cost to oneself'<sup>487</sup>). One of the problems with living in a totalitarian dictatorship like

---

<sup>483</sup> Sansal, 2084, p. 95.

<sup>484</sup> Sansal, 2084, p. 64.

<sup>485</sup> Sansal, 2084, p. 94.

<sup>486</sup> Sansal, 2084, p. 117.

<sup>487</sup> Sansal, 2084, p. 230.

Abistan, however, is precisely that one cannot know how much one's efforts of individual resistance can affect the overall political situation; the museum curator Toz, for example, maintains his collection of subversive 20th-century objects from a lost civilisation in the hope that his 'research... will be of use one day; when people of good will recognise one another and mobilise, they will find the artifacts that I have so painstakingly collected'; but he remains more or less resigned to the fact that 'Abistan is Abistan and will remain Abistan' and that his nephew Ram's revolution is more or less destined to fail.<sup>488</sup>

Ati's own choice at the end of *2084* to head for the mountains in search of the beyond of Abistan is similarly unlikely to bear fruit ('it would probably lead him to a terrible estrangement, inhuman suffering, and death'<sup>489</sup>), but is also worth it for its own sake ('but it didn't matter; it was his choice, a free choice'<sup>490</sup>). The corollary of this Basic Trust in life is hope, reasonable hope, the opposite of trustless blind submission:

I have a thousand reasons to believe [in a beyond of Abistan]. I believe it because Abistan lives on lies. Nothing has escaped its falsifications, and just as it has modified History, so too could it have invented its own Geography. You can make people who never leave their own neighbourhoods believe whatever you want... I believe it more and more since I have met you, Toz... You believed in your 20th Century and you have brought it back to life. Here it is, all shined up in this miraculous museum... You know this century, you have seen that its inhabitants possessed science and technology and certain virtues which, in spite of all narcissistic excesses, allowed them to preserve a certain space for pluralism and to live in it even when the going got tough.

[...] Why wouldn't I see something in myself of a man of good will who has recognised himself as such and now seeks to establish, to reestablish the link between our world and the other world?

[...] I want to give it a go: from where I am now, it is the only choice I can make. Life in this world is over for me now. I want, I *hope* to start a new one on the other side.<sup>491</sup>

Sansal does not overly romanticise 20th- and 21st-century Western culture here; he simply points out in *2084* that totalitarianism is a very real threat to the *ethos* of Basic Trust in life which, in the language of Hans Küng, is at the heart of all that is good in all cultures.

### In Search of 'Magic Words': Literature, Religion and a World Ethos

'Bad cop' Sansal's 'literary theology' echoes that of 'good cop' Navid Kermani<sup>492</sup>; whereas Kermani celebrates the literary fruits of early Islamic civilisation - in

---

<sup>488</sup> Sansal, *2084*, p. 254.

<sup>489</sup> Sansal, *2084*, p. 255.

<sup>490</sup> Sansal, *2084*, p. 255.

<sup>491</sup> Sansal, *2084*, pp. 257-259.

<sup>492</sup> Navid Kermani, *Zwischen Koran und Kafka: West-östliche Erkundungen*, (München: C.H. Beck, 2014).

*Zwischen Koran und Kafka* (2014), for example - in a bid to show that Islam need not pose an existential threat to the rest of the world and could still be a net contributor to an emerging World Ethos, Sansal focuses on the totalitarian perversions of contemporary Islamism, both in fictional form in *2084* and in his 2013 book *Gouverner au nom d'Allah*, a short history of the Islamist project in his native Algeria and beyond. Even here, however, Sansal's purpose is avowedly 'literary': 'This short work, which addresses the rise of Islamism in the Arab world, has no other pretension than that which a writer may have who, seizing on a given subject, tries to look at it in a *certain manner*, let's call it "literary", or in other words with his own subjectivity, but with the simultaneous hope that this subjectivity attain a *certain truth*.'<sup>493</sup> The essence of Sansal's argument in *Gouverner au nom d'Allah* is that utopianism always reflects one side or the other of an unhealthy dynamic of mistrust in reality; a 'World Ethos' is in many cases the opposite of dreams of world peace and prosperity, more a quiet and personal relationship with reality than anything 'apocalyptic'. The failures of the Socialist International in Algeria and other Arab countries, rather than inspiring genuine moral renovation led by individual example, ended instead in sinister and cynical power alliances between the corrupt Socialists in power and the Islamists who, dreaming of world domination and seducing new followers deluded by post-independence socialism, sought to occupy the vacuum left by a government absent from the everyday lives of people in need: 'We saw [the Islamists] multiply their cultural and social demands, which consisted of very precise obligations and prohibitions, and which the worried authorities, who had lost much of their revolutionary verve and heroic aura over the years, made their own with shameful, tactical enthusiasm, thereby sinking the country in an intellectual and psychological backwardness which is the bearer of all dangers.'<sup>494</sup>

On the one hand, Sansal appears grudgingly to grant Kermani his point, also made by Hans Küng in *Islam: Past, Present, Future* (2004) about Islam at its potential best: in *2084* he describes the religion of Abistan as 'a severely degenerated form of an earlier, brilliant religion which History and its vicissitudes had pushed onto a downward slope, revealing and amplifying all that this religion might contain which was potentially dangerous. It seems that this civilisation was left in such a bad state by the *Gkabul* [its Holy Book] that it died from it.'<sup>495</sup> On the other hand, however, he wants to make clear just how dangerous he thinks 21st-century Islamism is:

The clash between Christianity and Islam [in the Middle Ages] was unavoidable... Then, for centuries, there was an ebb. Arabs and Muslims struggled in all areas, their world shrunk like Balzac's Skin of Sorrow on all fronts: territorial, political, cultural, scientific, economic. There was nothing left of the Golden Age or the mythical House of Islam. Their nations were cut to pieces, reconfigured, colonised, and depopulated by wars, poverty and forced migration.

There remained, however, one thing which no one could take away from them: Islam, which they made into a hideout from their miseries, a refuge, a promise. There were many renovation projects over the centuries but the masses never heard about them; they never really

---

<sup>493</sup> Boualem Sansal, *Gouverner au nom d'Allah*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2013), p. 11.

<sup>494</sup> Sansal, *Gouverner au nom d'Allah*, p. 16.

<sup>495</sup> Sansal, *2084*, p. 206.

went beyond the small intellectual circles which conceived them. Until the advent of Islamism. Of all those who proposed renovation via Islam, the Islamists were the most credible and the most appealing. This was a global, religious, political, social project. [...] And what better choice did [the Arab masses] have? Democracy on the Western model demanded a mental revolution which was impossible within the confines of Islamic traditionalism. The fact remains that in fourteen centuries, no attempt at revolution on the scale of the Enlightenment was able to take root in the Muslim universe. Those which *were* made were confined to ivory towers and café circles, and were quickly killed in the womb.<sup>496</sup>

The danger of Islamism is in the first instance, Sansal argues, psychic or psychological rather than physical; worse than any military or physical defeat is the instrumentalisation of the Qur'an to create a sense of collective identity which acts as a crutch, a 'refuge for all miseries' in a zero-sum universe, rather than as a source of inspiration and trust from which to explore the universe for its own sake (to 'seek knowledge even in China', as the *hadith* has it). Basic Trust in life allows for a personal relationship with reality, even with Ultimate Reality or God, in which other people and other books are to be *explored* before they are to be feared or viewed as part of a foreign conspiracy. Just as Hans Küng sought to free Catholic and ecumenical theology from its more dogmatic elements and to return to the narrative and moral example of Jesus (and figures from other spiritual traditions) for inspiration, so too does Sansal seek 'literary' solutions to the challenges of globalisation. Individual heroes like his *Ati* in *2084* are needed to halt the rise of an ideology which is deeply comforting, particularly to people who already perceive themselves as marginalised and subjugated. In the end, he hopes, the Islamist 'espérance' or 'promise' of world domination will prove hollow compared to the 'espoir' or 'hope' of a life of free inquiry and free association.

In 'Écrire dans la violence du monde', Sansal very cleverly identifies the end of 'modernity' with the end of the human dream of physical exploration and discovery which ran approximately from Columbus to the moon landings. The end of the Cold War, and disillusionment with the sheer scale of the physical universe - memorably dramatised in the Hollywood film *The Truman Show* - heralded a turn away from the Space Race and a return to spiritual paths of human cultivation: just as Samuel Huntington was publishing his *Clash of Civilisations*, Hans Küng was bringing his 'World Ethos' idea into being - less than a new world religion, but more than mere consensus-oriented dialogue for 'peace' on a nuclear-capable planet. The art of 'transfiguration' described by Sansal as the magic of literature is none other than the ability to generate Basic Trust in life in a 21st-century universe. Just as Küng's own *Weltethos* project is an attempt to push beyond the pseudo-scientific postmodern relativism of late-20th century Western philosophy and return to a humanistic faith in the idea of truth and the power of such lived or 'literary' experience to improve individual people, so too is Sansal convinced that the only way to fight the temptations of totalitarianism is via literary inspiration, 'magic words' which summon courage in individuals to seek truth, wherever they are. There is no formula, no poem or song or declaration or even single story which can work identically on everyone; such thinking

---

<sup>496</sup> Sansal, *Gouverner au nom d'Allah*, pp. 161-162.



is already proto-totalitarian. Generating moments of 'subjective truth' - the kind which seeks generously to multiply rather than jealously to guard itself - on a cooling planet in a big and lonely universe is the common purpose of Boualem Sansal's literary engagement and Hans Küng's 'World Ethos' project. Both are convinced that this task is necessary for the long-term survival of the species, but this is less important than the existence of the fragile *ethos* itself.

## 18. *Love and Pedagogy* Meets *Projekt Weltethos*: Miguel de Unamuno and Hans Küng on Moral Motivation

*Literature is not an ars combinatoria: it's something much more important than that.*

Jorge Luis Borges

### Introduction

Miguel de Unamuno's *Amor y Pedagogía* (1902) is a *reductio ad absurdum* of all 'scientific' approaches to moral education. Without downplaying the importance of science ('only logic provides food'<sup>497</sup> etc.) for human happiness, Unamuno forces his reader - whom he addresses personally in his dedication<sup>498</sup> - to consider what the promotion of ethical and socially productive behaviour might look like by presenting an example of its doomed opposite: a purely 'sociological' approach to parenting which ends in the suicide of its victim.

A rereading of Unamuno's *Love and Pedagogy* in 2017 offers a timely opportunity to evaluate the state of the Hans Küng's *Weltethos* project as a whole. The book serves as a *plaidoyer avant la lettre* for a shift in focus away from the building of outward, 'global', 'sociological' *consensus* on ethical norms - a deductive, 'scientific' approach to the cataloguing and cross-referencing of existing 'values' around the world - to the *active cultivation* of a common *ethos* centred in feeling, a universal but endlessly differentiated spirit to be elaborated by free individuals of all stripes and affiliations safe in the knowledge that no pseudoscientific 'formula' for such cultivation will ever replace the personalised experience of Basic Trust itself.

### *Love and Pedagogy*: Unamuno on the Paradoxes of Good Teaching

In his prologue to the first edition of the book, Unamuno repeatedly apologises to his reader for seeming to 'take the piss' in his portrayal of the absurd don Avito Carrascal, who sets out to manufacture a genius using all the latest information offered to him from the natural sciences and sociology. He does so, however, in such a way as to make a mockery of the reader who would be offended in the first place at such a portrayal: 'There are moments [in the book] when the suspicious reader might come to believe that our author is not seeking any other reaction from his readers than "This is beyond the pale; we're being taken for a ride here." And such a goal, if there were one, would indeed be intolerable.'<sup>499</sup> Crucially, however, Unamuno does not place himself above the fray: 'If [the author] takes such aim at intellectualism it is because he suffers from it as few Spanish people could. We come to suspect that by

<sup>497</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía (Love and Pedagogy)*, (Madrid: Alianza, 2000(1902)), p. 181.

<sup>498</sup> Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía*, p. 39 (see also p. 34). Robert Hughes makes a similar point about the art of Henri Matisse and the contrast with the didactic ambitions of 20th-century socialist realism in his *Shock of the New* (BBC/Time-Life Films, 1980). See in particular Episode 3, 'The Landscape of Pleasure' for a discussion of the moral implications of this focus on the individual.

<sup>499</sup> Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía*, p. 26.

rushing to mock it he is really taking aim at himself. But this is extremely delicate territory in which we daren't enter.<sup>500</sup> This sets the tone for a book in which any pedagogical *ethos* can appear only in the negative; attempts to generate a didactic formula for moral success are by definition a form of 'intellectualism' which is hostile to the environment of love and trust in which such success could ever be bred in the first place.

In the Prologue-Epilogue to the second edition, written in 1934, Unamuno says the book aims at 'the true, eternal reality, the reality of the personality' and at the 'intimate individuality, the individual and personal intimacy of the reader' which the novel form in general can access.<sup>501</sup> 'Be yourself, yourself, unique and irreplaceable,' Unamuno's philosopher-teacher don Fulgencio will tell don Avito's 'poor little rabbit' of a son Apolodoro in a parody of the Romantic mentality. But 'who is a person anyway?' Unamuno asks:

And they tell us to take for granted the idea of a conscience which is not automatically there and has to be made!

This conscience is shaped in [a person's] first years, through the love of stories and the irrationality [...] which liberates us from logic, through the love of playing at creation, of becoming a poet inventing words without meaning: *pachulili*, *pachulila*, *titamini*. 'Meaningless?' I wrote at the time. Isn't this how language got started? More than thirty years later I recovered from the mouth of my young grandson two precious sounds among others - *oplapistos* and *cutibatunga* - and I am still trying to decide what they might mean.<sup>502</sup>

Much of the satirical tension in the novel will centre around the ambiguous combinatorial excesses - healthily playful but dangerous if taken too seriously - of don Fulgencio, himself described by Unamuno as the 'key figure' in the book.<sup>503</sup> Occupying the middle 'philosophical' ground between the sociological dogmatism of don Avito and the Romantic inhumanity of the poet Hildebrando F. Menaguti ('the purpose of great loves is to produce great works of poetry'), Fulgencio remains guilty of both these extremes but also comes closest to speaking sense on various occasions despite his pathetic attachment to what the reader can see is a meaningless *Ars magna combinatoria* project, in which the riddle of life is to be 'solved' in a matrix of aphorisms mapping the four coordinates of life, death, rights and duties. Between a hopelessly overconfident sociology, a philosophy which fails to understand the *a priori* playful and experimental nature of language, and a literature condemned to meaningless 'self-expression' and 'self-realisation' devoid of social or moral responsibility (as well as a 'religion' represented by Apolodoro's incurably superstitious mother Marina), the reader of *Amor y pedagogía* is left to cry out for an *ethos* to guide humanity out of its self-evident mess.

Don Avito, meanwhile, sets out to find the best baby-mother for his pedagogical purposes, but after fixing his powers of sociological reason on Leoncia, finds himself inexplicably 'falling' for Marina: 'What things do you know, Avito Carrascal, what do

---

<sup>500</sup> Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía*, p. 28.

<sup>501</sup> Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía*, pp. 32, 34.

<sup>502</sup> Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía*, p. 36.

<sup>503</sup> Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía*, p. 28.

you know in the face of these smooth, tender eyes which hint at things which are not known by anyone and never will be?’<sup>504</sup> This ‘original sin’ will serve as Avito’s ridiculous justification for all his future pedagogical failures: if only he had stayed true to the sociological cause from the beginning, success in creating a genius would have been assured. And yet, as the reader quickly learns, Marina’s motherly love, mixed as it is with desperate Hail Maries, is the ‘poor little rabbit’ Apolodoro’s best hope for a happy life; such a superstitious and uneducated primary caregiver, however, is unable on her own to cultivate sufficient *Lebensvertrauen* in her son, and fails to act as a bulwark against Avito’s inhuman plans for him.

The two ‘teachers’ Avito contracts to assist him with his genius-building - the philosopher don Fulgencio and the poet Menaguti - offer some semblance of hope across the novel: Fulgencio at least demonstrates a certain unwitting understanding of the playful, combinatorial nature of philosophy, and Menaguti leads the young Apolodoro to ask himself questions about the importance of love and literature - but both ultimately fail in their pedagogical endeavours by failing to transmit - for such transmission can only ever be personal, by one-to-one example rather than generalised formula - what love, the love of wisdom (philosophy) and literature are for in the first place. A stunted Apolodoro, subjected to a force-fed diet of his father’s sociological pedagogy, Fulgencio’s combinatorial philosophy and Menaguti’s Romantic poetry topped off by his mother’s superstitious religion, is unable to love because he has not been loved properly himself:

The father tries a new meeting of minds, but after just a few words the son exclaims:

‘Fine, but does science teach me to be loved?’

‘It teaches how to love.’

‘That’s not what matters to me.’<sup>505</sup>

Trapped in a state of emotional underdevelopment, devoid of stable, loving attachment figures with whom to grow, Apolodoro has reached puberty incapable of feeling loved, and therefore incapable of loving, regardless of the theoretical devices applied to him. His failed ‘love story’ with Carlita, and his ‘literarification’ of this hormone-fuelled passion, are rightly diagnosed by the author not as healthy, youthful romanticism but as debilitating, helpless narcissism. Apolodoro ‘starts to go to his *rendez-vous* [with Carlita] with an artistic goal in mind. He begins to love in order to create literature, erecting a theatre within himself, contemplating himself, studying himself and analysing his love’.<sup>506</sup>

This is why, when the novel fails to win any critical acclaim, Apolodoro is driven to suicide: lacking Basic Trust in reality, he seeks to win esteem from a public which, by either ignoring him or (as he repeatedly projects onto passersby) secretly mocking him for his literary shortcomings, deprives him of the will to live. Having been bred first and foremost to be useful to society rather than as a free individual who can develop his own ‘intimate personality’ and ethical relationship with the world in a safe, playful and trusting environment, he is unable to accept rejection by society and remains, like his teachers, stuck in a pre-ethical phase of focus on the survival and

---

<sup>504</sup> Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía*, p. 47.

<sup>505</sup> Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía*, p. 154.

<sup>506</sup> Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía*, p. 131.

prosperity of his own self. Don Fulgencio makes this narcissistic philosophy explicit with his conviction that, if human beings can just figure out a formula for spiritual perfection, 'we will all be resuscitated in our descendants':

- Where did art come from? From the thirst for immortality. From there we get the Pyramids and the Sphinx which sleeps at their feet. They say that it came from play. Play! Play is an effort to escape the logic which leads to death. They call me a materialist. Yes, I am a materialist, because I want a material immortality, an immortality of bulk and substance... I want to live - me, me, me, me, me... But you must have children Apolodoro, have children!

And upon hearing these doleful words, Apolodoro felt a furious desire to have children, to make them, and he thought of Clarita and let out a sigh as he did so.<sup>507</sup>

Don Fulgencio is utterly unable to imagine a childhood space of innocence in which games can be played in a safe environment. Rather than wishing to bring an independent, ethically conscious being into the world who must, at least in her early years, enjoy 'qualitative freedom' in order to develop a trusting, creative relationship with reality in the first place - utterly necessary if one is to 'transfigure'<sup>508</sup> the reality of death into something meaningful as an adult - even child-rearing is viewed as an attempt to perpetuate one's own self by perpetuating and perfecting the survival of humanity. This is precisely what Küng means when he says that without *Grundvertrauen* no one can behave ethically: a narcissist unwilling to sacrifice herself, and intent on 'surviving' at all costs, is unable to imagine or trust that reality will in some sense provide after the physical death of her individual self, and is therefore unable to enjoy any semblance of sacrifice, of a life lived for others. In don Fulgencio's pithy formulation of this anti-ethical stance, 'to live is to long for eternal life'<sup>509</sup>; for Unamuno, as for Küng, real life - a life in which love and trust are real, breathing values - only begins where this narcissism ends.

### The Limits of 'Let's Drown Pedagogy in Love, in Caring'<sup>510</sup>

One of the great mysteries of *Love and Pedagogy* is the inability of Apolodoro's mother, Marina, to prevent her son's suicide. On the one hand, 'the most rough-and-ready intelligence and character', represented in the novel by Marina and by the servant-girl Petrilla (introduced in the Epilogue as carrying Apolodoro's baby), 'can go together with the greatest depth and intensity of feelings'<sup>511</sup>; on the other, however, if such uneducated and superstitious maternal instinct and 'love' were enough to pass on the flame of civilisation by itself, art, literature, philosophy, theology and their cousins would not need to exist in the first place. Asked by an

<sup>507</sup> Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía*, p. 148.

<sup>508</sup> See Boualem Sansal, 'Ecrire dans la violence du monde', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjmBOGi6VxQ> (accessed 29/12/2016) for a discussion of this 'transfigurative' power of literature.

<sup>509</sup> Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía*, p. 145.

<sup>510</sup> Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía*, p. 213.

<sup>511</sup> Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía*, p. 174.

English friend why 'life couldn't win' and why 'the poor boy could [not] shake off the influence of his [father's] pedagogy, get married and be happy', Unamuno replied that 'a certain subconscious and intimate logic always pulled me back to my original idea'.<sup>512</sup> Marina's instinctive love for her son, 'tender' though it is, remains, even after his death, no match for her own self-interested and superstitious fear. As don Avito prepares in the Epilogue to give his arriving grandson an even fuller dose of Apolodoro's 'sociological' treatment, the grandmother-to-be Marina can only repeat her earlier refrain of 'What a world, oh blessed Virgin, what a world!'. While the physically affectionate motherly love offered by Marina to a young Apolodoro is, in comparison with his father's endless pedagogical monologues, 'another world', it remains 'just as incomprehensible as [his father's] "pedagogy", a world of kisses and almost of silence'<sup>513</sup>; Marina's superstition and lack of education leave her unable to persuade her growing son to trust anything beyond his father's pseudoscientific lecturing.

A 'world of kisses' may be much better for a young child than don Avito's sociological pedagogy, and may be necessary for the development of Basic Trust, but, Unamuno wants to show us, it is not sufficient: an intellectual, or at least intelligent, response to the problem of death, one which speaks to the whole person rather than simply resting on dubious authority (whether of revelation or reason), is nevertheless required if one is to acquire Basic Trust in life and reality and learn to behave ethically as an adult. In short, good parenting is a result 'neither of virility nor of femininity, but rather of the wisdom of [at least] one side'<sup>514</sup>. This 'wisdom', the author of *Amor y Pedagogía* shows, has an enormous emotional and ethical component as well as something of the combinatorial energy of don Fulgencio, who for all his over-earnest attachment to the results of his post-Hegelian philosophical enquiries, is at least free and able to create new possibilities of meaning by juxtaposing and reversing opposites, like a child unafraid of the consequences of her wordplay. Uncovering and celebrating this *ethos* of intellectual freedom, unshackled by superstition and fear of personal annihilation, is the real goal of Unamuno's novel; the 'sociological', 'combinatorial' and 'Romantic' vogues of don Avito, don Fulgencio and Menaguti respectively were simply the newest symptoms of its absence, while Marina's unreflected pseudo-Catholic pleas for salvation represented an older and more entrenched form of this spiritual ignorance.

### Unamuno and the Business of a World Ethos

More than a century after the writing of Unamuno's underappreciated masterpiece, the goalposts may have moved - today it is economics and the spectre of the *homo economicus*<sup>515</sup> rather than the ghosts of 'sociology', post-Hegelian philosophy or pseudo-Romantic poetry which chiefly haunts us - but the nature of the game, at least for the World Ethos movement, remains essentially the same as it did for the author of *Amor y Pedagogía*. Moving beyond the sphere of theology and interreligious

---

<sup>512</sup> Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía*, p. 170.

<sup>513</sup> Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía*, p. 98.

<sup>514</sup> See Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía*, p. 171.

<sup>515</sup> See Bernd Blaschke, *Der homo oeconomicus und sein Kredit bei Musil, Joyce, Svevo, Unamuno und Céline*, (Wilhelm Fink, 2004) for a discussion of Unamuno in the context of contemporary debates on the status of the *homo economicus* in 21st-century intellectual life.

dialogue, the World Ethos movement has been directly engaged in the reform of economics curricula since the events of 2008 made clear the ethical dimension of a worldwide crisis in economics and business education. Weltethos Institut Tübingen Director Claus Dierksmeier, most prominently, has sought to push beyond 'quantitative' *homo economicus*-based models in his 2016 books *Qualitative Freedom* and *Reframing Economic Ethics*<sup>516</sup>, but the World Ethos movement still faces the extraordinarily difficult task, not of undoing all the uncontroversial good of free markets and decentralised economic planning as such, but of transcending the 'Gordon Gecko' *ethos* which too often accompanies, tacitly or even (as in many business school programs) openly, 'capitalist' modes of production. Unamuno offers some extraordinary insights on this question of 'motivation for productivity' in the Epilogue to *Amor y Pedagogía*, including a startlingly modern defence of the idea of a Universal Basic Income:

Without therefore taking undue notice of the high priests of art who claim that the poet, musician or painter ought not to have to make a living from his work but rather to be free to live *for* it, I believe we ought instead to work for the day when *nobody* is forced to live from his vocation and *everybody* is able to live in free service to it, a world where everyone understands that making a table, tailoring a suit, building a wall or sweeping a street can, ought to, and must be regarded as a genuine work of art for which no salary need be paid, even though the society will find a way to maintain the carpenter, tailor and sweeper in their offices.

In order to reach such a point we must overcome the arrogant pretension of writers, painters, musicians and dancers who place themselves in a separate cohort and refuse to be considered along with other workers. Only when all are joined in the same rough lot, only when all alike are subjected to the yoke of capital and come truly to consider each other brothers in economic slavery, only when the poet sees that he is being forced to produce poems in the same way that his colleague is being forced to make baskets or shoes, only then will all be able to work together for universal emancipation and raise every office, absolutely every vocation, to the status of art. It is useless that the white collar open its arms to the blue and say 'Come up and join us!'; creative elites must descend to the hell in which the working classes today burn, and burn with them, sharing in the common misery. Only then, spurred on by the common craving for elevation and freedom, will they rise together to heaven, to a common sense of vocation. Thus, and only thus, might the day come when the spontaneous work [of the masses] will overflow with vital energy in truly free economic activity, an activity productive of beauty; thus and only thus will life become a work of art and art a work of life, to coin an aphorism worthy of my don Fulgencio.<sup>517</sup>

---

<sup>516</sup> See Claus Dierksmeier, *Qualitative Freiheit (Qualitative Freedom)*, (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2016) and *Reframing Economic Ethics: The Philosophical Foundations of Humanistic Management*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>517</sup> Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía*, pp. 169-170.

Establishing the connection between the intimate, personalised but universal *ethos* of *Amor y Pedagogía* and this 'World Economic Ethos', a uniquely hard sell to a business community more or less dominated by modern-day, *homo economicus*-celebrating 'don Avito types', is an important part of the work of the World Ethos movement. The significance of Unamuno's second novel, however, goes beyond such applications to reach the theological roots of the project itself. Interreligious 'dialogue' cannot take place between Marinas, any more than 'dialogue' of any kind can take place between any of the characters in the novel. The precondition for real dialogue is a willingness to learn from one's interlocutor<sup>518</sup>; only theologies and spiritualities and philosophies which include this dynamic principle can hope for admission to the World Ethos club. Hans Küng's great contribution to Catholic theology was to show that, unlike Marina with her desperate, self-centred, fear-driven 'Hail Maries', one can remain Christian in a deeply meaningful sense and still have the requisite Basic Trust in life and reality to accept - nay, to welcome - the possibility of truth in other intellectual and spiritual traditions. The further work of Küng and colleagues, including Karl-Josef Kuschel<sup>519</sup> and Stephan Schlenzog<sup>520</sup>, in ecumenical theology and interreligious studies has shown that the same is true of the other leading 'world religions' - Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and others (Sikhism, Bahai'ism, Yazidism etc.). The World Ethos project is thus best conceived as an antidote to antidialogical determinisms of all kinds, whether religious (Marina), 'sociological' (don Avito), philosophical (don Fulgencio), or even literary (Menaguti); while 'all the people who appear in my true-to-life account more or less have consciences capable of remorse'<sup>521</sup>, this 'más o menos' is not enough, either for the individual or for the world; a new *ethos* is required to transcend this dangerous semblance of true ethicality and to penetrate the secret fount of moral motivation and love for one's 'office' or 'vocation' which could, among other happy side-effects, liberate us from the reluctant 'forced labour' of wage slavery in a capitalist economy. Unamuno calls his new anti-deterministic *ethos* 'artistic': 'Art is not obliged to respect determinism. It is more than that: I think that the final goal of art is to emancipate us from such determinism, shake us from our [material] fate, even if via recourse to stories.'<sup>522</sup> Many will prefer a different label than 'artistic' for this World Ethos - indeed, the question of a label which is welcoming both for religious believers and for those who identify as 'non-religious' remains a major challenge for the World Ethos project - but Unamuno's point remains relevant: a World Ethos worthy of the name will not be a lowest common denominator of fixed, consensus-based, CSR-esque, deterministic 'principles' on a wall, but rather a living spirit of engagement with the world in which Basic Trust in life and reality, developed in early childhood and strengthened via further (indeed lifelong) education, enables a 'dialogical' and 'artistic' free play of ideas in a climate of self-sacrificing individual responsibility.

---

<sup>518</sup> See American World Ethos pioneer Leonard Swidler's *Dialogue for Interreligious Understanding*, (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014) for a discussion of the 'willingness to learn' as a precondition for all forms of dialogue.

<sup>519</sup> See in particular Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Leben ist Brückenschlagen*, (Stuttgart: Patmos, 2011).

<sup>520</sup> See Stephan Schlenzog, *Der Hinduismus: Glaube, Geschichte, Ethos*, (München: Piper, 2006).

<sup>521</sup> Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía*, p. 173.

<sup>522</sup> Unamuno, *Amor y Pedagogía*, pp. 170-171.



## 19. 'We Can't Lie, Not to Them': The Wire and Cultivation of Basic Trust in Life

*Where do you start with them? How do you get them to believe in themselves if they can't even admit their feelings about who they are and what they're doing in this world? [...] It's not about you or us, or the tests or the system; it's what they expect of themselves.*

Bunny Colvin

### Introduction

The critically acclaimed American TV series *The Wire* (2002-2008) offers a panorama of life in the neighbourhoods of Baltimore worst affected in the 1990s and early 2000s by the trade in illegal drugs. The immense mosaic of characters and social issues covered across the five seasons of *The Wire* ought not to distract from the central 'World Ethos' theme of 'Basic Trust in life', most prominently embodied in the character of Police Major Howard 'Bunny' Colvin, who risks his career in a bid to effect meaningful cultural change among the children of the city's drug trade. Colvin's courageous struggle against the bureaucracy of the city's Police and Education authorities, by which he aims to 'cut through the bullshit' and address the real psychological issues faced by the city's 'corner kids', can be understood as a case study, albeit imaginary, of a 'World Ethos in action'. Fellow rebel cop Jimmy McNulty offers a self-absorbed counterpoint to Colvin's altruism, and will also warrant our attention below.

### Bunny Colvin: A World Ethos Ambassador, For Real

*'Bunny?'*  
*'Only my friends call me Bunny.'*  
*'Yeah, but why?'*  
*'You don't need to know. And if you tell anybody, I'll cut your balls off. I'll cut 'em off, give 'em to Mrs. Donnelly in a jar... Don't doubt me boy.'*

The relationship between Bunny and 'corner boy' Namond Brice represents one of few happy endings in the entire gamut of tragic subplots which characterise *The Wire*. With Namond's father in prison for drug-related murders and his mother desperate to send her son out onto the drug corners to be her new 'breadwinner', Colvin identifies a certain 'spirit' or *ethos* in Namond that he seeks to cultivate. As he tells Namond's father Wee-Bey when he visits him in prison to ask for his support in gaining custody over Namond:

Your boy, smart, and funny, and open-hearted, and he got some flex in him, and I ain't see it at first 'cos he was always actin' out, always full up o' corner talk, you know, just talkin' shit to hide hisself, but he could go a lotta places and do a lotta things in his life, be out there in the world in a way that, you know, didn't happen for you and me. I mean, you know, our kind, shit man, we both know we gon' go to our grave forever knowin' what block Bennylou deadends at or who got the liquor licence over at the underground or what corner Taterman got shot on [...] back in '88.

But I'm talking about Namond here Mr. Brice. He's a lot of things - a lot of good things - I mean before you know it, he might surprise all of us given half a chance - but he ain't made for them corners man, not like we were. That's why I've come down here, 'cos I got to believe that you see it. [...] You know your son.'<sup>523</sup>

Despite starting in these hopeless circumstances, Namond is, by the end of *The Wire*, debating US Government AIDS policy in Africa; with the love and support of Colvin and his wife, he has both physically and mentally escaped the 'hood' into which he was born, and learnt to think beyond himself and for the world. Colvin's insitutional struggle, however, first with the Police and then with the local school system, makes him aware of the deeper challenges faced by all those who would seek to address the cultural problems caused by, and resulting from, Baltimore's drug trade. When he rewards a group of corner kids for winning a class competition by taking them to a downtown restaurant for a fancy meal, he is shocked by what he learns in their awkward management of the wholly foreign restaurant situation: 'I knew they'd be at a loss, but the extent of it. And I'm talkin' 'bout feelings, plummeting from masters of the universe to abject fear to humiliated fury, and no awareness of it,' Colvin tells his project partner Dr. Parenti.<sup>524</sup> In the restaurant, the corner kids realise that there is a world out there beyond the corners that they have no idea how to navigate, and no spiritual resources on which to call to cope with their sudden alienation. Returning home together in an angry mood, they seek to reaffirm their fragile identities by blasting hood music from a frustrated Colvin's car speakers; in class the following day, and throughout the rest of the experimental school programme (which is eventually discontinued by bean-counting local authorities), the enduring difficulty of getting these 'problem' students to trust their teachers enough to engage with 'foreign' material (such as that prescribed for state-wide tests) is a recurring leitmotif: 'Talkin' 'bout "Jane's father give Jane one week's worth of allowance"... Shit, I ain't got no allowance where I stay at... Father neither,' corner girl Zanobia says of one sample test question.<sup>525</sup> When Colvin uses his lifelong experience in the city's drug-trading neighbourhoods to engage the students on 'what makes a good corner kid', even the sceptical Parenti is forced to admit: 'The corner kids, they really came alive.' Colvin agrees: 'Yeah, when they talk about what they know, they talk from [the heart], and they stay on point. Shit, they were even taking turns in there.' But the challenge is, as Parenti articulates it: 'Can we get them in that kind of mindset with stuff they

---

<sup>523</sup> David Simon, *The Wire*, (HBO, 2002-2008), Season 4 Episode 13, 'Final Grades'.

<sup>524</sup> *The Wire*, Season 4, Episode 9, 'Know Your Place'.

<sup>525</sup> *The Wire*, Season 4, Episode 11, 'A New Day'.

*don't know?*<sup>526</sup> To the extent that Colvin succeeds in building this bridge of trust, he does so with a brand of honest street humour: when confronted with models of Big Ben and the Eiffel Tower for a class assignment, despite the fact that, as project teacher Miss Duquette puts it, 'since y'all only seem willing to be interested in stuff you know, we looked for things more like Baltimore', Colvin chimes in: 'But the scale model of the Fayette Street stash house was all sold out, so y'all just gonna have to make do.'<sup>527</sup> Later, when Miss Duquette seeks a volunteer to stand on a box blindfolded in a classroom trust exercise, a raised eyebrow from Colvin gets Namond, very reluctantly, to step forward; in a matter of weeks, Colvin has gone from being just another 'Po-lice' to being the man Namond calls when he gets arrested:

'The young man seems to think highly of you boss. He invoked your name with a measure of respect.'

'Yeah, wasn't but a few weeks ago I was in a room with him being called everything but a child of God. "Mr. Colvin sir... Fuck... you."

'Yo, at least I said "Mr."

[...] 'Alright, let me go call my wife.'<sup>528</sup>

Colvin himself, however, does not achieve all this on his own; as well as his wife's wholehearted support, his friendship with the man known only as 'The Deacon' ('a good church man is always up in everybody's shit') allows him to navigate through the practical and psychological pitfalls associated with the otherwise lonely path of moral leadership. As the Deacon and Colvin watch Namond carve his way through the Urban Debate League at the end of the series, the Deacon whispers:

'How's it feel there Bunny?'

'I tell ya, if I'd had that boy's gift to talk, I'da really caused a stir. Look at him go.'

'Don't sell yourself short. He's got your way of making an argument. Lucky for him though, he looks like his stepmamma.'<sup>529</sup>

Coming out of the debate, Colvin is forced to confront Baltimore Mayor Carcetti, who insists there was nothing that his administration could have done to support Colvin's ultimately failed attempts at structural reform in the city and to protect Colvin's job as a Police Major. 'Well I guess, Mr. Mayor, there's nothin' to be done,' Colvin retorts as he drives away with his wife and adopted son. 'Mr. C., you know the Mayor too? Damn...'<sup>530</sup>

## 2. Basic Trust and Overcoming Ego: The Story of Jimmy McNulty

---

<sup>526</sup> *The Wire*, Season 4, Episode 8, 'Corner Boys'.

<sup>527</sup> *The Wire*, Season 4, Episode 9, 'Know Your Place'.

<sup>528</sup> *The Wire*, Season 4, Episode 10, 'Misgivings'.

<sup>529</sup> *The Wire*, Season 5, Episode 9, 'Late Editions'.

<sup>530</sup> *The Wire*, Season 5, Episode 9, 'Late Editions'.

*What? They goin' study your study?! When do this shit change?*<sup>531</sup>

Colvin to Parenti

Another central theme in *The Wire* is the way in which individual career advancement stands in the way of the systemic reforms which might push a city like Baltimore in the direction of promoting Küngian *Grundvertrauen* among its citizens. Colvin is one exception which proves this rule; another is Roland Pryzbylewski, who completes the transition from gung-ho detective to engaged, sympathetic, low-profile high school teacher. A third is the model-making Lester Freamon, whose obvious detecting talents are squandered by a Police bureau which keeps him at arm's length from the levers of power. There is a certain quiet dignity in the resistance of all three of these men.

Jimmy McNulty, by contrast, embodied at his worst the destructive spirit of full-blown, self-righteous revolution. Disgusted by his superiors' self-interested, career-advancing reluctance to confront the true macro-picture of the drug trade, McNulty takes it upon himself to shake the system, culminating in Season 5 with an elaborate serial killer hoax with bodies at a local morgue designed to free up Police funding for an investigation of the city's drug kingpins. McNulty's willingness to question authority, though his supervisors admit this makes him 'good Police', risks being overshadowed by a destructive resentment which has deep roots in his earlier past. Repeatedly accused, even by his friends, of being an egomaniac willing to 'use anyone' to further his own noble causes<sup>532</sup>, McNulty on the one hand is able to put his finger on the pulse of the city's problems, such as when he lays it on his one-time girlfriend, the lawyer Rhonda Pearlman:

If only half you motherfuckers in the State's Attorney's Office didn't want to be judges, didn't want to be partners in some downtown law firm, if half of you had the fucking balls to follow through, you know what would happen? A guy [drug dealer] like that would be indicted, tried and convicted, and the rest of them would back up enough so that we could push a clean case or two through your Courthouse. But oh no, everybody stays friends, everybody gets paid, and everybody's got a fucking future.<sup>533</sup>

The behavioural analysis of McNulty's fake serial killer in Season 5, however, actually depicts, by McNulty's own admission, the deep psychological problems of McNulty himself:

The suspect is likely a white male in his late twenties to late thirties. He likely is not a college graduate but feels nonetheless superior to those with advanced education, and he is likely employed in a bureaucratic entity, possibly civil service or quasi-public service, from which he feels

---

<sup>531</sup> *The Wire*, Season 4, Episode 13, 'Final Grades'.

<sup>532</sup> See Rhonda Pearlman's attack on McNulty in *The Wire*, Season 1, Episode 11, 'The Hunt'.

<sup>533</sup> *The Wire*, Season 1, Episode 11, 'The Hunt'.

alienated. He has a problem with authority and a deep-seated resentment of those he feels have impeded his progress professionally. [...] The suspect has trouble with lasting relationships and is possibly a high-functioning alcoholic.<sup>534</sup>

McNulty's relationship with former colleague Beadie offers him a lifeline out of this vortex, but the escape is not clean; he falls repeatedly back into drinking and womanising. Policework can't fill the hole in Jimmy's life either, as Lester Freamon finally helps McNulty to understand:

'We're good at this Lester. In this town we're as good as it gets.'

'Natural Po-lice.'

'Fuck yes. Natural Po-lice.'

'Tell me somethin' Jimmy. How exactly do you think it all ends?'

'What do you mean?'

'A parade? A gold watch? A shining 'Jimmy McNulty Day' moment? When you bring in a case so sweet that everybody gets together and says "Aaaww, shit! He was right all along. We shoulda listened to the man." The job will not save you Jimmy. It won't make you whole, it won't fill your ass up. [...] Boy, you need somethin' outside o' this here.'<sup>535</sup>

Finally, at the end of Season 5, as his serial killer plot harmlessly unravels, McNulty says to himself 'Let's go home', by which he means 'home to a forgiving Beadie':

All the guys at the bar Jimmy, all the girls, they don't show up at your wake, and not because they don't like you, but because they never knew your last name. [...] And all the people on the job, all those people you spent all those hours in the radio car with... in the end, they're not going to be there either. Family, that's it, family, and if you're lucky, one or two friends who are the same as family. That's all the best of us get. Everything else is just...<sup>536</sup>

Just as Colvin ends up bringing Namond into his family, so too does Jimmy McNulty end up opting for the selfless local gesture instead investing his ego in the next big case. The structural problems of the city of Baltimore remain at the end of *The Wire*, and Jimmy McNulty's subversive energies may be lost as he quits chasing the next drug kingpin to devote more attention to his family, but, *The Wire* creator David Simon seems to want to argue, the real solutions to big social problems are always and unavoidably to be found within individuals and in their relationship with their lives as a whole. Without the cultivation of such Basic Trust within individuals on both sides of the drug trade, Baltimore will not change, regardless of the social policies or government initiatives put in place. McNulty's attitude to the murder of D'Angelo Barksdale in Season 3 sums up this slowly growing spirit of responsible humility within him, which by the end of Season 5 leads him back to Beadie. As he tells

---

<sup>534</sup> *The Wire*, Season 5, Episode 8, 'Clarifications'.

<sup>535</sup> *The Wire*, Season 3, Episode 9, 'Slapstick'.

<sup>536</sup> *The Wire*, Season 5, Episode 4, 'Transitions'.

D'Angelo's mother Brianna, 'I kinda liked your son you know. All things considered he was a pretty decent kid. And it grinds me that no one spoke up for him. Seems to me that nobody ever will.'<sup>537</sup> Too much desire to shake things up or to change the world at all costs sometimes reflects only frustration with life itself; a World Ethos is something more, and more positive and intimate, than that.

### Concluding Remarks: *The Wire*, A World Ethos and Len Swidler

*Can you write the rules to your thing? Can you do it together?*

Colvin to the corner kids

Colvin and McNulty are only two of an enormous cast of fascinating, three-dimensional characters on both sides of the Baltimore drug divide. Whether one thinks of Lieutenant Cedric Daniels ('the stat game, that lie? [...] Bend too far, and you're already broken'), heroin addict Bubbles ('thin line between heaven and here'), rip-and-run artist Omar Little ('every man got to have a code'), Detective Bunk Moreland ('we used to have ourselves a community; now all we have are predatory motherfuckers like you'), *Baltimore Sun* editor Gus Haynes ('I think you need a lotta context to seriously examine anything. [...] Maybe you win a Pulitzer with this shit, and maybe you have to give it back...') or two dozen others, the series is an almost endless repository of human vice and virtue. Even if one stops short of thinking that *The Wire* is Shakespeare for the 21st Century, there is a discernible *ethos* of 'leadership as personal care', in Karl Schlecht's preferred formulation, which informs every intimate, meaningful human interaction in the show. These moments of care - Colvin taking Namond home to his wife for dinner, Roland Pryzbylewski offering his student Duquan the chance to shower in the staff changing rooms, Bunk taking Omar aside to beg for 'no more killin'', even Rawls and Kima easing McNulty's guilt after the botched wire ends with Kima being shot ('you, McNulty are a gaping asshole - we both know this - but I'm fucked if I'm gonna stand here and say that you did a single thing to get a Police shot'<sup>538</sup>) - may be rare in the grim overall mosaic of the show, and may have little to no effect on the macro-situation of the drug trade in Baltimore, but the power and skill of the drama is to reveal them as worthwhile for their own sakes.

At one point in Season 4, Colvin asks the corner kids if they might like to draw up a list of 'corner values', something like the equivalent of a CSR value codex for drug dealing. This is seen first and foremost as a therapeutic, trust-building exercise, a way of engaging the kids on what they know in the hope that they might somehow develop an interest in the world they don't know. It also mirrors the 'democratic' approach to the dissemination of a World Ethos favoured by Leonard Swidler: Küng's *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* was a good start, but the future of the project lies in inviting people from all over the world to come together and have a go at drafting

---

<sup>537</sup> *The Wire*, Season 3, Episode 8, 'Moral Midgetry'.

<sup>538</sup> *The Wire*, Season 1, Episode 11, 'The Hunt'.

their own version. Colvin's experience in *The Wire* shows that such exercises, for all their possible value as therapeutic and pedagogical tools, are tangential to the real thing: Namond is initiated into the true meaning of a 'World Ethos' through his relationship as a whole with 'Bunny'; it is this which gives him the ability to see and feel beyond the confines of his self and his corner world. The classroom dialogue exercises are a part of this, but they are more the effect of a pre-existing *ethos* in Bunny than a cause of it in Namond. A 'World Ethos' is by no means anti-democratic or elitist in an exclusionary sense, but it is more than an exercise in democracy, and far more than a design by committee of a list of values agreed upon by everyone. It is a dynamic, lived concept, made real by small gestures of kindness which are made without a prior calculation of whether or not they will, on their own, change the world.

I had the privilege of sharing the podium with Len Swidler at a peacebuilding conference in Manila and in taking part as a facilitator in a post-conference 'dialogue workshop' he organised for around 40 willing participants. The fact that the 88-year-old Swidler flew 30 hours from the east coast of the United States to the Philippines says perhaps more than anything he said, or *could* have said, at the workshop: here is a man immediately recognisable as one who, for all his human flaws, 'walks the talk' of a World Ethos. When I visited his Dialogue Institute at Temple University in Philadelphia in 2016, I stayed in one of the three upstairs bedrooms in his old family house; the other two were occupied rent-free by an Iraqi refugee and an 82-year-old former male colleague who had lost everything in the 2008 financial crisis. While I recommend picking up one of Swidler's many books on and around the 'Global Ethic' theme<sup>539</sup> and evaluating the merits of his 'Dialogue Decalogue' ('no one knows *everything* about *anything*, therefore dialogue'<sup>540</sup>), these more intimate facts, and others like them reported to me by others who have known him, are more important than any theory or codex that he or anyone could ever develop. He is, no surprises, a terrifyingly dangerous driver (the flipside of the admirable and inspiring trait of not being deterred by age from doing anything is, well, refusing to be deterred from doing anything), and he admitted to me, at the end of a long and unforgettable day of 'dialogue' in Manila when I, 54 years his junior, had been talked under the table by a jetlagged octogenarian, that he quietly enjoyed his avuncular status because beautiful women were more comfortable around him, but this is a man who nursed a wife with dementia for fifteen years, a man who, in his late eighties, accepts invitations to go and talk to people *all* over the world with no regard whatsoever for his own health or safety, and looks after the relatives of foreign colleagues when they come to Philadelphia for cancer treatment. The likes of Bunny Colvin and Len Swidler, and even Jimmy McNulty on a good day ('when you were good, you were the best we had... but Christ, what an asshole!' is the frank assessment of McNulty's boss Jay Landsman at his Police farewell), have done, and will always do more for the idea of a 'World Ethos' than armies of theorists. A 'World Ethos' is an *ethos*, not a theory; Hans Küng's genius lay not in pseudoscientifically *explaining* the idea of a *Weltethos* or defining it once and for all, but in *describing* the feel of it from the inside of the world's major religious traditions (and, given his Catholic background, with a

---

<sup>539</sup> As well as Swidler's own *Dialogue for Interreligious Understanding*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), see River Adams, *There Must Be You: Leonard Swidler's Journey to Faith and Dialogue*, (Wipf and Stock, 2014) for an overview of Swidler's lifetime of work.

<sup>540</sup> See Len Swidler, 'Dialogue Decalogue', <http://dialogueinstitute.org/dialogue-principles/>, (accessed 16/10/2017).

particularly deep insight into Christianity), thereby extending to others an invitation, à la Bunny Colvin to Namond, to join the party of Basic Trust in life. Like all great art, *The Wire* offers its audience a similar description and a similar invitation without prescribing the full and final recipe.



## 20. The Nightmare of Basic Mistrust: Leila Slimani's *Chanson Douce*

*She seems unflappable. She has the look of a woman who can understand and forgive everything. Her face is like a peaceful ocean, the abyssal depths of which no one could ever guess.*<sup>541</sup>

### Introduction

Leila Slimani's Prix Goncourt-winning *Chanson Douce* (*Sweet Song*) (Gallimard, 2016) takes Hans Küng's idea of *Grundvertrauen* or *Lebensvertrauen*<sup>542</sup> ('Basic Trust in life') and asks: what becomes of a person who never has the privilege of building this 'yes-saying relationship with reality'<sup>543</sup> in the first place? Slimani's central protagonist Louise (based on a real-life American 'nanny gone wild') ends up murdering the two young children in her care in a horrifying pool of blood. Slimani's portrait of Louise, and of the bourgeois Parisian couple - Myriam and Paul - who hire her, reflects the seething class tensions of the globalising world into which Küng's World Ethos<sup>544</sup> idea seeks purchase: while a privileged few may enjoy a certain mirage of Basic Trust thanks to their relative economic freedoms, Slimani shows that any such trust, if built on the alienated labour of a human underclass itself denied access to stable attachment figures, is utterly unsustainable. The murders of *Chanson Douce* may be an extreme example of such class warfare, but they are its logical conclusion: an alternative social model, one which cares for young Louises and implants a certain *ethos* of Basic Trust in life before they can turn into vengeful adult murderers, is urgently required, Slimani suggests, if we are to manage the hectic changes of 21st-century globalisation.

### Ain't No Trust Nowhere: Louise

At the beginning, Myriam admires Louise's enthusiasm for games and role-playing: 'When she plays, she is animated by the total presence that only children possess'<sup>545</sup>. While this makes Louise *seem* like the perfect nanny for her children Mila and Adam, what *Chanson Douce* will reveal is that Louise is really a child herself, utterly incapable of the kind of adult sacrifice and self-marginalisation and 'responsible freedom' which, far from being the flipside of childhood 'freedom', is really the natural maturation and continuation of this early, playful liberty. Louise, by contrast, is stuck in a pre-ethical phase of moral development; the stories she tells the children are really all about her: 'From what dark lake, what black forest had she drawn these

---

<sup>541</sup> Leila Slimani, *Chanson Douce* (*Sweet Song*), (Paris: Gallimard, 2016), p. 29.

<sup>542</sup> See Chapter 1 of Hans Küng, *Was ich glaube* (*What I Believe*), (München: Piper, 2010) for a full discussion of Küngian *Grundvertrauen* in the context of both psychology and theology.

<sup>543</sup> See Hans Küng, *Wozu Weltethos? Religion und Ethik in Zeiten der Globalisierung* (*Whither Weltethos? Religion and Ethics in the Age of Globalisation*), (Freiburg: Herder, 2002), p. 21.

<sup>544</sup> See Hans Küng, *Projekt Weltethos*, (München: Piper, 1990).

<sup>545</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, p. 49.

cruel stories where the good die at the end...?’<sup>546</sup> When playing hide-and-seek with the children, she sadistically goes on for much too long:

Louise refuses to give up. She stays silent, her knees tucked up to her chin. The little girl’s feet kick gently against the wicker laundry basket. ‘Louise, I know you’re in there,’ she says laughing. All of a sudden, Louise leaps up with a violence that surprises Mila and throws her to the ground. Her head bangs against the tiles of the shower. Dazed, she starts crying, then facing a triumphant Louise, a Louise brought back to life and looking down on her from the height of her victory, her terror at having been abandoned morphs into a hysterical joy.<sup>547</sup>

Louise needs to be needed; everything she does for others - even the murders themselves in their own twisted way - is ultimately explicable in these calculated and calculating terms. Louise’s excessive attention to hygienic detail - another seeming feature of the ideal nanny - is in fact a symptom of a terrifying need for attention and esteem. Slimani offers glimpses into Louise’s earlier life of neglect, such as when the nanny to a neighbouring family, Wafa, cooks her a meal:

For the first time in her life, Louise sits on a couch and watches someone cook for her. Even as a child, she couldn’t remember anyone doing that just for her, just to please her. As a girl, she was forced to eat the leftovers from everyone else’s plates. She would be given luke-warm soup in the mornings, a soup which was reheated day after day until the last drop was finished. She had to eat all of it despite the grease which formed on the sides of the bowl, despite the taste of acrid tomato and despite all the half-eaten bones.<sup>548</sup>

Just as Louise was forced to play second fiddle to the rich children her own mother was nannying, so too is Louise’s daughter Stéphanie dragged into the same cycle of neglect:

Once, she dyed her hair red. Then she got her nose pierced. Then she started disappearing for weekends at a time. And then one day, she didn’t come back. Nothing was keeping her in Bobigny. Not the high school, which she had long since stopped going to. And not Louise.

[...] Stéphanie had disappeared. For her whole life she had had the impression that she got in the way. Her presence was a nuisance, [...] her laughing would wake the children Louise was looking after. Her big thighs, her generally heavy profile was asked to squash itself against the wall to let others pass in the narrow corridor of her existence. She was afraid of getting in the way, afraid of getting knocked over, afraid of occupying a chair that someone else might want. When she spoke, she struggled to express herself. When she laughed, others would take offence, no matter how innocent the laugh. She ended up developing a

---

<sup>546</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, p. 39.

<sup>547</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>548</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, p. 139.

gift for invisibility, and unsurprisingly, when the time came, without warning and as if she had always been destined for it, she vanished.<sup>549</sup>

Louise is not even unduly affected by Stéphanie's disappearance: 'On Monday morning, Louise is out the door, as always, before sunrise. She heads for the train, waits on the platform, heads up Rue Lafayette and then up Rue d'Hauteville. Louise is a soldier. She carries on...'<sup>550</sup> Louise's earlier beating of Stéphanie when the latter was, inevitably, having problems at school, reflects the appalling depths of the former's pathology:

Louise wanted to hit her, to shake her as hard as she possibly could. She would have liked to show her just how humiliating and effortful it was to raise a girl like her.

[... On the way home from the school meeting] they passed by the market, and Stéphanie slowed down to look at the stalls. Louise was overcome by a wave of hatred for her daughter's lack of responsibility, her adolescent selfishness. She grabbed her by the sleeve and pulled her with an unbelievable force and brutality. A blacker and blacker anger, more and more burning, invaded her. She wanted to bury her nails into her daughter's soft flesh.

As soon as had they returned home and Louise had closed the door behind her, Louise proceeded to punch her daughter senseless. She hit her in the back at first, sending her tumbling to the ground. Stéphanie, curled up in a ball, screamed helplessly. Louise kept going. Deploying all the force available to her, she rained an endless series of stinging blows down on Stéphanie's face. She pulled her by the hair, reaching around the arms which Stéphanie had drawn up instinctively to protect her head. She punched her in the eye, insulted her, scratched her until she bled. When she finally stopped moving, Louise spat in her face.<sup>551</sup>

Louise herself, even after Stéphanie's unsurprising departure, remains utterly obsessed with finding her own place in the world; Myriam and Paul offer her the chance to be needed, but as their children Mila and Adam grow older, the two working parents may come to need her less and less; when Louise's plan to make Myriam and Paul have a third baby fails, she can't take it anymore:

Louise is unable to find consolation with the children anymore. The stories she tells lose their verve, and Mila lets her know. The mythic creatures have lost their vivacity and splendour. Her characters seem to have lost the sense and purpose of their struggle; her stories now are long, meandering, broken, disordered, full of impoverished princesses, sick dragons, selfish soliloquies which the children don't understand, ramblings which test their patience.

---

<sup>549</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, pp. 90-91.

<sup>550</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, p. 91.

<sup>551</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, pp. 181-183.

[...] She [still] loves the way Adam turns back to her, to check that she is witnessing his progress, his joys, to show her that in all he does there is something destined for her, for her and her alone.

[...] *Someone has to die. Someone has to die so that we can be happy.* Louise is plagued by such morbid refrains as she walks. Words engulf her spirit which she has somehow not invented herself and which she is not sure she even understands. Her heart has hardened. The years have covered it in a thick and cold bark, so thick that she can hardly hear the heart beating inside. Nothing moves her at all anymore. She is forced to admit to herself that she is incapable of loving anything anymore. She has exhausted all the supplies of tenderness in this heart of hers...

[...] 'I will be punished for this,' she thinks to herself. 'I will be punished for not being able to love.'<sup>552</sup>

Louise, of course, has never been able to love, because she was herself never loved; in *Chanson Douce*, the first person who really tries to put herself in Louise's shoes is the murder investigator Nina Dorval ('Nina Dorval plunged her hands into Louise's putrid soul; she wanted to know *everything* about her'<sup>553</sup>); even Myriam is incapable of this leap of empathy until she sees Louise by chance one day in a distant *arrondissement*: 'The fact of seeing her on the street, by chance, in a part of town so far away from their routines, piqued a violent curiosity [in Myriam]. For the first time, she tried to imagine, viscerally, all that Louise was when she wasn't with them.'<sup>554</sup> Little wonder, then, that as Louise is gradually forced to confront the fact that Myriam and Paul dislike her and will not need her nannying services forever, 'her world seems to shrink, to fold in on itself, to weigh down on her with a crushing gravity. Paul and Myriam close doors in her face that she would like to break down. She has only one wish left: to make a world with them, to find her place in it, carve out a niche, a refuge, a warm corner.'<sup>555</sup>

Louise's Basic Mistrust in life manifests itself on the one hand as jealous rage against all those who have enjoyed this 'warm corner' of familial care or assumed that they might have this right (as Stéphanie did, by daring to look into those shop windows), and on the other as enmity towards all those who stand between her and her goal; Slimani presents Louise's murders, however, less as 'revenge' against Myriam and Paul than as a dubiously rationalised attempt to remove the perceived 'obstacles' to the new baby which might bring Louise back - still her only hope - into Myriam and Paul's inner circle. This also explains the otherwise inexplicable episode with the Ivorian nanny, Lydie, who dared to try to help Louise financially by offering her a contact with another family in need of a nanny:

'Well, what do you think? Shall I give them your number?'

Louise doesn't answer. She takes her anger with her and carries on her way, deaf and brutal. She cuts Lydie right off and, with a

---

<sup>552</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, p. 211, 213.

<sup>553</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, p. 226.

<sup>554</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, p. 218.

<sup>555</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, p. 190.

sudden violent swing, tips Lydie's pram upside down. The baby, woken as it crashed to the ground, started screaming.

[...] Lydie will tell this incredible story several times, never without swearing: 'That was no accident. She tipped the pram upside down on purpose.'<sup>556</sup>

Louise has already invested her final hopes for inclusion in Myriam and Paul; the idea that she might have to start over with new possible attachment figures is now simply unbearable. Basic Mistrust in life, Slimani argues, is in the end deadly, at least for its owner; no one can live indefinitely with such a cumulative burden of solitude and meaninglessness. The murders are tragic, and not themselves inevitable, but the underlying dynamic of lacking Basic Trust in life can indeed manifest itself in murderous ways, precisely because those starved of such trust will resort to *anything*, including murder, if they perceive that it will contribute to the formation of such a stable attachment:

The baby obsession goes round and round in her head. It is all she can think about. This baby, which she will love madly, is the solution to all her problems. It will shut the shrews in the square up, keep her horrible landlord at bay, protect her place in the kingdom. She convinces herself that Myriam and Paul do not have enough time for each other. That Mila and Adam are an obstacle to the new baby's arrival. That it's their fault if the couple haven't recovered their old intimacy. Their demands have exhausted the poor couple, Adam's light sleep keeps interrupting their embraces. If they weren't always getting in the way, being annoying, begging for tenderness, Paul and Myriam would be able to get on with making Louise a baby. She desires this baby with a fanatical violence, the blindness of the possessed. She wants it as she has rarely wanted anything, to the point that it hurts, to the point of being willing to strangle, burn, annihilate anything that might get between her and the satisfaction of her desire.<sup>557</sup>

To the end, Louise is stuck in a pre-ethical phase of identity formation; she is utterly unable to escape the prison of her 'putrid' self because she never receives what she needs from the community around her: she passes directly from a childhood of neglect into an adulthood of insincere service without ever enjoying the 'qualitative freedom' of moral responsibility.

### The Real Drama: Bourgeois Blindness in the 21st Century

As interesting and relevant for our purposes as Slimani's portrait of Louise is, it would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that the real story of *Chanson Douce* is the failure of Myriam and Paul to diagnose and, if indeed possible, to treat Louise's desperate condition. Slimani, a wealthy young Parisian mother of Maghrebi descent (just like Myriam), has admitted that she was driven to write the novel by the 'tricky' experience

---

<sup>556</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, p. 202.

<sup>557</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, p. 203.

of hiring a nanny herself.<sup>558</sup> By reversing the racial stereotypes (a white nanny for an Arab mother), Slimani focuses the reader's attention on the underlying psychological issues of class relations in contemporary France and, by analogy, around the world: everywhere one finds relations of economic dependence, one finds the same relationship between servants and their masters: the real power of the economically advantaged is a psychological power of not having to engage emotionally and to develop a common *ethos* with those who serve them. The naturalness of this arrangement is what bothers Slimani: she even seems to admit that a young couple with children is inevitably going to resort to treating the nanny as a means to a higher end. Myriam and Paul cannot reasonably be expected to fill the enormous attachment void in Louise's life: it is too late and too artificial to expect Myriam and Paul, or perhaps anyone, to 'need' Louise in the way she so obviously needs to be needed (and which has nothing whatsoever to do with her nannying abilities). And yet, Slimani asks, what is a young middle-class married French couple in the second decade of the 21st Century to do before the nanny-robots come online, and while both parents want to realise themselves professionally? On the one hand, Slimani is merciless in her critique of Myriam's professional selfishness:

She had always rejected the idea that her children could be an obstacle to her success, her freedom, acting like an anchor dropping to the bottom of the ocean and dragging her drowned face through the mud. The realisation [that this was indeed the case] initially plunged her into a profound state of sadness; she found the whole business unfair, and terribly frustrating. She had realised that she could never again live without the feeling of being incomplete, of doing one thing or the other badly, of sacrificing part of her life for the profit of another. She had made an existential drama of the whole thing, refusing to give up her dream of an ideal motherhood.<sup>559</sup>

On the other, however, when Paul's mother Sylvie criticises Myriam for failing to put her children first, Slimani is not exactly on Sylvie's side either:

Everyone had been drinking. Far too much. Myriam, sentimental as always, had hoped to find in Sylvie a sympathetic ear. She complained about never seeing her children, suffering from this frenetic existence where no one gave her anything on a plate. But Sylvie showed her no sympathy whatsoever. She didn't put her hand on Myriam's shoulder. On the contrary, she launched a full-scale attack on her daughter-in-law. Her weaponry had been sharpened in advance, ready to be used when the opportunity presented itself. Sylvie reproached her for devoting too much time to her [legal] career, even though she herself had worked right through Paul's childhood and always boasted of her independence. She accused her of being irresponsible, selfish. She counted out loud the number of business trips Myriam had made while Adam was sick and while [music producer] Paul was busy finishing an album. It was her

---

<sup>558</sup> Leila Slimani, 'Leila Slimani parle de son roman *Chanson Douce*', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ftDYhYlqpM>, 9/9/2016 (accessed 27/5/2017).

<sup>559</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, p. 44.

fault, she said, if the children were unbearable, tyrannical, capricious. Her fault and Louise's too, this cheap nanny, this substitute mother on whom Myriam, out of complacency and cowardice, relied. Myriam burst into tears. Paul, stunned, said nothing. Sylvie raised her arms and repeated: 'Now she's crying! She's crying and it's pitiable because she's incapable of hearing the truth.'

[...] Not an instant was spared on leniency or tenderness. Not a single piece of advice was handed down from mother to mother, woman to woman.<sup>560</sup>

If a certain aggressively self-centred brand of feminism is not admissible to the World Ethos club, Slimani is at least sympathetic to the idea that women - indeed, all people - should have the chance to make their own unique contribution to humanity; no one should be forced to define their lives in terms of domestic service to other people. Slimani's own craft - literature - may improve the lives of millions, but it requires difficult and unavoidable compromises in one's everyday life<sup>561</sup>; a writer cannot live *exclusively* for her children if she wants to maintain a professional commitment to her craft. A healthy balance between family and career is an art, not a science: the subjective need for attachment faced by every young human being is absolute, not necessarily requiring infinite *temporal* sacrifices but in principle an infinite *readiness* for sacrifice on the part of parents. Myriam's problem, Slimani argues, the one which she refuses to confront and which ultimately leads her to feign ignorance of Louise's deep psychological problems, is that she is herself the victim of overly aggressive feminist propaganda: it is simply not true that children are 'no obstacle', or ought to be no obstacle, to professional engagement outside the home. A parent, by any healthy definition of the term, must be psychologically prepared to sacrifice *everything*, even his career if necessary, for his children; the illusion that one can 'have one's cake and eat it too' thanks to human or robot outsourcing leads to children who will never develop a sense of Basic Trust in life, or at least, not through *you* (in Küng's more theological language, 'how can a person experience what it means to be accepted by God if she has never been accepted by a single human being?'<sup>562</sup>). Until one has reached such a state of spiritual maturity and readiness for sacrifice, the author of *Chanson Douce* suggests subtly but powerfully for her (first and foremost) Western audience, one should probably avoid the business of child-rearing altogether. Women raised like Louise are much worse than women raised like Myriam, but Myriam (and Paul) did not have ideal childhoods either; while the neglect they faced was nothing like as absolute as that of Louise, Paul's mother Sylvie is portrayed as an idealistic *soixante-huitarde*, stuck in what Martin Amis has memorably described as the 'first trimester'<sup>563</sup> of female liberation:

She hates seeing what her son has become - 'he was such a free little boy, do you remember?' - a man living under the yoke of his wife, a slave of her vanity and her appetite for money. She believed, for a long time,

---

<sup>560</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, pp. 131-132.

<sup>561</sup> See, for example, Martha Nussbaum on this subject: Martha Nussbaum, 'The Fragility of Goodness', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWfK1E4L--c&t=341s>, 29/9/2011 (accessed 24/5/2017) for a female academic's frank assessment of the challenges of working motherhood.

<sup>562</sup> Hans Küng, *Was bleibt: Kerngedanken (What Remains)*, (München: Piper, 2013), p. 25.

<sup>563</sup> See Martin Amis, *The Pregnant Widow*, (Jonathan Cape, 2010).

in a revolution led by both sexes, out of which a very different world was to be born than the one her grandchildren were now inhabiting. A world where there would be time to live.<sup>564</sup>

For Sylvie, 'liberation' means liberation from moral responsibility, from living *for* others. This may be the natural and justified cry of the oppressed creature, but it is a long way from the horizon of spiritual perfection, and still a substantial distance from any recognisable 'World Ethos'. Formal autonomy may indeed be an utterly necessary condition for human moral self-realisation, but it is far from sufficient; Louise and Sylvie develop a 'profound enmity' for each other partly because they are rivals in a self-centred universe; Sylvie's hopes for Paul - an extension of her own hopes for herself - have more in common with Louise's beatings of Stéphanie than one might at first think: they are both the natural result of a failure to consider one's children as morally autonomous beings in need, first and foremost, of stable attachment figures. Sylvie's twisted logic of 'liberation' fails to account for the real source of Paul's need for autonomy.

Paul comes out of *Chanson Douce* as well as anyone; he certainly senses that something is deeply wrong with Louise before Myriam does, and that his parents' problems, and indeed his own, are mild by comparison. Still, his relationship with his job remains utterly self-centred, based not on any ethic of service to humanity, but simply on his own liberation from structures of perceived domination:

Paul is happy. His life, for once, seems to be keeping pace with his appetite, with his mad energy, his *joie de vivre*. The boy who always sought the open spaces [of personal freedom] can now finally stretch his legs. In the space of a few months, his career had taken real liftoff, and for the first time in his life he was doing exactly what he wanted. He no longer spent his days in the service of others, following orders and keeping his mouth shut with hysterical producers or spoilt singers.<sup>565</sup>

When it comes to the responsibilities of fatherhood, Paul admits to himself that he wasn't ready for them, but from somewhere, probably from several generations deep in his genealogy, he finds the courage to live with them, more or less:

All he wanted was to go back home, be free, do some more living; he had not lived enough and he had realised this sad fact too late. The robes of fatherhood seemed to him both too big and too sombre.

But it was done now, he couldn't say that he had had enough of the whole thing. The children were there, loved, adored, their importance to him never called into question, but a certain doubt had insinuated itself all around him. The children, their smell, their love for him, all this moved him in a way he could barely describe. Sometimes he wished he could be a kid with them, come down to their level, melt into their childhood. Something had died in him, and it wasn't just his youth or his carefree side. He wasn't useless anymore. There were people who needed him, and he was going to have to get along with that. In becoming a father,

---

<sup>564</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, p. 133.

<sup>565</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, p. 119.



he had acquired principles and certainties, things he had sworn he would never have. His generosity had become relative. His passions had waned. His universe was smaller.<sup>566</sup>

In his dealings with Louise, Paul suffers from slightly less guilt than Myriam, which means he is both more generous - he invites her to dinner, teaches her to swim on the family holiday and so on - but also slightly less blind to her pathologies and less willing to give her the benefit of the doubt as she begins to reveal her true self. A week with his parents should be enough to throw Louise's deep instability into stark relief:

Paul doesn't dare say it to his wife, but that night, he feels relieved. Since they had arrived here, a weight seemed to have been lifted from his chest. Half-awake, numb with cold, he thinks of their return to Paris. He imagines their apartment like an aquarium invaded by a toxic algal bloom, a grave where the air would never circulate again...<sup>567</sup>

In the end, however, Louise is just too damned convenient:

Upon their return, these dark ideas are soon forgotten. In the living room, Louise has left a bouquet of dahlias. Dinner is ready, the sheets are crisp and clean. After a week in freezing rustic beds eating *ad hoc* meals at the kitchen table, they are happy to recover their family comforts. It would be impossible, they think, to do without her. They react like spoilt children, domestic cats.<sup>568</sup>

Paul does not deserve to pay for such character shortcomings with the murder of his innocent children, but the line is a straight one: if he had not lied to himself about what he really already knew, or should have known, about Louise, his children would still be alive.

### *Chanson Douce* and a World Ethos

Leila Slimani's novel offers no easy answers for 21st-century middle-class parents; it may be legitimate for both parents to want to pursue careers and contribute to society outside the home, but the outsourcing of childcare - not of daycare in the healthy, part-time, prosocial sense of a kindergarten, but of the kind of care in and around the home normally considered the province of parents themselves - is essentially portrayed as unnatural and unhealthy for everyone concerned, not least for the children. To some extent, technology may soon make the whole business easier, but the deeper dynamics of mistrust across class lines, so skilfully portrayed by Slimani in *Chanson Douce*, will remain, and not just in France; as factories close or are turned over to the robots, one context where the managerial and working classes are still forced to interact with each other, the world over, is and will remain

---

<sup>566</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, pp. 121-122.

<sup>567</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, p. 135.

<sup>568</sup> Slimani, *Chanson Douce*, p. 135.

the nannyng one. Myriam and Paul do not come out of their examination in *Chanson Douce* at all well, but the power of the novel lies in the fact that they are, in many respects, average to above-average members of their cohort: they have a guilty conscience about the whole thing, but instead of rising to meet the moral challenge that Louise presents, they prefer to take the easy and natural road of dehumanising her and placing the interests of their children, and ultimately their own interests, above her equally human needs; when Louise has finally shown herself beyond all doubt to be in need of serious psychiatric help, Paul reminds Myriam that 'she is our employee, not our friend', and the convenient exploitation continues.

A 'World Ethos' surely entails leadership in the sense of 'personal care', as *Weltethos* donor Karl Schlecht is fond of repeating; dialogue, rather than leaving each other alone with our problems, seems like the recipe for peace and stability. *Chanson Douce*, however, makes palpable the fact that money can, if we are not very, very careful, buy temporary insulation from the problems of others, even of those with whom we work most closely. The world is full of Louises, densely dotted with those who have never enjoyed the privilege of developing a relationship of Basic Trust with reality. The extent of what is required to right this wrong in each individual case is conveniently underestimated by those with projects, such as career and/or childrearing, which they not unreasonably consider as more important. But should people like Louise therefore simply be written off, or can the rest of us somehow shoulder the burdens of initiation into Basic Trust? If Louise and millions like her really need the parent they never had, where might we find all these parents? How might we break the chain of abuse and neglect which Louise passed down to her daughter Stéphanie? And with what policies - a Basic Income as a bridge to Basic Trust perhaps? - should we care for such Louises in the meantime? *Chanson Douce* rightly asks more questions of a future World Ethos than it is able to answer. All we can say for sure is that Louise was not fit to look after those kids, and that Myriam and Paul were themselves too self-centred to see it. Ultimately, Louise had more in common with the parents of the children she murdered than is comfortable for any of the middle-class Westerners and non-Westerners who might recognise themselves in Myriam or Paul to admit.

## 21. Good Stories Want to be True: Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat* and a World Ethos for Global Business

### Introduction

*When you have a platform, use it for Truth; it won't last forever.*

Anonymous

Leaders are often confronted with strong temptations to serve other interests than the truth. Intention thus becomes the hallmark of moral leadership: rhetorical skills deployed in the service of legitimate interests may also be prized and respected in leaders, but never at the expense of a fundamental commitment to truthfulness summarised in the old journalistic adage: 'When the facts change, I change my mind; what do you do?' The absence of such a baseline spirit of truthfulness among the leaders of an organisation renders trust, both in the organisation and in the individuals composing it, impossible.

The work of Hans Küng on truthfulness, trust and the idea of a World Ethos pushes beyond both philosophical jargon and managerial platitudes to arrive at the heart of the question of the legitimacy of narrative: all spiritual traditions worth the name, whether 'religious' or otherwise, foster a spirit of 'Basic Trust in life' (*Grundvertrauen* or *Lebensvertrauen*) which liberates the individual to trust in the outcome of genuine, free intellectual inquiry.<sup>569</sup> Troubled Australasian rugby league football star Kevin Locke offers a somewhat less well-lettered but nevertheless profound summary of this spiritual transformation: 'I'm not here to preach or anything. It's just about being honest to myself.'<sup>570</sup> Comedian Ricky Gervais has offered a similar summary of his philosophy of comedy: 'The truth doesn't hurt.'<sup>571</sup> People who cultivate a disposition of honesty will still disagree with each other over given facts, or over the interpretation or narrativisation of those facts, but discourse between them will not descend to incivility or violence as long as both sides are convinced of the sincerity and commitment to truthfulness of their interlocutor. The erosion of this trust sours the public square; putting a spirit or *ethos* of honesty back into global public life, and pushing beyond the superficial logic of 'Corporate Social Responsibility' in the private sector to embed a spirit of truthfulness in the day-to-day running of corporations, is a major priority for the *Weltethos* project as a whole as it seeks to push beyond Küng's best-known 1993 *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* and 2009 *Global Economic Ethic Manifesto* to reach a more narrative conception of the project itself, in which the legalistic, consensus-driven, CSR-friendly logic of the *Declaration* cedes primacy to the cultivation of Basic Trust in life.

---

<sup>569</sup> See Hans Küng *Was ich glaube (What I Believe)*, (München: Piper, 2010).

<sup>570</sup> See Kevin Locke, 'Kevin Locke on his NRL Comeback', *One News (TVNZ)*, 21/3/17 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkOkYUZIWy0>, accessed 23/3/17).

<sup>571</sup> See Ricky Gervais, *Inside the Actors Studio: Ricky Gervais*, (New York: CABLEready, 2009).

Nikolai Gogol's short story *The Overcoat* (1842) illustrates this *ethos* of truthfulness both thematically and in its own narrative structure, thereby serving as a lesson in managerial rhetoric from the annals of World Literature for all those engaged in the development of a World Ethos for global business and management. The hero of *The Overcoat*, Akaky Akakievich, is a victim of his superiors' self-deceiving narratives; Gogol paints a picture of mid-19th-century St. Petersburg as a world in which most managers lack Basic Trust in life, making relationships of trust and honesty between leaders and their subordinates impossible. *The Overcoat* satirises the shortcomings of a managerial class which lacks professional fortitude and prefers instead the false safety of existing hierarchies.

### Gogol's *The Overcoat* and the Challenge of a World Ethos for Global Business

From the very beginning of *The Overcoat*, Gogol targets the absurd sensitivity of St. Petersburg's élites, depicting a pervasive culture of mistrust and status anxiety which goes so far as to prevent him from telling his story in full detail: 'In the department of -- but it is better not to mention the department. There is nothing more irritable than departments, regiments, courts of justice, and, in a word, every branch of public service. Each individual attached to them nowadays thinks all society insulted in his own person.'<sup>572</sup> The hero of *The Overcoat*, Akaky Akakievich, is by contrast presented as secure and self-assured - if not in his social relations, then at least in his job as a titular councillor:

It would be difficult to find another man who lived so entirely for his duties. It is not enough to say that Akaky laboured with zeal: no, he laboured with love. In his copying, he found a varied and agreeable employment. Enjoyment was written on his face: some letters were even favourites with him; and when he encountered these, he smiled, winked, and worked with his lips, till it seemed as though each letter might be read in his face, as his pen traced it. If his pay had been in proportion to his zeal, he would, perhaps, to his great surprise, have been made even a councillor of state. But he worked, as his companions, the wits, put it, like a horse in a mill.<sup>573</sup>

Insofar as his professional zeal is exclusively for a mechanical task rather than a managerial one, Akaky can scarcely be considered a 'leader' in any conventional sense; in his utter disregard for status, remuneration and popularity, however, he embodies the spirit of dedication which is, Gogol ruefully argues, utterly lacking in St. Petersburg's public life. In his purity of focus on his job, Akaky becomes the victim of those around and above him, who see in him a form of vague and inexplicable threat:

The young officials laughed at and made fun of him, so far as their official wit permitted; told in his presence various stories concocted about him, and about his landlady, an old woman of seventy; declared that she beat

---

<sup>572</sup> Nikolai Gogol, *The Overcoat*, East of the Web Short Stories (<http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/Over.shtml>), accessed 27/6/17 (original publication 1842), sec. 1, para. 1.

<sup>573</sup> Gogol, *The Overcoat*, sec. 3, para. 1.

him; asked when the wedding was to be; and strewed bits of paper over his head, calling them snow. But Akaky Akakievich answered not a word, any more than if there had been no one there besides himself. It even had no effect upon his work: amid all these annoyances he never made a single mistake in a letter. But if the joking became wholly unbearable, as when they jogged his hand and prevented his attending to his work, he would exclaim, "Leave me alone! Why do you insult me?" And there was something strange in the words and the voice in which they were uttered. There was in it something which moved to pity; so much that one young man, a new-comer, who, taking pattern by the others, had permitted himself to make sport of Akaky, suddenly stopped short, as though all about him had undergone a transformation, and presented itself in a different aspect.<sup>574</sup>

While his fellow officials remain enslaved to their wider appetites, Akaky himself, workplace bullying aside, enjoys the simple pleasures of a happy professional life:

Even at the hour when the grey St. Petersburg sky had quite dispersed, and all the official world had eaten or dined, each as he could, in accordance with the salary he received and his own fancy; when all were resting from the departmental jar of pens, running to and fro from their own and other people's indispensable occupations, and from all the work that an uneasy man makes willingly for himself, rather than what is necessary, [...] Akaky Akakievich indulged in no kind of diversion. No one could ever say that he had seen him at any kind of evening party. Having written to his heart's content, he lay down to sleep, smiling at the thought of the coming day -- of what God might send him to copy on the morrow.

[...] Thus flowed on the peaceful life of the man, who, with a salary of four hundred rubles, understood how to be content with his lot.<sup>575</sup>

The need for a new overcoat to confront the harsh St. Petersburg winter, however, breaks into Akaky's idyll, and forces him to make financial sacrifices in order to be able to maintain his routine. The overcoat becomes a parallel source of meaning for Akaky, a game within the wider game of his professional life:

To tell the truth, it was a little hard for him at first to accustom himself to these deprivations; but he got used to them at length, after a fashion, and all went smoothly. He even got used to being hungry in the evening, but he made up for it by treating himself, so to say, in spirit, by bearing ever in mind the idea of his future cloak. From that time forth his existence seemed to become, in some way, fuller, as if he were married, or as if some other man lived in him, as if, in fact, he were not alone, and some pleasant friend had consented to travel along life's path with him, the friend being no other than the cloak, with thick wadding and a strong lining incapable of wearing out. He became more lively, and even his

---

<sup>574</sup> Gogol, *The Overcoat*, sec. 2, para. 2.

<sup>575</sup> Gogol, *The Overcoat*, sec. 4, para. 2; sec. 5, para. 1.

character grew firmer, like that of a man who has made up his mind, and set himself a goal. From his face and gait, doubt and indecision, all hesitating and wavering traits disappeared of themselves. Fire gleamed in his eyes, and occasionally the boldest and most daring ideas flitted through his mind; why not, for instance, have marten fur on the collar? The thought of this almost made him absent-minded. Once, in copying a letter, he nearly made a mistake, so that he exclaimed almost aloud, "Ugh!" and crossed himself.<sup>576</sup>

While Akaky's old coat had been the butt of his colleagues' jokes, the real pleasure of the new coat lay in the fact that it was 'warm and well-fitting', not so much in the aesthetic judgments or esteem of his colleagues; although they feign excitement and insist on celebrating Akaky's new purchase together, it is clear that this is no more than a new excuse for a get-together around the cardtable: Akaky himself is reluctant to go, awkward and abandoned while there, and seeks an excuse to head home early, whereupon he is promptly robbed of his new coat by bandits in the street.

Seeking redress for this disastrous injustice, Akaky is advised to bypass the Police and to contact a local government figure known only as the 'prominent personage', a man who will become, in many respects (and certainly for our purposes) the central character in the story, a representative of an entire managerial class in mid-19-century Russia which Gogol sought to satirise:

What was the exact official position of the prominent personage remains unknown to this day. The reader must know that the prominent personage had but recently become a prominent personage, having up to that time been only an insignificant person. Moreover, his present position was not considered prominent in comparison with others still more so. But there is always a circle of people to whom what is significant in the eyes of others is important enough. Moreover, he strove to increase his importance by sundry devices; for instance, he managed to have the inferior officials meet him on the staircase when he entered upon his service; no one was to presume to come directly to him, but the strictest etiquette must be observed; the collegiate recorder must make a report to the government secretary, the government secretary to the titular councillor, or whatever other man was proper, and all business must come before him in this manner. In Holy Russia all is thus contaminated with the love of imitation; every man imitates and copies his superior.<sup>577</sup>

In his dealings with Akaky, the 'prominent personage' epitomises the manager who is under pressure because he does not know what he is doing, or why:

His ordinary converse with his inferiors smacked of sternness, and consisted chiefly of three phrases: "How dare you?" "Do you know whom you are speaking to?" "Do you realise who stands before you?"

---

<sup>576</sup> Gogol, *The Overcoat*, sec. 11, para. 2.

<sup>577</sup> Gogol, *The Overcoat*, sec. 18, para. 1.

[...] Otherwise he was a very kind-hearted man, good to his comrades, and ready to oblige; but the rank of general threw him completely off his balance. On receiving any one of that rank, he became confused, lost his way, as it were, and never knew what to do. If he chanced to be amongst his equals he was still a very nice kind of man, a very good fellow in many respects, and not stupid; but the very moment that he found himself in the society of people but one rank lower than himself he became silent; and his situation aroused sympathy, the more so as he felt himself that he might have been making an incomparably better use of his time. In his eyes there was sometimes visible a desire to join some interesting conversation or group; but he was kept back by the thought, "Would it not be a very great condescension on his part? Would it not be familiar? and would he not thereby lose his importance?" And in consequence of such reflections he always remained in the same dumb state, uttering from time to time a few monosyllabic sounds, and thereby earning the name of the most wearisome of men.

[...] Akaky Akakievich, who was already imbued with a due amount of fear, became somewhat confused: and as well as his tongue would permit, explained, with a rather more frequent addition than usual of the word "that," that his cloak was quite new, and had been stolen in the most inhuman manner; that he had applied to him in order that he might, in some way, by his intermediation -- that he might enter into correspondence with the chief of police, and find the cloak.

For some inexplicable reason this conduct seemed familiar to the prominent personage. "What, my dear sir!" he said abruptly, "are you not acquainted with etiquette? Where have you come from? Don't you know how such matters are managed? You should first have entered a complaint about this at the court below: it would have gone to the head of the department, then to the chief of the division, then it would have been handed over to the secretary, and the secretary would have given it to me."

"But, your excellency," said Akaky Akakievitch, trying to collect his small handful of wits, and conscious at the same time that he was perspiring terribly, "I, your excellency, presumed to trouble you because secretaries -- are an untrustworthy race."

"What, what, what!" said the important personage. "Where did you get such courage? Where did you get such ideas? What impudence towards their chiefs and superiors has spread among the young generation!" The prominent personage apparently had not observed that Akaky Akakievich was already in the neighbourhood of fifty. If he could be called a young man, it must have been in comparison with someone who was seventy. "Do you know to whom you speak? Do you realise who stands before you? Do you realise it? Do you realise it? I ask you!" Then he stamped his foot and raised his voice to such a pitch that it would have frightened even a different man than Akaky Akakievich.<sup>578</sup>

---

<sup>578</sup> Gogol, *The Overcoat*, sec. 18, para. 2; sec. 19, para. 1; sec. 20, paras. 2-5.

Gogol then gives his story a self-conscious fantastic twist by bringing Akaky, dead from fever after losing his only warm coat, back to life as a ghost haunting the streets of St. Petersburg, grabbing overcoats from wealthy shoulders and finally from the terrified 'prominent personage' himself. Gogol as always places doubts around the actual facts; but by focusing on the conscience of the 'prominent personage', he arrives at the deeper truth or *ethos* of human existence rather than remaining trapped in the outward symbols of rank, status, power and money: the 'prominent personage' not only feels remorse over Akaky's death, but also and especially over the dehumanising way in which he spoke to him. This conscience, however, is weak, and quickly fades; Gogol's device of turning Akaky into a ghost grabbing at the shoulders of the 'prominent personage' serves as a 'teaching moment', both for the 'prominent personage' himself and for the intended reader (many of whom would have recognised themselves in Gogol's satire). The roots or 'sprouts' of conscience are there, but must be cultivated if they are to blossom into an *ethos* capable of assuming responsibility for the world as a whole:

But we have totally neglected that certain prominent personage who may really be considered as the cause of the fantastic turn taken by this true history. First of all, justice compels us to say that after the departure of poor, annihilated Akaky Akakievitch he felt something like remorse. Suffering was unpleasant to him, for his heart was accessible to many good impulses, in spite of the fact that his rank often prevented his showing his true self. As soon as his friend had left his cabinet, he began to think about poor Akaky Akakievich. And from that day forth, poor Akaky Akakievitch, who could not bear up under an official reprimand, recurred to his mind almost every day. The thought troubled him to such an extent that a week later he even resolved to send an official to him, to learn whether he really could assist him; and when it was reported to him that Akaky Akakievich had died suddenly of fever, he was startled, hearkened to the reproaches of his conscience, and was out of sorts for the whole day.

Wishing to divert his mind in some way, and drive away the disagreeable impression, he set out that evening for one of his friends' houses, where he found quite a large party assembled. What was better, nearly every one was of the same rank as himself, so that he need not feel in the least constrained. This had a marvellous effect upon his mental state. He grew expansive, made himself agreeable in conversation, in short, he passed a delightful evening. After supper he drank a couple of glasses of champagne -- not a bad recipe for cheerfulness, as every one knows. The champagne inclined him to various adventures; and he determined not to return home, but to go and see a certain well-known lady of German extraction, Karolina Ivanovna, a lady, it appears, with whom he was on a very friendly footing.<sup>579</sup>

The purpose of Gogol's ghost device is to make manifest that the *ethos* which shines out of the narrative is the only truly reliable component: while almost all the facts of the story (which 'department', which 'prominent personage', which 'ghosts' etc.) are

---

<sup>579</sup> Gogol, *The Overcoat*, sec. 24, paras 1-2.



hazy, the author's Basic Trust in the moral dimension of life, and in a sense of justice transcending the immediate consequences of each character's actions, opens up an entire dimension of 'spiritual humanism' (in Tu Weiming's idiom) into which the reader is generously invited. The facts of the story, as unreliably narrated by Gogol, are only ever vehicles with which to hint, by their very arbitrariness, at this deeper realm of truth:

This occurrence made a deep impression upon him. He even began to say: "How dare you? do you realise who stands before you?" less frequently to the under-officials, and if he did utter the words, it was only after having first learned the bearings of the matter. But the most noteworthy point was, that from that day forward the apparition of the dead *tchinovnik* ceased to be seen. Evidently the prominent personage's cloak just fitted his shoulders; at all events, no more instances of his dragging cloaks from people's shoulders were heard of.<sup>580</sup>

While Akaky's ghost 'disappears' when it finds the overcoat it is looking for, the ghost of his robber is forced to wander the streets of St. Petersburg, and is last seen 'directing its steps apparently towards the Obukhoff bridge'<sup>581</sup>, a lost soul unable to find satisfaction for the injustices it has suffered and caused because it lacks the Basic Trust in life which Akaky in some measure enjoyed, and of which his colleagues and superiors were jealous.

### Learning from Akaky, Learning from Gogol: *The Overcoat* and Humanistic Management

Akaky is a product of Gogol's imagination; whether such a person could really exist is as moot as the question whether the ghosts in the story could really exist. Gogol's rhetoric in *The Overcoat* is one of attempted honesty in a world where facts - even the most basic facts in the story - cannot be trusted. What we can say with certainty, however, is that while Akaky lacks the social skills and interests to be a conventional 'leader', the purity of his devotion to his job and his couldn't-hurt-a-fly demeanour are an example within his organisation which Gogol patently wishes were more common. Akaky does not deserve the bullying which befalls him; the author defends him where he cannot defend himself (Akaky's 'ghost', indeed, behaves in a way which Akaky the man would not have found possible, and is an obvious reflection of the author's own desire for social justice). The 'prominent personage', meanwhile, stands in for the bullying and hierarchical mainstream managerial culture of Gogol's day, into which he was hoping to introduce humanistic reform via a kind of narrative *reductio ad absurdum* of its guiding principles.

The rhetoric used to achieve this reform is not one of twisting or otherwise evaluating the facts, but of transcending them entirely; Gogol is asking us to trust him and his story on another level, leading us into a moral dimension where material facts and consequences lose their absolute authority. Gogol's story 'wants to be true', not in the shallow sense of psychological or anthropological measurability (or even

---

<sup>580</sup> Gogol, *The Overcoat*, sec. 25, para. 3.

<sup>581</sup> Gogol, *The Overcoat*, sec. 26, para. 1.

plausibility), but in a normative sense: paradoxically, only a person who is not attached to the outcome of certain facts, like Akaky in his professional devotion to his craft, can be trusted not to twist those facts in her own interests. While Gogol's rhetoric in *The Overcoat* may look like a relativist assault on truth, it is in fact its exact opposite: managers who are free from status anxiety and committed to the causes they serve, without regard for their own positions, are, like Gogol himself, going to be able to generate credible narratives for their staff, whatever the given facts of the situation.

The implications of this 'humanistic turn' for business ethics and the philosophy of management are tremendous: no CSR-style value catalogue can ever replace the ongoing, daily willingness to transcend the facts and their consequences. This is precisely why more than a *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* or *Global Economic Ethic Manifesto*, or even UN Global Compact and Sustainable Development Goals, will always be needed: no outward consensus on values, however eloquently crafted, can ever hope to replace the dynamic inner *ethos* of truly humanistic management. K ng himself makes this very clear in *What I Believe* (2013); Tu Weiming's embrace of 'spiritual humanism' points in a similar direction: at best, the 'Global Ethic Project' (K ng's preferred translation of his *Projekt Weltethos*) of the 1990s and early 2000s - the attempt to build an outward consensus on values as 'facts' common to human societies everywhere - is itself a kind of Gogolian *reductio ad absurdum* of Western CSR culture, a necessary stepping-stone to a deeper, humanistic (rather than merely pseudoscientific) 'World Ethos' rooted in Basic Trust in life.

Rather than embracing the scientific paradigm (researching what 'works' for businesses, what makes them 'more successful' etc.), management philosophy ought instead to adopt, if we are to follow Gogol's example (and that of Tu Weiming), a humanistic paradigm of *self-cultivation* as its guide. Just as humanity's best hope for saving the environment may lie precisely in overcoming the idea that the environment must at all costs be saved<sup>582</sup>, so too may management be liberated from the tyranny of factual outcomes by a humanistic spirit which takes the idea of a 'World Ethos' seriously for its own sake, and seeks to promote it, not via CSR-style alchemy formulae, but by engagement with narratives like Gogol's *The Overcoat*. Managers capable of such deep humanistic insight into the reality of the moral dimension of human life (the 'soul of the world', as Roger Scruton refers to it<sup>583</sup>) will, like Gogol himself, be believed even when the facts are not clear, precisely because they have understood that the meaning of life is not to be found in facts, but rather in the way one deals with them. Leadership consists, first and foremost, in embodying this humanism; the person ready to sacrifice herself to the facts is the person most to be trusted with presenting them in the first place. Intention is everything: the firm or individual who really 'believes in nothing' besides profit will never really be believed; one is free to decide that trusting the fear of producers (i.e. the fear of losing customers) even when you know they are lying - in a lazy word, capitalism - suffices to hold a society together, but one is also free to doubt it, or at least to prefer a

---

<sup>582</sup> I explore the environmentalism theme in the context of World Ethos debates - a notable absence from the current volume - in 'Pity for Stones? The New Confucian Ecological Turn and the Global Ethic Project', *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 7 (2): 2017, pp. 25-34. doi:10.18848/2154-8633/CGP/v07i02/25-34.

<sup>583</sup> See Roger Scruton, *The Soul of the World*, (Princeton University Press, 2014).

reorientation of management education away from outcome-driven paranoia towards self-cultivation and inner freedom from immediate consequences.

That such a reorientation may actually liberate productive energies in the manner of Akaky Akakievich (compared with his status-anxious and less productive colleagues) and promote economic growth is of course a second-order question; even to ask it is to miss the deeper humanistic point of a 'world ethos for global management'. But like Akaky with his overcoat, there is no shame whatsoever in enjoying 'warm and well-made' things; Küng's 'World Ethos' and Tu's 'spiritual humanism' do not entail a vow of poverty. German concrete-pump mogul Karl Schlecht has 'put his money where his mouth is' with multi-million-dollar investments in both Küng's Weltethos Institut at the University of Tübingen and Tu Weiming's World Ethics Institute at Peking University, both out of an intrinsic desire to promote a culture of *Liebe zum Tun* ('loving what you do') among new generations of managers and also out of a deep conviction that his own success in business and happiness in life was owed to his Akaky-like passion for his work. Many question Schlecht's entrepreneurially aggressive, formulaic approach to trust-building, and his general zealotry in trying to unlock the power of a World Ethos for globalised business, but as an employee, one can live with such excesses because the purity of the leader's vision is admirable: by investing most of his vast fortune in a foundation to serve the public good, Schlecht can at least be said to have walked the talk of his humanism. One may disagree with his means and methods - vociferously and daily - but the self-sacrificing (or at least money-sacrificing) transparency of his intention makes the disagreement bearable and the work rewarding.

*Of course* one hopes, *ceteris paribus*, as Schlecht himself firmly believes, that humanistic reform of management education and management practice will lead to increased productivity, but one need not believe it in order to believe that such reform is worthwhile for its own sake for individual human beings, independent of the effect on overall economic growth. Selling this idea to outcome-oriented companies and government agencies, however, requires a certain pragmatism and skill which the Weltethos Institut at the University of Tübingen, headed by Claus Dierksmeier<sup>584</sup>, and Tu Weiming's World Ethics Institute at Peking University are busy learning: on the one hand, the message is one of intrinsic, humanistic motivation for management decisions, but on the other, the cultures of most firms and organisations are so heavily outcome-oriented that a message which sounds too esoteric (like 'World Ethos' or 'spiritual humanism') may not get a second hearing.

In a certain sense, even the goal of diffusing a World Ethos for global business in the hope of improving the world economy, rather than focusing on the character development of the individual human beings who compose it, contradicts the idea of a World Ethos in the first place; Basic Trust in life transcends the entire realm of GDP figures and even of Human Capabilities Index indicators. Intention - or rather, the Gogolian transcendence of mere profane intention - can trump all the well-meaning, goal-oriented and scared energy in the world: this is the liberating thought, the vision of 'qualitative freedom'<sup>585</sup> at the heart of the World Ethos idea.

---

<sup>584</sup> See Dierksmeier's *Reframing Economic Ethics*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) for a discussion of humanistic reform of economics curricula.

<sup>585</sup> See Claus Dierksmeier, *Qualitative Freiheit (Qualitative Freedom)*, (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016).

## 22. Hollywood and Basic Trust: From *La La Land* and *Person of Interest* to *The Circle* and Beyond

### Introduction

Hans Küng's *Weltethos*, we have by now established, is an aspirational idea rather than a lowest-common-denominator consensus, but it need not, indeed must not, be formulated in exclusively lofty, highbrow terms; the misconception that it is an academic or theoretical construct has been a serious obstacle to the idea's diffusion. By contrast, and despite all ongoing accusations of racism and sexism levelled against it, the American entertainment industry's extraordinary capacity, unrivalled in the history of humanity, to speak to millions of people across linguistic and cultural boundaries is frequently interpreted in highbrow circles as a philistine focus on the kitsch of supply and demand rather than for what it, at its best, has been, is, and could still be: a wildly successful purveyor of Basic Trust in life. The goal of this short chapter is not to develop any thesis about Hollywood in general or *Weltethos* in particular, but simply to show that three contemporary, mainstream American cultural productions - the Oscar-winning film *La La Land*, the popular television series *Person of Interest* and the adaptation to the big screen of Dave Eggers' *The Circle* - echo predecessors like *Casablanca* and *Sleepless in Seattle* in turning the theme of romantic or erotic love, so peerlessly cultivated by Hollywood, into a vehicle for contemporary meditations on the meaning of Basic Trust.

### *La La Land*: The Bittersweet Reality of Globalised Romance

Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) in *Casablanca* sacrificed himself for a woman; Sebastian Wilder (Ryan Gosling) in *La La Land* does not sacrifice himself exactly - he follows his own dream of becoming a jazz club owner - but his obvious debt to his former lover, the now famous globetrotting actress Mia Dolan (Emma Stone) - leaves her, and him, deep in the midst of life when she visits the oft-discussed jazz club years later with her new husband (before returning home to their baby-sat children).<sup>586</sup> The theatrics of *La La Land* aside, the message of the film for a generation of itinerant, internationally mobile 'gig economy' workers would seem to be this: the business of Basic Trust in life has gotten harder, not easier, with the multiplication of choice offered by intercontinental travel and the Internet. While middle-class individuals in developed countries have never had the business of 'pursuing their dreams' so easy, the cost of this 'freedom' is a tragic awareness that 'sacrifice' in the 21st Century often means staying true to one's own dreams rather than abandoning them in the interests of geography. Mia's decision to pursue an acting career in Paris leaves Sebastian to choose between: a) begging her to stay, and forcing her to abandon the very thing he loved and admired in her; b) following her, and losing the very thing that makes her love him; and c) staying behind, to become the man whose vision she had supported, cultivated and admired. To see him again, years later, and to see that the very vision they had discussed had become, to the letter, a physical

---

<sup>586</sup> Damien Chazelle, *La La Land*, (Summit Entertainment, 2016).

reality in the form of his jazz club ('Seb's'), was to remind her not only of a concrete path she could, in a parallel universe, have followed, but to open to her through one concrete 'parallel universe' the infinite possibilities of human fate. Rather than filling her with regret as such, the experience of Seb's, and of Sebastian himself, was to remind her that life was indeed bigger than both of them; their reunion was a justification of their choices, even if the dream of a parallel universe together with Sebastian remained utterly legitimate. This fantasy is not portrayed in *La La Land* as an act of unfaithfulness to her current husband, but as an inevitable outcome of a concatenation of circumstances, made possible by 21st-century globalisation, in which everyone has behaved as they should. While for Rick Blaine in *Casablanca* it is the Second World War which inevitably gets in the way of his plans with his love Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman), forcing him to remain true to her (and himself) by abandoning her, for the protagonists of *La La Land* it is globalisation itself which makes the task of maintaining a romantic relationship while remaining true to oneself impossible. The pair embrace the risks of a life apart - and in both cases (the jazz club owner and the actress) the fantastically high probability of failure - and give each other the emotional support, and ultimately the courage, to pursue the thing that they love without regard for their own interests in physical companionship.

Person of Interest: Tortured Soldiers Find Refuge in Each Other

*I'll pass - trust issues.*

Sameen Shaw

*I just couldn't bear it if anyone hurt you - I mean, besides me.*

Samantha Groves (Root)

*Root: There's no time like the present Sameen. Why are you so afraid to talk about your feelings?*

*Shaw: Feelings? I'm a sociopath, I don't have feelings.*

*Root: And I'm a reformed killer for hire. We're perfect for each other. You're gonna figure that out some day. [...] I never stopped looking for you.*

*Shaw: All the scars are from before... Samaritan's torture was more psychological.[...] When I was training with the [special forces], they taught us, if we were ever tortured, to take our minds somewhere else, some place safe.*

Root: *Where did you go?*

Shaw: *Nowhere. The training was bullshit. There was no safe place. No escape.*

Root: *Hey... Stay here with me.*

Shaw: *Oh I couldn't stand you when we first met. You wouldn't stop buggin' me. [...] When they had me, they put me through these tests, these 'simulations', over 7000 of 'em, and always with the same goal. To turn me against all of you. To kill you. [...] The simplest way to break someone is to rob them of their reality, and they did that well. I don't know if I'm calling the shots anymore. And neither do you. Seven thousand simulations. I killed a lot of people. But the one person I couldn't kill was you. That's why I killed myself, over and over again. And I'd rather do that here and now than to risk your life. [...] Do you know where we are? What they did to me? The torture? I told you I couldn't escape it. [...] But when things got to be too bad, there WAS one place I would go to in my mind. Here, with you. You were my safe place. But not anymore, I can't control [anything]. So the only thing I can control is this [draws gun to her own head].*

Root: *OK Shaw, play it your way [draws gun to her own head].*

Shaw: *What the hell are you doing?*

Root: *You can't live with me. I can't live without you. So if you die, I die too. [...] Actually Sameen, I've been hiding since I was twelve. This might be the first time I feel like I belong.<sup>587</sup>*

If Proust is right that 'reality is formed only in memory', the challenge of building Basic Trust in this reality would seem to require the active cultivation of positive memories. How on Earth is one to do this when one is imprisoned and subjected to direct, neurological, 21st-century torture, over and over again, for what seems like centuries? The victim of such torture in *Person of Interest*, Sameen Shaw (Sarah Shahi), finds an anchor in reality that she can trust in the form of Root (Amy Acker), a character also steeped in a history of torture; their love story comes to define the second half of the series as they battle together to halt the advance to world domination of the totalitarian surveillance system known as Samaritan.

Both Root and Shaw, as well as the erstwhile John Reese (Jim Caviezel), have chequered histories as contract killers before finding a renewed purpose in the

---

<sup>587</sup> Jonathan Nolan et al., *Person of Interest*, Warner Bros. Television, 2011-2016. See also [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hthg4Hy\\_80c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hthg4Hy_80c) for this quote.

service of programming genius Harold Finch (Michael Emerson), whose 'Machine' promises a more human approach to contemporary surveillance in which each individual life is accorded irreducible value. Along with other mainstream television successes such as *Prison Break*, the inviolable priority of family values over utilitarian concerns comes to define the 'good versus evil' narrative of the show; life lived in the service of numbers, in which individuals can and should be sacrificed to the greater cause, is revealed in all its dramatic intensity for what it always becomes: an excuse for blood and violence. *Person of Interest* places the characters in Harold's team in a constant series of dilemmas in which the interests of the individuals in the team are pitted against the wider context of the battle for supremacy between Samaritan and Harold's Machine: in short, risk losing the war against Samaritan, and risk a life of totalitarian slavery for everyone, but sacrifice individuals too easily in the hope of gaining a strategic advantage in the war, and you have already lost the very flame of humanism you are fighting to defend. In the end, Shaw's love for Root wins out: 'I never stopped looking for you,' she is able to affirm, even as Harold and the others had more or less given up.

Not unlike *House* a decade before it, *Person of Interest* achieves what has now become *de rigueur* in the American entertainment industry: portraying the excruciating worst of human existence in order dramatically to overcome it and to reaffirm that life - not mere lived days of pleasure but a readiness for sacrifice for others - is worth it for its own sake. Generations raised on a glut of information (which includes a glut of violence) cannot hope to build Basic Trust in life without confronting this violence directly and trying to understand and see beyond it. Other popular and innovative American series over the last decade, such as *True Detective*, also portray profoundly damaged characters fighting their way back to a meaning which is always found in, or rather through, concrete relationships with other human beings and the recovery of a willingness to sacrifice for them. The thirst for 'religion' in this sense remains as alive as ever, even among the millions of young people in developed countries who reject 'religious' labels; it is simply that the texts and stories provided by the Axial Age civilisations, for all their allegorical profundity, lack the appearance of relevance for generations raised on computer games and the horrifying, apocalyptic new possibilities - real or imaginary - of recent decades, from nuclear war to alien invasion, environmental destruction, genetic engineering, all-seeing surveillance and so on. The American entertainment industry - and indeed, the globalised, multimedialised entertainment industry of the future - has its work ahead of it, not to replace the religious wisdom of the past, but to update the message of Basic Trust in life common to the world's leading spiritual traditions, as identified by Hans Küng, for a century like none before it, in which Shaw's technological, centuries-long torture is a potential, imaginable part of the reality in which we all - if Hans Küng is right and if we are to realise our own highest natures as ethical beings<sup>588</sup> - must somehow learn to trust. Shaw's struggles with Samaritan and Harold's struggles to trust the Machine in *Person of Interest* are simply the latest iterations of humanity's never-ending struggle to establish and maintain Basic Trust in life itself in the face of changing technological and cultural circumstances.

---

<sup>588</sup> See Hans Küng, *Wozu Weltethos? Religion und Ethik in Zeiten der Globalisierung* (Freiburg: Herder, 2002), p. 21.

## The Circle: The Death of Privacy and the Survival of Basic Trust

The star firepower of Tom Hanks and Emma Watson is enlisted by Dave Eggers and company for the 2017 film adaptation of Eggers' novel *The Circle*, which portrays a Google-like company pursuing a goal of 'full transparency' via omnipresent surveillance. Circle boss Eamon Bailey (Hanks) and right-hand man Tom Stenton (Patton Oswalt) do not volunteer, however, to apply the advanced technology to themselves; the film explores the pair's relatively sophisticated, or at least modern, methods of manipulation of a predominantly young Circle workforce: the idea that people behave better when they are being watched, and that a world without secrets ('secrets are lies') is a world in which everyone is ultimately better off, is presented by the leadership as both axiomatic and urgently needed, not least because of the obvious benefits (economic, medical, judicial, perhaps even political) of such big data collection. The thought experiment in the film, however (a young German director Alex Schaad has taken on a similar theme in *The Invention of Trust*<sup>589</sup>), concerns the explicitly moral dimension of such 'transparency': does ethics not begin precisely with *private* self-cultivation, and is ethics not best understood, as it is by Peter Hitchens, as 'what one does when one thinks *no one* is looking'? 'Honesty' means something more than full transparency: it means honesty to oneself before honesty to others, and to the extent that we are emotional beings with emotional attachments, this may mean lying to others or otherwise strategising to protect the things we care about. All-seeing, all-measuring surveillance technology risks making this impossible, thereby making attachment to life as a whole impossible (by actively hindering the development of an independent personality with attachments to specific things - one is reminded here of Terry Eagleton's definition of 'culture' as 'what one is willing to die for'<sup>590</sup>). Eggers is adamant that advanced surveillance technology is here to stay, and that its benefits should not be understated, but he is equally clear that the limits of its humanistically beneficial and bearable application will simply have to be worked out as we go along. No one - and certainly not the author (who is also the co-author of the screenplay) - knows in advance how the experiment (which will be conducted in some form somewhere, or everywhere, soon) will play out (the enigmatic ending leaves unclear what happens to The Circle once Bailey and Stenton have gone 'fully transparent'), but one thing at least is sure: early transparency adopter Mae Holland (Watson) has not lost her Basic Trust in life, or even necessarily her confidence in the liberating potential of the Circle, despite the tragic Circle-induced death of her estranged boyfriend Mercer (Ellar Coltrane); she wants to see the outcome of the experiment with Bailey and Stenton for herself before making up her mind about what such technology should and should not be allowed to do. Perhaps the game of Basic Trust cultivation simply moves to a new level once everyone knows everything, or many more things, about everyone else, or maybe it really is as destructive of human potential as Mercer intuitively fears. The dialogue between Mae and Mercer is sadly cut short, but the author had no real choice: the outcome of such a radical social experiment, like that of Universal Basic Income, cannot be predicted in advance by any amount of data or argument, and there are good *prima facie* arguments on both sides (represented in *The Circle* by Mae and Mercer respectively, and in their genuine

---

<sup>589</sup> Schaad presented his film (Donndorffilm, 2016) at the Weltethos Institut Tübingen in May 2017.

<sup>590</sup> See 'Terry Eagleton in Conversation with Roger Scruton',

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOdMBDOj4ec&t=45s>, 13/9/2012 (accessed 12/10/2017).



if fractured friendship with one another). Alain Finkielkraut's radical and plausible defence of privacy, explored briefly earlier in this book, may not necessarily conflict with a 'fully transparent society'; perhaps such technology will help to educate us, for example, into a relationship of Basic Trust in life itself and an overcoming of scared self-centredness by revealing the human flaws and human needs in *everyone*. We cannot know, however, until we have run the experiment; and as Boualem Sansal and other antitotalitarian authors mentioned in this book (including Hans Küng and of course Dave Eggers himself) remind us, we have to be extremely careful about how we conduct the experiment, for totalitarianism, once rooted, can be a bitch to eradicate.

### Concluding Remarks: Keeping the World Ethos Updated

Hollywood, of course, is not alone in this putative task of cultivating Basic Trust in life in Millennials and their descendants; it has already long since ceded primacy to the gaming industry and social media. Alongside the efforts, in the West, of the likes of Hans Küng to create a 'theology for the new millennium'<sup>591</sup> and Alain Finkielkraut to cultivate an 'intelligent heart'<sup>592</sup> in new generations of readers by recourse to literary and cultural products of the 19th and 20th Centuries (a goal to which this book also basically aspires), intellectuals in Western and non-Western traditions are also faced with the challenge of salvaging the kernel of themselves in a world in which the American-led entertainment industry in general - and the gaming industry and social media sites in particular - enjoy unprecedented access to the hearts and minds of smartphone users all over the world; one reads with a certain nostalgia, for example, the 1958 Declaration signed by prominent New Confucians Mou Zongsan, Tang Junyi and others, in which the West is accused of failing to understand the essence of Chinese philosophy. And yet Hollywood and its offshoots, from Disney to Clint Eastwood and contemporary indy-comedies like *The Big Sick* (2017), would seem to have understood Tang's thesis in *The Truth of Love* (1940)<sup>593</sup> well enough over the three quarters of a century spanning *Casablanca* and *The Circle*, making billions of dollars packaging and selling this humanistic insight: love is indivisible, and ultimately resistant to attempts to understand it in the bottom-up language of science.

The challenge for humanity in 2018 lies less (as it did for Küng in 1993) in reconciling the spiritual traditions of the world with each other (though the challenges here remain enormous) than in reconciling our geographically and culturally divided past with our immediate joined-at-the-hip present and future. This perhaps partly explains the failure of Küng's *Weltethos* project to reach the Millennials who should have been its primary target: focusing on intercultural and theological details has limited attention to the equally important task of facing the technology-driven cultural challenges to Basic Trust in life which are new to the world and, to an ever-increasing degree, common to all those born into it. The world's respective cultural heritages, celebrated in at least some of their diversity in this volume, have much to add to this

---

<sup>591</sup> See Hans Küng, *Theologie im Aufbruch: Eine ökumenische Grundlegung*, (München: Piper, 1987).

<sup>592</sup> See Alain Finkielkraut, *Un coeur intelligent*, (Paris: Stock/Flammarion, 2009) and *Si l'amour durait*, (Paris: Stock, 2011). Erik Orsenna's *Grand Amour*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993) attempts a similar feat - 'l'apprentissage de la préférence' in the 'royaume désordonné des sentiments' - in novelistic form.

<sup>593</sup> I am working on an English translation of this text, due for publication in 2018.

conversation, but they will never replace the need for new, updated, convincing attempts to foster Basic Trust in the face of new technological and cultural developments. Cultural criticism cannot limit itself to the recycling of the best of the old; it must also face, embrace and celebrate the best of the new. Küng's concept of a 'theology for the new millennium' and Finkelkraut's 'intelligent heart', even as they celebrate the gifts of the past, require no less.

### Epilogue: From *The Circle* to *The Square*

Beyond *The Circle*, the Swedish film *The Square* (Palme d'Or, Cannes, 2017) has added its own sour twist to the global trust conversation in recent months. The action centres on an art installation in a Stockholm museum ('the Square is a sanctuary of trust and caring; within it we all share equal rights and obligations'<sup>594</sup>), but the film primarily depicts the chaotic life of museum Director Christian (Claes Bang), who perceives himself as a powerful member of an unequal society, and who alternates between enjoyment of his status and guilt at the privileges it brings. Christian's struggles to trust in his own motivations and in the overall meaning of his existence, set as they are against the utopian backdrop of the Square, enable a harsh but also frequently hilarious commentary on hypocrisy in contemporary Sweden and - thanks to a trans-Atlantic cast featuring Dominic West and Elisabeth Moss - in the Western world as a whole. Public 'trust-building exercises' like the Square, the film shows us, will remain empty as long as the individuals running the institutions which organise them - from governments and universities to museums and private foundations<sup>595</sup> - do not themselves credibly embody a deeper *ethos* of Basic Trust in life itself.

---

<sup>594</sup> Ruben Östlund, *The Square*, (Plattform Produktion et al., 2017).

<sup>595</sup> The Karl Schlecht Foundation and Weltethos Institut Tübingen have offered their support to a *Jahr des Vertrauens* ('Year of Trust') initiative across Germany in 2018 (<https://jahr-des-vertrauens.de>) which will do well to avoid the pitfalls depicted in *The Square*.

## 23. 'Aesthetics is the Mother of Ethics': Joseph Brodsky and the Unrivalled Attractiveness of the Impossible

*To live at all is frightening. Have you noticed how it all ends?*

Joseph Brodsky

### Introduction

Nobel Prizewinning Russian emigré poet Joseph Brodsky (1940-1996) offers a vision of poetry in which a 'theology of language'<sup>596</sup> rescues the poetic word from postmodern doubt, sacralising it without falling into fundamentalism about its transcendental meaning. In so doing he adds literary meat and a dose of realist perspective to Jesuit philosopher Rupert Lay's 'biophilic' and 'constructivist' ethics, building a more fully humanistic *ethos* in which the individual's freely chosen aesthetic and literary preferences trump the dictates of moralising language and serve as the locus of trust-building in life itself.

### 'Evil is Trashy': Poetry and Brodsky's Path to Basic Trust

'All evil proceeds from the same simple source,' Brodsky writes: 'When one person starts to think that she is better than another. "*I'm better than him*": this is the root of evil.'<sup>597</sup> Poetry for Brodsky is more than 'rational knowledge'; it lies somewhere 'between intuition and revelation'.<sup>598</sup> One of the goals of poetry is 'to create an atmosphere of unavailability in that which is said'<sup>599</sup>; nevertheless, literature in general, even the realm of 'religion', is at its best always focused on the individual ('what is remarkable about the Christmas story [...] is that we have a sacralising of the life of an individual, of one specific individual'<sup>600</sup>), even though it also presupposes a certain faith in language as a transmitter of meaning ('language itself is faith'<sup>601</sup>): 'What literature is capable of is the cultivation of respect for individual people.'<sup>602</sup> It is out of this cultivated concern for individuals by individuals - not generalisable abstract rules of ethical behaviour - that societies as a whole (and the globalised world of the early 21st Century) can hope to achieve any form of stability:

The problem - how can I put this? - consists in the fact that, in the realm of rational thought, we are reduced to ethical statements, but ethical

---

<sup>596</sup> Joseph Brodsky, in P.I: Mikhailov (ed.), *I. A. Brodsky*, (Moskva: Prospekt, 2017), p. 9. Mikhailov's dense and brilliant collection of Brodsky excerpts, collected under rubrics including 'Theology', 'Time', 'Metaphysics' and 'Life' and also including such pithy gems as 'What could be more attractive than the impossible?' (p. 10), is the focus of this short chapter. Those interested in specific Russian and international references can consult Mikhailov's own footnotes.

<sup>597</sup> Brodsky, p. 90.

<sup>598</sup> Brodsky, p. 60.

<sup>599</sup> Brodsky, p. 41.

<sup>600</sup> Brodsky, p. 66.

<sup>601</sup> Brodsky, p. 25.

<sup>602</sup> Brodsky, p. 63.

statements alone do not bring a society together. For such business, something is needed besides; indeed, 'ethics' as a discipline often leads to ethical disasters. There is nothing easier than behaving as if one is motivated exclusively by lofty principles, but to me, to make a society truly livable, what is needed is an aesthetics, for aesthetics is hostile to bullshit. In other words, an individual should above all become an aesthetic being. In my understanding, aesthetics is the mother of ethics.

[...] If in the end someone wants to insist on putting morality in the centre, the question still remains: what is the basis of it? At bottom, it seems like it is the idea of God. But we live in a world which is often busy denying the existence of a higher Being. At the same time, though, people have to take their morality or their ethical principles from somewhere. Taking such principles at face value is all well and good, but they can always just be corrupted.

[...] For me, aesthetics is a much surer basis for society - for civil society, if you like - because in the end, when it comes down to making a moral choice, whereas [a religious or even a secular ethical code] asks you to choose on the basis of written legislation [which you can either ignore or only pretend to obey], aesthetics forces you to behave right without any reference to law.<sup>603</sup>

Brodsky's 'literary theology', indeed, takes an equally hard tone with both religious and secular dogmatisms, not least because of his intimate experience of both Orthodox Christianity and the Soviet Union.<sup>604</sup> While rabidly defending the sacred dimension of poetry and the legacy of the world's spiritual traditions in this ongoing humanistic conversation, Brodsky gives 'religion', in the sense of 'organised religion', a tough time:

I maintain a conception of God as the possessor of an absolutely free, unconditioned will. I am against the psychology of exchange offered by [the mainstream understanding of] Christianity - do this, and you'll get that, right? [...] This is, in essence, a form of anthropomorphism.

[...] My first contact with Hinduism gave me the feeling that one was being presented with a veritable spiritual Himalayas: hidden behind one peak there was always another even higher than the last.

[...] I did all the practices - self-overcoming more than self-denial - as much for self-preservation as anything, because when [the Soviet authorities] arrest you, beat you and so on, they really make it hell, but they can't do anything to you if you don't think your body is really you. In the end, though, I felt that the whole bag wasn't really for me. Still, when I reread the Old and New Testaments, I immediately sensed that, from a spiritual point of view, they were only a tiny corner of the transcendental expanses offered by Hinduism. So whenever I hear talk of this or that specific church, I always feel uneasy: it is my conviction that the metaphysical potential of an individual human being is only

---

<sup>603</sup> Brodsky, pp. 64-65.

<sup>604</sup> See Brodsky, p. 42.

rarely (I repeat, this is my personal experience), very rarely fully realised within the confines of one specific religious organisation.<sup>605</sup>

Basic Trust for Brodsky is always an intuitive, aesthetic, yes-no question rather than a doctrinal one; when the World Ethos is present inside us, the whole universe is our home: 'When you have the feeling inside yourself that you know who you are and what is most essential in you, it is completely unimportant where you live.'<sup>606</sup> Conversely, when this *ethos* is missing, nowhere feels right: 'If a person's nerves are somehow jangled, then any place he happens to find himself will reflect back to him this sense of [the] absurdity [of life]. You go out and talk to someone but still feel the whole time that the conversation is pointless, that you shouldn't be there, and that your interlocutor shouldn't be there either.'<sup>607</sup> While literature in general can work this magic ('in our almost post-Christian era, literature, and perhaps history, are the only sources of ethical nourishment'<sup>608</sup>), poetry in particular 'creates something directly contradictory'.<sup>609</sup> The real 'contradiction' at the end of this 'school of insecurity', however, is the one between the 'life' - the sensory delights of the day - and the 'work' - the meaning of which transcends time ('a work of art is always created with the aim of outliving its creator'<sup>610</sup>). Basic Trust in life as a whole means, paradoxically, the readiness to sacrifice that life, or the quality of that life, for the work, or in Brodsky's case, for poetry: 'You have two things: your life and your poetry. You have to choose between the two: you can only do one of them properly; [...] you are forced to be mediocre in the other. I prefer a mediocre life.'<sup>611</sup>

### Beyond Constructivism for a Humanistic World Ethos

*We have all fallen into a psychological trap prepared by our civilisation. Our mothers or nannies or whoever else in our childhoods affirmed to us that life was wonderful, that people were wonderful, that good defeats evil, and that the big bad wolf will never come. Whenever we are confronted with something terrible, our first reaction is always: 'This isn't possible, there is some kind of mistake here. We let it happen,' or better still, 'Someone else did.' Mothers would be better advised to tell their children that half the time the big bad wolf makes it through, and that he looks just like we do.*<sup>612</sup>

Joseph Brodsky

---

<sup>605</sup> Brodsky, pp. 69, 73-74.

<sup>606</sup> Brodsky, p. 80.

<sup>607</sup> Brodsky, p. 82.

<sup>608</sup> Brodsky, p. 101.

<sup>609</sup> Brodsky, p. 99.

<sup>610</sup> Brodsky, p. 42.

<sup>611</sup> Brodsky, p. 113.

<sup>612</sup> Brodsky, p. 89.

Brodsky's focus on the human individual and her poetic word echoes German Jesuit philosopher Rupert Lay's message of 'constructivism' in *Über die Liebe zum Leben* (2017).<sup>613</sup> Following on explicitly from the 'biophilic' legacy of Erich Fromm and Albert Schweitzer, Lay, an experienced business coach with a lengthy taste of organisations' common protototalitarian penchant for regulating language via value catalogues in the interests of collective 'harmony', 'cohesion' and 'motivation', asks his readers to embrace the idea of a 'second Enlightenment'<sup>614</sup> in which the 21st-century human being is liberated to 'construct' her own private relationship with language without being subjected to coercive pressure to speak, and ultimately to think, in officially sanctioned categories. This humanistic supplement to the first Enlightenment, which focused on scientific reasoning and the elaboration of universally acceptable minimum consensus principles for politics and morality, overcomes the relativist trap of postmodernism by insisting on an explicitly 'biophilic' orientation for ethical education, an approach which, to the extent that life is indeed, like poetry, a complex 'school of insecurity', by definition precludes sloganeering. Lay's *Über die Liebe zum Leben* uses the frequently turgid language of contemporary Western philosophy to point out the limits of Western rationalism; what his project fails to do, however, is to push on, having explained what is needed - 'biophilic' individual spirits - to the business of actually providing direct (rather than merely indirect) nourishment for those spirits. Like Adonis<sup>615</sup>, Brodsky *produced* poetry as well as writing about the importance of it: he goes beyond Lay and beyond philosophy to give his reader a direct *taste* of a World Ethos - or Roger Scruton's 'soul of the world', if one prefers - rather than merely articulating its existence:

The only thing I know, and that I can say with a certain degree of security, is that I have never betrayed myself. I remember myself at the age of four, in green gumboots, sitting on the porch of our country house, looking out through the rain over a long, winding road... As far as I'm concerned, I am still on that porch, still wearing the same gumboots. I think I have stayed the same person I was then.<sup>616</sup>

Brodsky was also aware, however, that a humanistic *ethos* is easier to pass on when there is a recognised or recognisable canon with which new generations can grapple. This canon has dissolved in the 21st Century:

I remember, when I was growing up, 'literature' meant two hundred - at most three hundred - names. It was in any case sufficiently limited as to allow me the thought that I might one day read everything worth reading. Now I walk through bookshops the same way we all walk through music stores and their thousands of discs, knowing as we do that there will not be enough time for us to listen to it all. Choices need to be made, but it

---

<sup>613</sup> Rupert Lay, *Über die Liebe zum Leben: Die Ethik im Konstruktivismus als Ausdruck der Biophilie*, (Hamburg: Tredition, 2017).

<sup>614</sup> See Rupert Lay, *Die zweite Aufklärung: Eine Einführung in den Konstruktivismus*, (Monsenstein and Vannerdat, 2015).

<sup>615</sup> See Adonis, 'I Was Born for Poetry', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldLr4M1cP28&t=134s>, 15/1/2015 (accessed 25/8/2017).

<sup>616</sup> Brodsky, p. 146.

is not at all clear on what basis: no one can show the way, insofar as no one can be in a position to guide us through the whole lot. If we are living today in the age of anthologies, tomorrow will be the age of catalogues.<sup>617</sup>

Part of the logic of this book has been to create, however arbitrarily, a 'World Ethos mini-canon' beyond the old confines of national or regional literatures, or at least to write a volume which gives the reader some recurring reference points to hold onto, an updated and globalised version of something like Brodsky's '200-300 names' to which she can psychologically relate. The goal has not been to create a closed system to which nothing could be added; as our discussions of Hollywood in the last chapter directly argued, part of the responsibility of any 'spiritual humanism' is to engage critically with new cultural material as well as constantly to revisit and unearth the best of the old. Abstract theorising cannot match the power of individual stories, of which poetry is the most condensed form: each of us must 'construct' her own mini-galaxy of '200-300 stars' out of her own life experience - not the same lights in the same order for any two people - if the idea of a World Ethos is to take credible and human shape. Weighing and comparing the 'best' of these poetic words and prose stories (Matthew Arnold's 'best that has been thought and said in the world') is possible even if one accepts that the 'world' is too big to be known by one person, and even if one broadly accepts Lay's (and Brodsky's) 'constructivist' view of language; it is precisely the fact that profound, 'biophilic' communication is possible between beings with utterly private inner worlds and idiosyncratic definitions of words that allows the idea of a World Ethos to become an intersubjective reality in the first place. Küng's *Weltethos* is antitotalitarian to its core, but it is somehow miraculously communicable, not in any one book or formula, but, as Brodsky suggests, cumulatively, by a kind of humanistic or literary osmosis over time:

I am not at all sure that one can be converted to Basic Trust. People ultimately have to be left to get to it on their own. It is something that one arrives at all by oneself, not a pre-packaged formula. Life plants it in them and it grows; nothing can replace these efforts of life itself. It is truly hard work, which is why we should let time do it, because time sorts it out much better [than our trying to come up with a full and final equation for it].<sup>618</sup>

Only life itself, then, can do the planting; all that educators can do, Brodsky argues, is to seek to provide those in their charge with access to as much life and poetry as possible in the limited time available to them.

---

<sup>617</sup> Brodsky, p. 138.

<sup>618</sup> Brodsky, p. 62.

## 24. Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game: A World Ethos and the Death of Joseph Knecht*

*The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them. That's the essence of inhumanity.*

George Bernard Shaw

### Introduction

Not for nothing does *Weltethos* co-traveller Karl-Josef Kuschel currently preside over the International Hermann Hesse Society: as well as Hesse's pioneering work in the field of interreligious dialogue (covered in detail by Kuschel in *Leben ist Brückenschlagen*), the author of *Siddhartha* also tackles directly - more directly, perhaps, than any other major 20th-Century author - the complex theme of Basic Trust in life. We focus here on *The Glass Bead Game*, not in the hope of doing justice to the novel's richness and complexity, but at least in order to approach the essence or *ethos* on which it is built.

### *The Glass Bead Game: Refuge in a Parallel Universe*

The publication date of *The Glass Bead Game* (1943) says it all about the historical context of its German author's concern: 'The task for me was to build an intellectual space in which I could live and breathe. Despite all the toxins in the world at large, I had to make the realm of the spirit and the soul real and unavoidably visible.'<sup>619</sup> Kastalien is the ivory tower *par excellence*, the province of tranquillity for masters of the noble art of the Glass Bead Game, an imagined future synthesis of all spheres of human knowledge in self-fulfilling and self-justifying ludic form. Joseph Knecht is described from the future as the most famous master in the history of the game, though we will see by the end of the novel that his mythic status is principally derived from his final abandonment of Kastalien and his mysterious death in the world beyond. Like Nabokov's Luzhin in *The Luzhin Defence* (1930), Knecht realises that absorption in games and abstract discourses is no substitute for the mutual teaching and learning of human relationships, for the risks and rewards of life itself. From his position of wisdom and privilege, Knecht decides that he can better serve as a teacher of the young in the provinces than as a preacher to the converted acolytes of the Glass Bead Game in Kastalien. This thirst for contact with fresh human enthusiasm, Knecht shows by his own example, is needed in order to preserve the vitality of the Glass Bead Game itself, and to justify Kastalien's existence to the taxpayers who fund it and the armies who defend it. Hesse's 'spiritual realm' where he could 'live and breathe' was not Kastalien as such, but the heart and mind of his

---

<sup>619</sup> Hermann Hesse, *Das Glasperlenspiel (The Glass Bead Game)*, (Suhrkamp, 2013(1943)), p. 2.



Hitler antidote Joseph Knecht, whose character development he traces from schoolboy days.

Following a brief introduction to the imaginary world of the novel, the first chapter ('Die Berufung') recounts Knecht's 'calling' to a life in the game:

This outgrowing of a hitherto harmonious and beloved home... Among the stings that a true calling brings with it, these are the bitterest. Whoever receives such a call receives not just a gift and an order, but also a kind of debt; like the soldier who is pulled from among his comrades and made into an officer, the promotion is only worthy to the extent that it brings a certain guilt with it, a bad conscience towards those one has left behind.

[...] At times he had suffered greatly from these outbursts of feelings of alienation between himself and his classmates, but he had never regarded himself as a chosen one: he experienced his calling less as a worldly promotion relative to others than as an inner reminder and encouragement to his own self. [...] The time was now ripe: his blessings were confirmed and legitimised, his sorrows had had a meaning. The unbearably old and small uniform of his former life could now be taken off; a new one was waiting for him.<sup>620</sup>

This feeling of a life needing above all to make sense as a whole will inform Knecht's choices, and the spirit in which he makes them, throughout the novel. Other people, however, most notably Knecht's music teacher, also give meaning to this quest for truth, integrity and 'identity'; one wishes to honour *them* in one's quest to live one's own life well. Instead of seeking permission (which would easily have been granted) for a sabbatical from Kastalien's authorities, Knecht wants by the end of the novel to move all in on his new pedagogical plans for the provinces, not because he wishes to turn his back on Kastalien as such, but because he sees it as the logical continuation of his 'calling':

I am thankful to you [for the offer of a sabbatical] but I cannot accept it. What I am seeking is not so much the satisfaction of a curiosity or sensual pleasure in the wider world as a path to the Absolute. I don't want to go out into the world with an insurance policy in case of disappointment, like a careful traveller who wants to take a look at the world from a position of safety. On the contrary, what I crave is daring, obstacles and risk; I am hungry for reality, for responsibilities and deeds, but also for deprivation and suffering. The inner path I have taken is now my one and all, my law, my home, my duty.<sup>621</sup>

Knecht realised through his friendship with Plinio Designori that there was an important world outside the game and outside Kastalien; educating Plinio's son Tito and others like him from the provinces now seemed more meaningful than devising sophisticated new game formats for the privileged elites who could study and enjoy

---

<sup>620</sup> Hesse, *Das Glasperlenspiel*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>621</sup> Hesse, *Das Glasperlenspiel*, pp. 431-432.

them. A key part of this education platform was to give the young a sense that they too could be teachers:

I have seen from your collection that you know far more about mountain plants than I do. It is among other things the goal of our living together that we share knowledge with each other and bring each other up to the same level; so let's start with your examining my limited knowledge of botany and helping me forward in this area.<sup>622</sup>

Knecht's invitation to the young Tito to join a new community of the spirit proves irresistible:

The youngster, who valued highly the patrician instincts and traditions of his household and did not forgive his father for having departed from them, met here for the first time [in Knecht] that spiritual, educated nobility, that power which, under the right conditions, can work miracles and skip a long sequence of ancestral generations to turn a plebeian into a high nobleman within a single lifetime. In the ardent and proud young boy there arose a feeling that joining and serving this kind of nobility could perhaps become a duty and an honour for him, that perhaps here, as it appeared and was embodied in the form of his teacher - who for all his gentleness and kindness remained a man through and through - was a meaning for his life and a series of goals to be met.<sup>623</sup>

Yet Tito's pull on Joseph, the game master turned educator of future managers and 'real-world' leaders, is no less significant:

The work was fun, and his student was not just any odd young talent that one must awaken and bring into form; he was also, as the only son of an influential and well-to-do patrician, a future leader, one of the social and political key players in his land and among his people, destined to provide an example and guidance to others. Kastalien had remained somewhat indebted to this family; it had not done its job with the education of Tito's father, and had left him in a difficult place between [the game] and the outside world. As a result, the gifted and likeable Plinio was left unhappy, with an unbalanced and unmanageable life, and his son was in danger of falling into the same trap. There was something there to be healed and made right, something like a debt to be paid, and it gave him joy and a sense of purpose that this task had now fallen to him, the rebel and seeming apostate.<sup>624</sup>

The dialogue between Plinio and Joseph, in which they revisit their school days and talk frankly through the deep psychology of their respective life decisions, contrasts starkly with Joseph's euphemistic dealings with the ossified Kastalien bureaucracy; the latter's defence of the game at all costs had led to a loss of contact with the world

---

<sup>622</sup> Hesse, *Das Glasperlenspiel*, p. 462.

<sup>623</sup> Hesse, *Das Glasperlenspiel*, p. 463.

<sup>624</sup> Hesse, *Das Glasperlenspiel*, pp. 464-465.

and with the human beings who breathe life and meaning into the game in the first place.

### Joseph's Death and a World Ethos

*'Oh no!' he thought horrified, 'now I am responsible for his death!' And only now, where no pride was left to be maintained and no resistance to the truth could be offered, he felt in the depths of his frightened heart just how dear this man had become to him. And as he, despite all rational objections, felt himself to be responsible for his master's death, a kind of frisson of the sacred passed through him, telling him that this guilt would transform him and his life, and demand much greater things from him than he had ever demanded of himself.*<sup>625</sup>

Joseph drowns mysteriously on his mountain swim; Tito wonders what he might have done to prevent it, and whether his own youthful exuberance might have pushed the aging master to surpass his physical limits. What Hesse describes, however, has not a hint of tragedy or irresponsibility about it; Joseph's death is no more than the relaying of a civilisational baton, an *ethos* which, once grasped, can remain in one's hands for the remainder of one's own race, until it is time to pass it on to the next runner. Right before Joseph's disappearance into the mountain lake, Hesse describes Tito's rite of self-discovery under Joseph's watch:

There was something, as he would only later realise, in his dance and his magic possession that was not only due to the mountain air, the sun, the morning and the feeling of freedom, but no less to the phase of his life which was waiting for him, embodied in the figure, in equal measure friendly and demanding of reverence, of his master. Much happened in this morning hour which would define the destiny of Tito and his soul, and which marked it out from the thousands of other hours of his life as a festive and consecrated moment. Without knowing what he was doing, without criticism and without suspicion, he did what the blessed morning demanded of him, danced his devotions, saluted the sun, expressed his joy and his trust in life, his veneration and reverence in movements and gestures of gratitude, bringing both pride and a readiness to sacrifice his soul to the sun and the gods in his dance, and no less to the admired and revered wise man and musician, the master of the magic game from a mysterious faraway province, his future teacher and friend.<sup>626</sup>

This future is about to be cut short, but the facts register already in eternity: Tito has been 'called' by Joseph to join something beyond himself, and thereby to realise his

---

<sup>625</sup> Hesse, *Das Glasperlenspiel*, p. 471.

<sup>626</sup> Hesse, *Das Glasperlenspiel*, p. 468.

highest self in the service of this *ethos*. Depth of humanistic experience, Hesse argues, matters more than length; brief but intense moments of intimacy with other human beings and with nature can lift one's concerns altogether out of the realm of time, chance and impossible physical survival, and towards a relationship with life as a whole. The stage for such intimacy, however, must be carefully set; this is the role of teachers in any human society, and the reason why a World Ethos is a flame or baton to be passed on, a flickering fact about the world today but no inevitability tomorrow. Alone, without language, without guidance, without inspiration, there can be no *ethos*, no Basic Trust in life, indeed no sense of life as a whole, as a thing with a beginning, a middle, an end and an overall meaning. Such meaning - 'without which', as Hans Küng argues, 'no one can behave ethically'<sup>627</sup> - is experienced, if at all, anew by each individual as a subjective state, not transmitted via formula; the most any 'culture' or set of books can do is to set the stage on which acts of human generosity can be recognised for the extraordinary gifts they are: gifts which lift us out of our own struggle for survival and confirm to us, via their effect on us, that we are destined for - or rather, that we already *are* - more than the world of space and time.

All this seems a long way from the 'real world' of politics, business and civil society, but Hans Küng's surviving insight - with consequences far beyond theology - is precisely that such an individual *ethos* is necessary in all of us if the 'real world' is to hold together or do more than hold together: without Basic Trust in life flourishing in the hearts and minds of individual human beings everywhere, trust *between* human beings, and the feelings of responsibility, reverence and honour which spontaneously accompany such trust, is impossible, and the social institutions on which we each rely for our individual survival and prosperity will eventually break down. The liberal illusion that one can simply avoid or privatise such questions of meaning has been revealed by the quarter-century following Küng's *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* in 1993 for what it is: an oversimplification of the realities of moral life. Weltethos Institut Director Claus Dierksmeier's focus on 'qualitative freedom'<sup>628</sup> can thus be understood in this context: it is impossible, given the very nature of the liquid in question, to force a person to drink from the well of the humanities, but leaving her alone in a spiritual desert to find her own way out - the 'negative' or 'quantitative' freedom option - is not an increase in freedom for anyone.

A general climate of Enlightenment-style political freedom and scientific innovation may be a big improvement on earlier, feudal social arrangements, but we need to move, in Tu Weiming's phrase, 'beyond the Enlightenment mentality', to a Second Enlightenment or Second Axial Age or even a humanistic 'Industry 5.0', as authors mentioned in this book from Martha Nussbaum to Rupert Lay, Len Swidler and Karl Schlecht have all variously advocated.<sup>629</sup> Hans Küng's *Projekt Weltethos*, with its timely post-Cold War emphasis on the cultivation of Basic Trust in life in the face of liberal triumphalism, postmodern relativism and fundamentalist aggression, represents an important milestone on this journey towards a common spiritual humanism, a World Ethos which, as this book has tried to show, is in no danger of

---

<sup>627</sup> Hans Küng, Hans Küng, *Wozu Weltethos? Religion und Ethik in Zeiten der Globalisierung* (Freiburg: Herder, 2002), p. 21.

<sup>628</sup> See Claus Dierksmeier, *Qualitative Freiheit*, (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016).

<sup>629</sup> See, among others, Tu Weiming, 'Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality', in his *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity: Essays on the Confucian Discourse in Cultural China*, (New Delhi: CSC, 2010) and Rupert Lay, *Die zweite Aufklärung: Eine Einführung in den Konstruktivismus*, (Monsenstein and Vannerdat, 2015).

ever becoming boring, for it is, in the Chinese idiom, a symphonic 'harmony without uniformity' rather than a list of fixed principles built on ever-shifting linguistic sands.

## Afterword (Tübingen, December 2017)

*Kierkegaard, the warner of the first half of the [19th] Century, had tried to call attention in a timely fashion to the crucial fact [...] that the individual in the presence of God - even in the face of the leveling, collectivist tendencies of early mass society - has an irreplaceable, irreversible, sacrosanct value.*

*[...] To be sure, Kierkegaard the Protestant is himself what he called Protestantism in general, not the norm but the corrective. And as a corrective, as the precursor of a new theology, [...] he got more support than anyone could have assumed he would in the Christian world of his time.<sup>630</sup>*

Hans Küng, 'Religion as a  
Contradiction of the Existing Order'

'Not the norm, but the corrective'; this summarises both Hans Küng's own theological career and my attempt here to add some literary flesh to his *Weltethos* idea, to shift the public conversation about it - to the extent that there still is one - from the search for consensus on the wording of a 'Global Ethic' to a 'search for traces'<sup>631</sup> of a 'World Ethos' rooted in Basic Trust in life. The vast expanse of this terrain of the spirit, however, means a long list of omissions which will have to be addressed, one chapter at a time, in future volumes: an exciting prospect. The next volume in this open-ended series will begin with an extended chapter on Tu Weiming and his 'spiritual humanism' before recovering echoes in sources ranging from Adonis to Zamyatin via the likes of Viktor Frankl, Milan Kundera, Marcel Proust, Dave Chappelle and a dozen or so others.

The desire to celebrate Hans Küng's 90th birthday in March 2018, however, coupled with the general need for a 25th-anniversary stocktake of the *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* and its legacy, has encouraged me to bring down the curtain on this volume as the days draw short and the Tübingen snow falls gently outside my window. The candle behind the world burns on beyond this book, these lives and this town.

---

<sup>630</sup> Hans Küng, 'Religion as a Contradiction of the Existing Order', in Hans Küng and Walter Jens, *Literature and Religion: Pascal, Gryphius, Lessing, Holderlin, Novalis, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Kafka*, (Paragon House, 1991), pp. 201-202.

<sup>631</sup> Küng, Hans, *Spurensuche: Die Weltreligionen auf dem Weg*, (München: Piper, 1999).

## Bibliography

Adams, River, *There Must Be You: Leonard Swidler's Journey to Faith and Dialogue*, (Wipf and Stock, 2014).

Adonis, 'Roots and Causes of Islamic Violence', *Ad Hoc*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OhnHX3LqOmU&t=260s>, 22/5/2016 (accessed 13/8/2017).

Adonis, 'I Was Born for Poetry', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldLr4M1cP28&t=134s>, 15/1/2015 (accessed 25/8/2017).

Adonis, 'A Cultural Black Hole', (12/5/2016), <http://www.alhayat.com/Opinion/Adonis/15560183/ثقافة-مدارات-أسود-ثقافي>, (accessed 25/8/2017).

Aleksievich, Svetlana, *Vremya Sekond-Xend (Second-Hand Time)*, (Moscow: Vremya, 2016 (2013)).

Alighieri, Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, <http://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-26/> (accessed 6/2/2017).

Amann, Wolfgang and Agata Stachowitz-Stanusch (eds.), *Integrity in Organisations: Building the Foundations for Humanistic Management*, (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013).

Amis, Martin, *The Pregnant Widow*, (Jonathan Cape, 2010).

al-Ansari, Abdulhamid, 'Towards a Modern Understanding of Jihad' (Nahwa Mafhumin 'Asriyy lil-Jihad'), *Al-Ittihad*, 21/10/15.

al-Ansari, Abdulhamid, 'The Emirates and the Humanisation of Media Discourse' (Al-Imarat wa 'Ansinat al-Khitab al-Diniyy'), *Al-Ittihad*, 18/5/16.

al-Ansari, Abdulhamid, 'The Emirates and an Islamic Jurisprudence which Looks Forward to the Future' (Al-Imarat wa Fiqh Istishraf al-Mustaqbal'), *Al-Ittihad*, 15/6/16.

al-Ansari, Abdulhamid, 'Our Youth and a Culture of Life' (Al-Shabab wa Thaqafat ul-Haya'), *Al-Ittihad*, 29/6/16.

al-Ansari, Abdulhamid, 'Terrorism Rides Roughshod Over Sanctities' ('Al-Irhab Yatatawalu 'ala al-Muqaddasat'), *Al-Ittihad*, 13/7/16.

al-Ansari, Abdulhamid, 'A Culture of Dialogue: A Global Necessity' ('Thaqafat ul-Hiwar: Dururatun 'Alamiyya'), *Al-Ittihad*, 11/1/17.

al-Ansari, Abdulhamid, 'Why Has Democracy Not Taken Hold in the Arab World?' (Limadha lam Tatarassakhu al-Dimuqratiyya 'Arabiyyan?'), *Al-Ittihad*, 9/3/2017.

Arnold, Matthew, *Culture and Anarchy*. [http:// www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4212/pg4212.html](http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4212/pg4212.html), (accessed 10/9/2017).

Blaschke, Bernd, *Der homo oeconomicus und sein Kredit bei Musil, Joyce, Svevo, Unamuno und Céline*, (Wilhelm Fink, 2004).

Breasted, James, *The Dawn of Conscience*, (Prentice and Hall & IBD, 1976(1932)).

Borges, Jorge Luis, 'La Biblioteca de Babel', (1941), in *Ficciones*, (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1944).

Brown, Jonathan A.C. *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy*, (Oneworld Publications, 2015).

al-Buleihi, Ibrahim, *The Genius of Automatic Attention ('Abqariyyat ul-Ihtimam al-Tilqa'iyy)*, (Dar al-Tanwir lil-Tiba'a wal-Nashr, 2017).

- al-Buleihi, Ibrahim, 'A Dialogue on Reason and Backwardness' ('Hiwar fi al-'Aql wal-Takhalluf'), *Sky News*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4YRL8uniRM&t=77s>, accessed 14/3/17.
- al-Buleihi, Ibrahim, 'Why Are Arabs and Muslims Backward?' (Limadha al-'Arab wal-Muslimun Mutakhallifun?'), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KTm\\_ig49JwY&t=508s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KTm_ig49JwY&t=508s) (accessed 28/4/17).
- Chazelle, Damien, *La La Land*, (Summit Entertainment, 2016).
- Cheng Chung-Yi, 'Confucian Religiousness and its Implications for Interreligious Dialogue', paper presented at the *International Society for Chinese Philosophy 19th International Conference (Chinese Philosophy in the Contemporary World)*, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 21-24 July 2015.
- Clark, T.J., 'Picasso and the Fall of Europe', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 38 No. 11, June 2016 (<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n11/tj-clark/picasso-and-the-fall-of-europe> - accessed 19/12/2016).
- Cline, Erin M., *Families of Virtue: Confucian and Western Views on Childhood Development*. (Columbia University Press, 2015).
- Cockburn, Patrick, *Henry's Demons: Living with Schizophrenia, a Father and a Son's Story*, (London: Simon & Schuster, 2011).
- Cockburn, Patrick, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution*, (London: Verso, 2015).
- Cockburn, Patrick, 'Patrick Cockburn, Author and Journalist', [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B\\_mocVSkZkY&t=1172s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_mocVSkZkY&t=1172s), 25/3/2015 (accessed 13/8/2017).
- Cockburn, Patrick, *The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East*, (London: Verso, 2016).
- Cockburn, Patrick, 'To Prevent Another Week of Terror, Our State Must Not Become a Vast ISIS Recruiting Sergeant', <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/manchester-attack-isis-radical-islamist-extremism-britain-terrorism-government-response-where-now-a7759021.html>, 27/5/2017 (accessed 13/8/2017).
- Craze, Gareth, 'Corporate Social Responsibility and Dehumanisation', *Philosophy of Management Conference*, Webster University, St. Louis, on 14/7/2017.
- Curtiz, Michael, *Casablanca*, (Warner Bros., 1942).
- Dawkins, Richard, *Science in the Soul: Selected Writings of a Passionate Rationalist*, (Bantam Press, 2017).
- Demiri, Lejla, 'Theology of Coexistence', What Can Christianity and Islam Contribute?', Rezension der 'Theologie des Zusammenlebens' Tagung, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen, 15/04/2016.
- Dennett, Daniel, 'Thank Goodness I'm Alive', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Hlbg4-YNfl>, 6/1/2008 (accessed 29/8/2017).
- Dierksmeier, Claus, 'Kant on Virtue'. *Journal of Business Ethics*. 113 (4): 2013, pp. 597-609.
- Dierksmeier, Claus, *Qualitative Freiheit: Selbstbestimmung in weltbürgerliche Verantwortung*, (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016).
- Dierksmeier, Claus, *Reframing Economic Ethics: The Philosophical Foundations of Humanistic Management*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- Dworkin, Ronald, *Religion Without God*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).
- Eagleton, Terry, 'The Liberal Supremacists', <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/apr/25/liberal-islam>, 25/4/2009 (accessed 21/8/2017).
- Eagleton, Terry and Roger Scruton, 'Terry Eagleton in Conversation with Roger Scruton', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOdMBOj4ec&t=303s>, 13/9/2012 (accessed 15/10/2017).
- Eagleton, Terry, *Culture and the Death of God*, (Yale University Press, 2015).



- Ephron, Nora et al., *Sleepless in Seattle*, (TriStar Pictures, 1993).
- Finkielkraut, Alain, *Un coeur intelligent*, (Paris: Stock/Flammarion, 2009).
- Finkielkraut, Alain, *Si l'amour durait*, (Paris: Stock, 2011).
- Finkielkraut, Alain, *La seule exactitude*, (Paris, Gallimard, 2015).
- Finkielkraut, Alain, 'L'Interview', *Stupéfiant!*, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8sX5Mq2j6Yo>), accessed 19/4/17.
- Fisk, Robert, *The Age of the Warrior: Selected Essays by Robert Fisk*, (Nation Books, 2008).
- Fisk, Robert, 'Interview with Robert Fisk on What Really Matters in the Middle East', [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uug1D-2\\_O34&t=547s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uug1D-2_O34&t=547s), 4/12/2015 (accessed 13/8/2017).
- Fisk, Robert, 'How Would Legendary Foreign Correspondent Clare Hollingworth Have Reported on the World of Twitter and Trump?', <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/donald-trump-twitter-social-media-clare-hollingworth-a7524336.html>, 12/1/2017 (accessed 13/8/2017).
- Fisk, Robert, 'Can Syria Ever Be Repaired When its Long Civil War Finally Comes to an End?', <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/syrian-war-conflic-ends-how-to-repair-country-lessons-from-lebanon-dont-apply-a7729676.html>, 11/5/2017 (accessed 13/8/2017).
- Fisk, Robert, 'In the Age of Islamic Literalism, We Should Remember the Scholar Who Fought Back', <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/nasr-abu-zeid-quran-literal-isis-wahhabism-remember-a7762991.html>, 30/5/2017 (accessed 13/8/2017).
- Foessel, Michael and Jürgen Habermas, 'Critique and Communication: Philosophy's Missions (A Conversation with Jürgen Habermas)', (<http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2015-10-16-habermas-en.html>), 16/10/2015 (accessed 15/10/2017).
- Fromm, Erich, *Die Kunst des Liebens*, (München: dtv, 1995 (1956)).
- Fromm, Erich *Haben oder Sein: Die seelischen Grundlagen einer neuen Gesellschaft*, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1976).
- Gervais, Ricky, *Inside the Actors Studio: Ricky Gervais*, (New York: CABLEready, 2009).
- Gogol, Nikolai, *The Overcoat*, East of the Web Short Stories (<http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/Over.shtml>), accessed 27/6/17 (original publication 1842).
- Gromov, Mikhail, *Chekhov*, (Moskva: Molodaya Gvardiya, 1993).
- Hertzberg, Hendrik, 'Hitchens, Athens, 1984', <http://www.newyorker.com/news/hendrik-hertzberg/hitchens-athens-1984>, 23/12/2011 (accessed 20/9/2017).
- Hesse, Hermann, *Das Glasperlenspiel (The Glass Bead Game)*, (Suhrkamp, 2013(1943)).
- Hitchens, Christopher, *Why Orwell Matters*, (London: Basic Books, 2002).
- Hitchens, Christopher, 'Late Night Hitch Stand-Up at 2003 Hay Festival', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11t7EXps050> (accessed 8/3/2016).
- Hitchens, Christopher, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2007).
- Hitchens, Christopher, 'A Death in the Family', <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2007/11/hitchens200711>, 3/10/2007 (accessed 21/8/2017).
- Hitchens, Christopher, 'Philip Larkin, The Impossible Man', <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/05/philip-larkin-the-impossible-man/308439/>, May 2011 (accessed 21/8/2017).

- Hitchens, Christopher, 'The Importance of Being Orwell', <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2012/08/christopher-hitchens-george-orwell>, 9/7/2012 (accessed 21/8/2017).
- Hitchens, Peter, *The Rage Against God: How Atheism Led Me to Faith*, (London: Continuum, 2010).
- Hitchens, Peter, 'The Rage Against God', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vuuJKLSG3dw&t=21s>, 12/3/2013 (accessed 21/08/2017).
- Hitchens, Peter, 'Peter Hitchens Blog (Terrorism)', <http://hitchensblog.mailonsunday.co.uk/terrorism/> (accessed 11/9/2017).
- Hitchens, Peter, 'God Does Exist', *Oxford Union*, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnIH4gomOqc> (accessed 8/8/2017).
- Hitchens, Peter, 'Why Some People Want God Not to Exist: Aldous Huxley Speaks', <http://hitchensblog.mailonsunday.co.uk/2015/08/why-some-people-want-god-not-to-exist-aldous-huxley-speaks-.html>, 17/8/2015 (accessed 21/8/2017).
- Hitchens, Peter, 'Line of Duty - Should AC12 Be Sent to Syria?', <http://hitchensblog.mailonsunday.co.uk/2017/04/line-of-duty-should-ac12-be-sent-to-syria-.html>, 13/4/2017 (accessed 21/9/2017).
- Hitchens, Peter, 'A Whitsun Address', <http://hitchensblog.mailonsunday.co.uk/2017/06/a-whitsun-address.html>, 5/6/2017 (accessed 21/8/2017).
- Hughes, Robert, *Shock of the New* (BBC/Time-Life Films, 1980).
- Huntington, Samuel, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, (Simon and Schuster, 1996).
- al-Jassem, Sheikha, 'Those Who Believe the Qur'an is Above the Constitution are Betraying Kuwait', *Al-Shahed TV*, 8/3/16, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mf\\_r0hhU1BE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mf_r0hhU1BE), accessed 15/3/17.
- Keir, Jonathan, *Warriors for Civilisation: Naguib Mahfouz, Andrei Tarkovsky, Tu Weiming and their Western Counterparts*, (University of Tübingen Doctoral Thesis, 2014), <https://publikationen.uni-tuebingen.de/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10900/57853/wfc%20library2.pdf?sequence=1>, accessed 8/8/2017.
- Keir, Jonathan, 'Through Christendom and Beyond: Andrei Tarkovsky and the Global Ethic Project', in *Andrei Tarkovsky: Klassiker - Класик - Classic - Classico*, (Potsdam: Universitätsverlag, 2016), pp. 237-254.
- Keir, Jonathan, 'Pity for Stones? The New Confucian Ecological Turn and the Global Ethic Project', *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 7 (2): 2017, pp. 25-34. doi:10.18848/2154-8633/CGP/v07i02/25-34.
- Kermani, Navid, *Zwischen Koran und Kafka: West-östliche Erkundungen (Between Qur'an and Kafka: East-West Explorations)*, (München: C.H. Beck, 2014).
- al-Khatib, Ibtihal, 'Interview with Al-Arabiya', 14/3/08, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbLLel5WZqc>, accessed 15/3/17.
- al-Khatib, Ibtihal, 'Freedom: A Right and a Burden' ('Hurriyya: Haq wa 'Ib'), *HIKMA-Talk*, 14/5/16, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y29Sx\\_i4-Bg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y29Sx_i4-Bg) (accessed 11/3/17).
- Kissinger, Henry, *World Order*, (New York: Penguin, 2014).
- Küng, Hans, *Kunst und Sinnfrage*, (Zürich: Benziger, 1980).
- Küng, Hans, *Theologie im Aufbruch: Eine ökumenische Grundlegung*, (München: Piper, 1987).
- Küng, Hans and Julia Ching, *Christentum und chinesische Religion*, (München: Piper, 1988).

- Küng, Hans, *Projekt Weltethos*, (München: Piper, 1996(1990)).
- Küng, Hans and Walter Jens, *Literature and Religion: Pascal, Gryphius, Lessing, Holderlin, Novalis, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Kafka*, (Paragon House, 1991).
- Küng, Hans et al., *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic*, 1993, [http://www.global-ethic-now.de/gen-eng/0a\\_was-ist-weltethos/0a-pdf/decl\\_english.pdf](http://www.global-ethic-now.de/gen-eng/0a_was-ist-weltethos/0a-pdf/decl_english.pdf) (accessed 19/12/2016).
- Küng, Hans and Jarl-Josef Kuschel, *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions*, (London: SCM Press, 1993).
- Küng, Hans, *Spurensuche: Die Weltreligionen auf dem Weg*, (München: Piper, 1999).
- Küng, Hans and Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Wissenschaft und Weltethos*, (München: Piper, 2001).
- Küng, Hans, *Wozu Weltethos? Religion und Ethik in Zeiten der Globalisierung* (Freiburg: Herder, 2002).
- Küng, Hans and Dieter Senghaas (eds.), *Friedenspolitik: Ethische Grundlagen internationaler Beziehungen*, (München: Piper, 2003).
- Küng, Hans, *Der Islam: Geschichte, Gegenwart, Zukunft*, (München: Piper, 2004).
- Küng, Hans, Klaus M. Leisinger, et al., *Manifest Globales Wirtschaftsethos (Manifesto Global Economic Ethic)*, (München: dtv, 2010).
- Küng, Hans, *Was ich glaube*, (München: Piper, 2010).
- Küng, Hans, *Handbuch Weltethos: Eine Vision und ihre Umsetzung*, (München: Piper, 2012).
- Küng, Hans, *Was bleibt: Kerngedanken*, (München: Piper, 2013).
- Küng, Hans, *Glücklich sterben*, (München: Piper, 2014).
- Kuschel, Karl-Joseph and Stephan Schlensoog (eds.), *Hans Küng: Eine Nahaufnahme*, (München: Piper, 2008).
- Kuschel, Karl-Joseph, *Leben ist Brückenschlagen*, (Stuttgart: Patmos, 2011).
- Lay, Rupert, *Die zweite Aufklärung: Eine Einführung in den Konstruktivismus*, (Monsenstein and Vannerdat, 2015).
- Lay, Rupert, *Über die Liebe zum Leben: Die Ethik im Konstruktivismus als Ausdruck der Biophilie*, (Hamburg: Tredition, 2017).
- Lind, Michael, 'Let's Abolish Social Science', <https://thesmartset.com/lets-abolish-social-science/>, 25/8/2015 (accessed 23/12/2017).
- Locke, Kevin, 'Kevin Locke on his NRL Comeback', *One News (TVNZ)*, 21/3/17 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkOkYUZIWy0>, accessed 23/3/17).
- Lourenço, Eduardo, *A Europa Desencantada: Para uma Mitologia Europeia*, (Lisboa: Gradiva, 2005).
- McEwan, Ian, 'Christopher Hitchens, Consummate Writer, Brilliant Friend', <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/18/opinion/christopher-hitchens-consummate-writer-brilliant-friend.html?mcubz=3>, 16/12/2011 (accessed 21/8/2017).
- Mikhailov, P.I. *I.A. Brodsky*, (Moscow: Prospekt, 2017).
- Mishra, Pankaj, 'Welcome to the Age of Anger', <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/dec/08/welcome-age-anger-brexite-trump>, 8/12/2016 (accessed 20/12/2016)
- Mollgaard, Eske, 2015, 'Political Confucianism and the Politics of Confucian Studies'. *Dao* (14): 2015, pp. 391-402.

- Nabokov, Vladimir, *The Luzhin Defence (Zashchita Luzhina)*, (Berlin: Slovo, 1930).
- Nabokov, Vladimir, *The Gift (Dar')*, (Paris: Sovremennye Zapiski, 1937).
- Nabokov, Vladimir, *Course of Russian Literature (Curso de Literatura Rusa)*, trad. Maria Luisa Balseiro (Barcelona: Zeta, 2009 (1981)).
- Nagel, Thomas, 'Pecking Order: John Gray's *The Silence of Animals*', [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/07/books/review/john-grays-silence-of-animals.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=2&ref=books&pagewanted=all&](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/07/books/review/john-grays-silence-of-animals.html?pagewanted=1&_r=2&ref=books&pagewanted=all&), 5/7/13 (accessed 15/10/2017).
- Nolan, Jonathan et al., *Person of Interest*, (Warner Bros. Television, 2011-2016).
- Nussbaum, Martha, 'The Fragility of Goodness', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWfK1E4L--c&t=341s>, 29/9/2011 (accessed 24/5/2017).
- Nussbaum, Martha C., *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, (Princeton University Press, 2013).
- Nussbaum, Martha C., *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, (Cambridge: Bellknapp, 2013).
- Orsenna, Erik, *Grand Amour*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993).
- Orsenna, Erik, *La Vie, La Mort, La Vie: Louis Pasteur (1822-1895)*, (Fayard, 2015).
- Östlund, Ruben, *The Square*, (Plattform Produktion et al., 2017).
- Paul, Gregor, 'Steve Hansen on His All Blacks Inspiration', [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/rugby/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=80&objectid=11909578](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/rugby/news/article.cfm?c_id=80&objectid=11909578), 23/8/2017 (accessed 15/10/2017).
- Pizzolatto, Nic, *True Detective*, (HBO, 2014-).
- Poniatowska, Elena, *El universo o nada*, (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta Mexicana, 2013).
- Ramadan, Tariq, *Introduction à l'éthique islamique (Introduction to Islamic Ethics)*, (Paris: Châtelet, 2015).
- Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, (Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- Sansal, Boualem, *Gouverner au nom d'Allah*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2013).
- Sansal, Boualem, *2084*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2015).
- Sansal, Boualem, 'Ecrire dans la violence du monde', *Rencontres International de Genève*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjmBOGi6VxQ> (accessed 31/10/2016).
- Scarry, Elaine, 'Poetry Changed the World: Injury and the Ethics of Reading', <http://bostonreview.net/poetry-arts-culture/poetry-changed-world-elaine-scarry> (accessed 20/12/2016).
- Schaad, Alex, *The Invention of Trust*, (Donndorffilm, 2016).
- Schlenzog, Stephan, *Der Hinduismus: Glaube, Geschichte, Ethos*, (München: Piper, 2006).
- Scruton, Roger, 'Scientism in the Arts and Humanities', <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/scientism-in-the-arts-and-humanities>, Fall 2013 (accessed 25/08/2017).
- Scruton, Roger, *The Soul of the World*, (Princeton University Press, 2014).
- Shore, David et al., *House*, (Universal, 2004-2012).
- Showalter, Michael, *The Big Sick*, (FilmNation Entertainment/Amazon Studios, 2017).

Simon, David, *The Wire*, (HBO, 2002-2008).

Slimani, Leila, *Chanson Douce (Sweet Song)*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2016).

Slimani, Leila, 'Leila Slimani parle de son roman *Chanson Douce*', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ftDYhYIqpM>, 9/9/2016 (accessed 27/5/2017).

Smith, David Livingstone, 'Freud the Philosopher', <https://aeon.co/essays/from-philosophy-to-psychoanalysis-a-classic-freudian-move>, 10/8/2017 (accessed 19/8/2017).

Swidler, Leonard, *Dialogue for Interreligious Understanding*, (Palgrave, 2014).

Swidler, Leonard, 'Dialogue Decalogue', <http://dialogueinstitute.org/dialogue-principles/> (accessed 8/8/2017).

Tolstoy, Leo, *O Zhizni (On Life)*, (1869), [http://rvb.ru/tolstoy/01text/vol\\_17\\_18/vol\\_17/01text/0349.htm](http://rvb.ru/tolstoy/01text/vol_17_18/vol_17/01text/0349.htm) (accessed 12/12/2016).

Tu Weiming, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity: Essays on the Confucian Discourse in Cultural China*, (New Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilisations, 2010).

Tu Weiming, *Ershiyi Shiji de Ruxue (Confucianism in the 21st Century)*, (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2014).

Tu Weiming, 'Spiritual Humanism: An Emerging Global Discourse.' [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ya-isyq6c\\_I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ya-isyq6c_I), 18/12/2015 (accessed 11 August 2016).

Tu Weiming, *Wenming duihua zhong de rujia (Confucianism in Civilisational Dialogue)*, (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 2016).

de Unamuno, Miguel, *Amor y Pedagogía (Love and Pedagogy)*, (Madrid: Alianza, 2000(1902)).

Useem, Jerry, 'Power Causes Brain Damage', <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/07/power-causes-brain-damage/528711/>, July/August 2017 (accessed 19/8/2017).

Zhao Tingyang, 'All-Under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism: An Old Story and New World Peace', in Fred Dallmayr and Zhao Tingyang (eds.), *Contemporary Chinese Political Thought: Debates and Perspectives*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), pp. 46-66.

Zweig, Stefan, *Érasme: Grandeur et décadence d'une idée (Triumph und Tragik des Erasmus von Rotterdam)*, trad. Alzir Hella (Paris: Éditions Grasset, 1935).

Those who have read to the end of this book are invited to consider the following conundrum.

On the one hand, Adonis writes in *Poetry's Time (Zaman al-Shi'r)* (1972):

If we want to reap material benefit from poetic forms and accord them influence in our everyday lives, use them to change our ideas, then we are at the level of advertising, not at the level of poetry. I am not against advertising, or against the use of poetic and visual imagery in advertising, but I am against calling things by their wrong names. In this context, we could say that, very often, what is described as 'poetry' [...] is merely advertising for something else. There is no unity in the language of advertising between form and content; that is the business of poetry. There is no fixed content in this sphere, no fixed form; the content here is not an idea but a state of being; the form is not a template, but rather an image or structure of such a state. A poem is a living thing, born as a self-contained whole, in a single moment.

On the other hand, if Hans Küng's *Projekt Weltethos* is indeed to remain a 'project', then some form of 'advertising' would seem to be required for it. Karl Schlecht has, in his entrepreneurial zeal, relentlessly insisted on the diffusion of a 'World Ethos' logo:



The reader of this book is invited to accept the following challenge: can she come up with a better one? As orientation, the following quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer: 'All meaning in life is realised when love is present.'

Beyond his widely publicised attempts to reform Vatican politics in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, Swiss theologian Hans Küng (1928-) is best known as the architect of the *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic (Erklärung zum Weltethos)*, signed by religious leaders from around the world at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1993.

Twenty-five years on from this historic event, Küng's *Weltethos* project has fallen from the radar of international concern. This book returns to the roots of Küng's vision, to the development of what he calls 'Basic Trust in life' (*Lebensvertrauen* or *Grundvertrauen*). 'Without this Basic Trust', Küng boldly claims, 'no one can behave ethically.'

Echoes of this theme are then recovered from the annals of World Literature, with a view to reorienting the conversation around Küng's legacy away from legalistic definitions of a 'Global Ethic' - a list of ethical principles for the entire world - and towards a 'World Ethos' - a spirit of concern for the meaning of one's life as a whole.



*Jonathan Keir (Auckland, 1982-) was a Research Fellow at the University of Tübingen's Weltethos Institut from 2014 to 2017.*



Karl Schlecht  
Stiftung

