

Beyond Orientalism*

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In a post-colonial, postmodern world, what is the intellectual ground on which Asia and Europe can meet and communicate? Historically the meeting place between East and West has often been a place of fantasies, mutual misunderstandings and projections. Have we now at last dispelled the illusions and stereotypes of a previous age? Do we now stand within the global clearing of a single world - beyond orientalism? What can we hope to gain from the meeting of Asia and Europe on this newly cleared ground? The multicultural, globalising conditions which prevail at the close of the century make urgent the need to address these questions, and I argue for a diligent cross-cultural inquiry and educational strategy which is based on the ideals of interactive pluralism which both respects traditional loyalties and identities, yet which is able to set them in creative, agonistic interaction with each other.

I begin with a quotation from that icon of British imperialism, Rudyard Kipling, not though his famous lines concerning the impossibility of the meeting of East and West, but rather the subsequent less often quoted lines:

But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth, When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth.

In this paper I want to address the question how East and West can meet in this post-imperial, postmodern age, to ask what is the intellectual ground on which can we meet, and what is the cultural space in which Asia and Europe can communicate? Historically the meeting place between East and West has often been a place of illusions, mutual misunderstandings and hostile projections. The exotic, mysterious, despotic East of Western imagination has been complemented by an Asian image of the West as a decadent materialistic utopia, 'Asiatic hordes' matched by 'red-headed devils'. Have we now at last dispelled the illusions and stereotypes of a previous age? Do we now stand within the global clearing of a single world in which, at last, we can engage in a true and fruitful dialogue? Have we gone 'beyond orientalism' - and occidentalism?

For Edward Said, it will be recalled, 'Orientalism' has been Europe's way of representing the East. It has, according to him, involved an attitude of patronising superiority on the part of Western scholars towards the East, an attitude which was the accompaniment to and the valorisation of the imperial expansion of the European powers. The Orient, on this view, was the archetypal 'other' which was not

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just the product of common xenophobia, but rather a means towards the self-definition of Europe, and the affirmation of its cultural hegemony, of the sense of its special role in the order of things, and hence its right to trade, convert, conquer, and control.¹

Some believe that little has changed. The hegemony of Europe, they argue, did not end with the lowering of flags of empire, and the imperial levers of power are still just as effectively operated as they were previously by the more overt and formal institutions of empire. We are still left with what Salman Rushdie has referred to as 'the empire within'.

Nevertheless it is arguable that the conditions under which East and West meet have changed drastically in the last decades of the twentieth century. European self-questioning, even its self-destruction in intellectual terms, has progressed rapidly. The modernist Enlightenment conceptual framework on which the orientalist project rested has been shaken to its foundations. This has been accompanied by a worldwide cultural explosion in which an unprecedented multiplication of channels of international communication and interaction has accompanied a remarkable economic transformation in Asia, a transformation in which the current economic crisis may be only a temporary check.

This globalising process means that Europe itself has been superseded by the process of modernising which it initiated. Modernisation is, in so many ways, no longer equivalent to Westernisation. There has certainly been a concerted attempt on the part of intellectuals, both Western and Eastern, to transcend the Orientalist paradigm, even to the point of veering at times towards a radical anti-Eurocentrism, sometimes referred to as 'Occidentosis', the hatred of all things Western, or 'Third Worldism', namely an attitude of mind which encourages the West's sense of post-colonial guilt and self-contempt, its self-laceration for the crimes of empire. Even Edward Said himself has come to believe that in a post-colonial period, with increasingly sophisticated scholarship and a growing 'critical consciousness', a post-orientalist epoch may be arriving in which East and West can approach each other without the encumbrance of former prejudices and distorting assumptions.

These new globalising conditions which now prevail, however we assess their continuing European tilt, or indeed their increasing Asian inclination, make even more urgent the need for understanding between Asia and Europe, for a diligent cross-cultural inquiry which yet remains conscious of the dangers of Orientalism. As Ninian Smart expresses it,

We now exist in a global civilization. We need a global interplay between values and world-views.²

This implies, in my view, an interactive pluralism which both respects traditional loyalties and identities yet which is able to set them in creative interaction with each other. The political philosopher John Gray speaks of this as a 'rivalrous encounter of ideas and values in the context of peaceful co-existence', premised on a form of 'radical toleration' which demands, not just grudging acceptance, but willingness to

1 See Said, E.: *Orientalism*, Harmondsworth, 1978.

2 Ninian Smart: *Philosophy East and West*, 1994, 44:2, p. 411.

learn from the 'other'.³ It is worth reminding ourselves that the interaction of values and world-views between Asia and Europe has a long history and, far from being uniformly oppressive of the 'other' as Said once argued, has frequently been transformative to both sides. As Joseph Needham put it:

For three thousand years a dialogue has been going on between the two ends of the Old World. Greatly have they influenced each other.⁴

Arguably, the instruments of both the scientific and industrial revolutions and of laissez-faire capitalism, usually seen as typically Western inventions, were originally forged in Asia, were further developed in Europe, and are now streaming back into Asia. The intellectual and cultural significance of this dialogue of civilisations is now even more important than ever and is, I believe, at the heart of the postmodern, globalised world that we have now entered.

This new post-orientalist, post-colonial ground on which we meet is not always easy to traverse, however, and there are many dangers and obstacles that lie along the new Silk Road between Europe and Asia. One only has to look at the current economic crisis to realise that, while the expansion of global markets can open up lines of communication in all fields and facilitate mutual co-operation, the collapse of these markets can lead to introversion and renewed protectionism, and even possibly to the reversal of the tide of globalisation. Looking beyond this immediate crisis, there have emerged a number of new obstacles to the communication between the two 'ends of the earth', beyond those constructed by the old orientalist and imperialist enterprises. For example, there is the resurgence of nationalism after the end of the Cold War, the revival of extreme right-wing politics in Europe and America, and the growth of religious fundamentalisms. Asian nations such as Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia have emerged as self-conscious and independent powers, and above all there is the renewal of China's power and self-confidence after long centuries of humiliating treatment by the West.

The globalising processes which have broken down many ethnic barriers, and opened up new possibilities for cultural and intellectual exchange, have also encouraged the demand for recognition and independence by particular groups, interests, and nations which can lead to defensive or hostile attitudes towards the 'other'. This is evident in the resurgence of Hinduism in recent years, and in the assertion of Islamic values and consciousness leading to strong anti-Western feeling and reaction against the 'Westoxification' of Muslim societies. On the European side, there is the development of economic and political union in Europe, with its increasing political integration, which could lead towards an increasing cultural narcissism, particularly if it is drawn into a world economic recession. And at the other end of the Silk Road there is the resurgence of Asian consciousness, the 'Asianisation of Asia', riding on the wave of rapid and unprecedented economic and social transformation. This transformation is viewed by some, such as Lee Kuan Yew, as evidence of the superiority of the Confucian system of values, and has

3 John Gray: *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age*, London, 1995:84.

4 Joseph Needham: *Within the Four Seas: The Dialogue of East and West*, London, 1969, p. 11.

inevitably produced a new form of cultural questioning, in particular concerning the role of European models in the creation of specifically Asian forms of modernity, which might serve to distance and alienate Asia from the West.⁵ A similar attitude is evident in the case of Islamic cultures where over the past few decades there has been a marked shift away from the attitude 'We must Westernise' to the assertion, not just of difference, but of moral and cultural superiority to the materialistic, godless West. The new Silk Road, the new global superhighway, opens up the world, yet simultaneously closes it down.

This paradoxical situation, one in which we are both impelled into a single world environment yet which at the same time fragments and divides us, is a reflection on the fact that orientalism itself has in the past often been caught in a dialectical tension between the extremes of globalism and universalism on the one hand, and on the other pluralism and particularism: it tends towards a universalistic outlook which transcends cultural boundaries and encourages an inter-cultural convergence, yet it also affirms local and regional differences and tends to nurture the unique particularity of cultures which stand in contrast with each other, even in mutual incomprehension. What I intend to do now is to offer some brief reflections on these two meta-narratives as we might call them, and on the contended space that lies between them. This will, I believe, not only bring out some of the characteristics of the encounter between Asian and Western cultures, both in their historical and contemporary perspectives, but also underline its central intellectual importance for us today. I am inevitably going to be selective and schematic.

Universalism in its various forms has a long pedigree in Europe. The thinking of Leibniz offers a useful example. In his pursuit of the perennial philosophy he sought, not only a solution to the catastrophic religious divisions and wars in Europe, but also a way of building a bridge between European and Chinese philosophy which he believed to be fundamentally compatible with each other, and which led to the establishment of the Berlin Academy of Sciences in 1700 which he envisioned as a means for 'the interchange of civilization between China and Europe'.⁶ His thinking in this respect is often said to have led, in the long run, to the establishment of the United Nations, an institution which of course is founded on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a principle embedded in the Enlightenment ideal of universal human reason and belief in the fundamental unity of human nature and human values.

In the middle years of this century, in the face of a different kind of cataclysm, the philosopher C.A. Moore inspired a universalist movement in the late 1930s which sought nothing less than a 'world philosophical synthesis'. In his opening address to the East-West philosophers' conference of 1939 in Hawaii Moore declared that its purpose was to forge a synthesis of the ideas and ideals of East and West, a purpose

5 Kishore Mahbubani: 'Asia and a United States in Decline', *Washington Quarterly*, Spring 1994, pp. 5-23, and S. Huntington: *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, 1996, p. 108.

6 A. Reichwein: *China and Europe: Intellectual and Artistic Contacts in the Eighteenth Century*, London, 1925, p. 81. See also Mungello, D.: *Leibniz and Confucianism: the Search for Accord*, Honolulu, 1977.

which was driven by what he saw as the West's need for a 'wider perspective', one which would be suitable for

a truly cosmopolitan and international world order, in which diverse basic conceptions and resultant evaluations of the two cultures are combined into a single world civilization.⁷

More recently still, the universalist model has appeared in the 'end of history' thesis advanced by Francis Fukuyama in which he announced

the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.⁸

Allied to this has been the belief in the universal applicability of Western-created economic models, a belief which has been challenged by the articulation of an alternative Confucian model, and indeed on which recent events in Asia and Russia have themselves cast serious doubt.

A particular form of universalism which came into vogue in the middle years of the century goes under the heading of 'complementarity'. Here the key to East-West understanding was seen, not in the fusion of differences, but in the recognition of a fundamental reciprocity between the two different civilisations, in particular between the spiritual propensity of the one and the scientific rationalism of the other, and the need to broker a 'marriage of East and West' in which harmony was to be achieved through the recognition of the unity of opposites. The philosopher F.S.C. Northrop, for example, who participated in the Hawaii East-West conferences, argued that fundamental differences between Asian and Western ways of thinking, characterised broadly speaking by the distinction between intuition and reason, represented mutually balancing aspects of a single world philosophy. Writing at the time of the foundation of the United Nations, he believed that this philosophy would in time provide the foundation for the emergence of a unified and peaceful world order.⁹ A similar kind of project was undertaken by the psychotherapist C.G. Jung. According to him the traditional East was predominantly introvert in its outlook, the West predominantly extrovert, the balanced interaction of these complementary factors being a key to both psychological and cultural wholeness.¹⁰

Universalism has certainly proved highly contentious in recent times, not least over the issue of universal human rights. In broad philosophical terms, it has been viewed on the one hand as the foundation stone of a universal conception of humanity, and to the establishment of a rationally compelling set of values that all can subscribe, and hence a basis for global understanding and reconciliation. On the other hand it has also often been seen in more divisive terms, as a totalising metaphysics which obliterates cultural differences, as a way of privileging of Western over Asian values, as a product of the Hegelian subordination of Asian to European thought, and as a part of what Husserl called 'The Europeanization of all foreign parts of

7 C.A. Moore: *Philosophy East and West*, Princeton, 1946, pp. vii & 234.

8 Francis Fukuyama: 'The End of History', *The National Interest*, Summer 1989, p. 4.

9 F.S.C. Northrop: *The Meeting of East and West*, New York, 1946.

10 See J.J. Clarke: *Jung and Eastern Thought: A Dialogue with the Orient*, London, 1994, pp. 66-9.

mankind' which he believed to be 'the destiny of the earth'.¹¹ On this view universalism is not merely a manifestation of a particular school of European philosophy, but is inscribed in the very heart of the Western imperialist mentality. The handsome prince of benign universality turns out to be the ugly toad of imperialistic oppression.

The complementarity model has also come in for much criticism of late, particularly from a deconstructionist methodology which characterises it, not only as essentialising East and West, and thereby obscuring internal differences, but also as a discriminating form of binary discourse, demeaning to Asian thought in the way that polarised gender language is thought to be demeaning to the female sex, the East representing the weak, female, irrational set of characteristics, contrasting poorly with the masculine, rational and dynamic qualities of the West.

In spite of these post-colonial critiques we need to recall that the universalistic model has had its advocates amongst Asian intellectuals as well. One of its most eminent proponents was the Indian philosopher and statesman, Radhakrishnan, an advocate in his day of a particular form of universalism associated with Neo-Hinduism. Hinduism as such has always been associated with a tolerant, eclectic outlook, a creed based on the spiritual oneness of the universe and which teaches the underlying identity of all creeds. From the time of Rammohan Roy in the early nineteenth century, through Vivekananda to Radhakrishnan, this kind of universalism has been associated with the desire to find some kind of mediation between Indian and Western traditions. Radhakrishnan was himself a leading exponent of the ideal of intellectual and spiritual convergence, and of global dialogue and understanding. In his many writings he sought nothing less than the laying of the groundwork for a genuinely cosmopolitan philosophical and religious discourse, in which 'a cross-fertilisation of ideas and insights ... a great unification [will] take place in the deeper fabric of men's thoughts', and will lead to 'a world society with a universal religion of which the historical faiths are but branches'.¹²

Some critics such as Wilhelm Halbfass have suspected that this accommodation is a covert form of inclusivism in which other traditions such as Christianity are simply contained within the wider embrace of Hinduism.¹³ Nevertheless there is certainly a strong pluralistic strain in Radhakrishnan's thinking which respects and recognises the validity of many different ways to ultimate truth. This leads to a consideration of pluralistic models. As with the universalistic variety, these have often, particularly in the form of multiculturalism, come to be seen as divisive and dangerously conflictual. In recent times there are plenty of examples of the way in which pluralistic outlooks can lead to intolerant ethnic strife; one only has to look at Bosnia and Sri Lanka, though Singapore seems to have handled things differently. And indeed there are those who believe that a pluralistic, multi-culturalist tendency is destined to tear apart the social coherence of both the United States and Russia. On an even wider stage pluralism has been associated with certain somewhat

11 See W. Halbfass: *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*, Albany, 1988, p. 437.

12 Radhakrishnan: *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, Oxford, 1939, pp. 51 & 347-8.

13 Halbfass, *ibid.*, 1988, Ch.13.

modish rightist ideas such as those of Samuel Huntington. He dismisses any idea of a single world civilisation, and though he does not precisely advocate contest - quite the contrary - he sees the 'clash of civilizations' as an inevitable and key feature of the emerging postmodern, post-Cold War world order. Pluralism for him means a plurality of civilisations which are in endemic conflict with each other and whose cultural identities are not mutually negotiable.¹⁴

A now much favoured form of pluralism is associated with hermeneutics and with the notion of dialogue. 'Dialogue' is a term which has indeed achieved almost cult status of late, and its increasing use is seen by some to represent a profound cultural shift, especially evident in the field of inter-faith encounter where, according to one theologian, we are moving 'from the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue'.¹⁵ John Hick has even characterised this shift as a new 'Copernican Revolution' in which Christianity has seen itself displaced from the central location in which it has always viewed itself, and relocated alongside other religious traditions, and in fruitful dialogue with them, even leading to the reconstruction of Christian theology.¹⁶ At the other end of the dialogue, the Zen Buddhist Masao Abe believes that exchanges between Buddhism and Christianity have gone beyond the stage of promoting mutual understanding and are leading towards their mutual transformation.¹⁷

Hermeneutics is one way of giving theoretical substance to the rather vague notion of dialogue, viewed by thinkers such as the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, not as a cosy chat but as a challenging encounter of traditions, based not on intuitive insight of the other but of the confrontation between one's own historically-based prejudices and the texts and traditions of other cultures. Gadamer's important insight here is that true communication at whatever level means, not the obliteration of differences, of border, breed and birth, but rather their fully self-conscious recognition, and their integration into the process of dialogue. Important for Gadamer, therefore, is the tension of the relationship between understanding and difference, for it is the very diversity and plurality of outlook and perspective, not their mutual absorption or melding, which is the necessary condition for understanding of any kind.¹⁸ In the words of Emmanuel Levinas, it is only through the 'radical separation, the strangeness of the interlocutors [that] the revelation of the other to me' becomes possible.¹⁹ The very possibility of dialogue, indeed of understanding itself, presupposes distance, but a distance through which, not only the other becomes revealed, but also a more self-aware, more self-critical understanding becomes possible; in the words of Richard Bernstein,

14 Huntington, *ibid.*, 1996.

15 L. Swidler: *Death or Dialogue: From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue*, London, 1990, p. vii.

16 J. Hick: *God and the Universe of Faiths*, Oxford, 1973.

17 J. Cobb and C. Ives (eds): *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, Maryknoll NY, 1991, p. 3.

18 Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Truth and Method*, London, 1975.

19 Emmanuel Levinas: *Totality and Infinity*, Pittsburgh, 1969, p. 73.

it is only through an engaged encounter with the Other that one comes to a more informed, textured understanding of the traditions to which "we" belong.²⁰

This sort of pluralism, therefore, is not the mere obdurate antagonism or 'clash' of incommensurable opposites, but rather the creative tension that exists between contrasting voices which are prepared to listen to each other and share differences as much as similarities.

But our two strong men must not rush ahead here into each other's embrace. Could it be that this 'hermeneutics of difference', as it is called, simply perpetuates colonial, Eurocentric attitudes? Gadamer has been criticised for insufficient awareness of the underlying political interests, racist attitudes, and of ideological manipulation, of the repressed inequalities that are disguised through humanistic talk of dialogue. Is a true hermeneutical engagement possible as long as, in Heidegger's phrase, East-West dialogue 'shifts everything into European'?²¹ Is dialogue simply a way of belatedly shoring up the West's collapsing hegemonic status? The largely Western impetus behind, for example, the inter-faith dialogue has led some such as the Japanese theologian Joseph Kitagawa to wonder whether dialogue is merely used 'as a gimmick to camouflage the bankruptcy of the historical missionary approach of the Western Churches'.²² We converse for the most part in a European language; we may allow that this is a matter of practical convenience - after all English is the predominant language of international commerce. But at the same time we need to be aware of the subtle implications this may have for the way in which we conduct our proceedings. The Indian cultural critic Aijaz Ahmad believes that the currently more friendly East-West field of studies is simply one more medium through which the global authority of the West is inscribed in the 'new world order'; difference is simply contained within the dominant culture.²³ Perhaps the very reference to the relationship between 'Asia' and 'Europe', or between 'East' and 'West', perpetuates an old orientalist duality. Moreover, the fact that we seem fated to use this vocabulary provokes the question whether, for all our good intentions, we can escape the biases that our histories and languages impose on us.

Having raised these questions, I confess to not knowing the answers. Indeed 'knowing the answers' might well be part of the problem. The Enlightenment project which we seem to be moving beyond encourages us to believe that all questions have answers and these answers, along with their mode of proof, can be expressed in a single, universal, rational frame of discourse. This approach may be useful in the natural sciences, but in the realm of human affairs it is both false and dangerous. In the human sciences I tend to agree with thinkers such as Isaiah Berlin that it is an illusion to suppose that all knowledge can be unified in a single system of thought under the discipline of a single methodology. There are limits to mutual understanding and to the possible resolution of inter-cultural difficulties. Now more than

20 E. Deutsch (ed): *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophic Perspectives*, Honolulu, 1991, p. 93.

21 Martin Heidegger: *On the Way to Language*, New York, 1971, p. 4.

22 Joseph Kitagawa: *The Quest for Human Unity*, Philadelphia, 1990, p. 11.

23 Aijaz Ahmad: *In Theory: Classes, Nations, and Literatures*, London, 1992.

ever we need to learn from chaos theory, let alone from the vicissitudes of the stock market, the sheer unpredictability of things. What follows from this is not necessarily anarchy or universal conflict as some conservative voices predict, but rich diversity, the very key to life itself in its interactive profusion, a culture-diversity to mirror the bio-diversity of the natural world. Though it is difficult to conceive of the world as a single reality, its very multiplicity, as Gadamer has shown, is precisely what makes communication, and even self-understanding, possible.

The value of this communicative abundance, and its potential for productive dialogue, is evident in the kinds of issues that arise at the meeting point of East and West. These issues have a long history in orientalist discourse, yet are especially relevant and emphatic at the present time. In the final part of my paper I shall list several broad categories of issue which seem to me of most significance and range of implication. In doing this I hope to reinforce my earlier claim that the point of encounter between Asia and Europe is at the very centre of the new world order.

First, there is the issue of modernity and its relation to tradition. The tension between tradition and modernity has been present in Europe since the Enlightenment, and orientalism itself, which first emerged in that period, helped to pose that problem in the European context where Asian ways of thinking have often been used as a critique of modernising tendencies. In the Asian context the issue is even more pressing because of the rapidity of the social and economic changes that are taking place. Earlier confrontations between the traditional ways of Asian nations and Westernising irruptions have now become pressing issues for politicians as well as scholars. Established ideas on the process of social development are now being recast in a context in which the Western meta-narratives of historical progress have been thoroughly disrupted, and, furthermore, have been subjected to radical questioning in Europe as well.

Secondly, there is the related question of identity, both personal and collective. At the level of the individual person there are tensions between traditional Asian and Western conceptions of the person, Western individualism often being confronted with Eastern communitarian values; an intriguing aspect of this is the way in which political and economic thinkers from both Asia and Europe are looking towards each other for alternative paradigms to confront contemporary problems. At a more abstract level there are issues about the nature of mind and consciousness which are increasingly benefiting from a multi-cultural approach. At the collective level there are issues concerning new identities, multiple and overlapping identities, the emergence of new nations, the re-alignment of old ones, the question of minorities and of ethnic and cultural diversity, and more widely still the cultural identities of Europe and Asia themselves. In the post-colonial and post Cold War period political and cultural boundaries are being redrawn, everything is in motion once again, precipitating a global identity crisis where the question 'Who are we?' can no longer be given a straight answer.

Thirdly, uncertainties over identity lead deeper into uncertainties over accepted forms of knowledge and valuation. Relativism has been a factor in European orientalism right from the start when ideas from the East were seized upon as a

counter-point to orthodoxy, and a newly self-confident Enlightenment Europe found itself confronted with civilisations in the East which, while fundamentally different in certain cultural respects, appeared to be as advanced and as sophisticated as Europe. Nowadays the issue of relativism is as hotly debated as ever, and increasingly it is drawing on an East-West comparative axis, not only as a way of enhancing empathy and openness towards difference, but in order to confront such perennial philosophical issues as the universal standing of knowledge, of values, and of rationality itself. Such questions represent merely the broad philosophical background to a whole range of more specific issues where the fusion of the horizons of Asian and European cultures generates controversial fall-out; the most conspicuous of these issues are: human rights, democracy, race and ethnicity, the family, the place of women in society, population and birth control.

Fourthly, the relativistic problematic provoked by these encounters has also entered deeply into the humanities. In the field of historiography we see a radical restructuring taking place in the light of what is sometimes called the decolonisation of European history, a rewriting of history from a post-colonial standpoint, calling into question a kind of historical writing based on Eurocentric assumptions. This has been accompanied by a new form of historical and cultural criticism in the shape of post-colonial and subaltern studies, a revoicing of repressed minorities which is having an impact on literary studies as well.

Fifthly, there are broadly-speaking spiritual issues. For example, when Buddhism first impinged significantly on the European consciousness in the nineteenth century, though it fascinated some radical minds such as Arthur Schopenhauer and Edwin Arnold, it was often treated as a threat to established belief, to be scorned or refuted. But a seachange has taken place over the past half-century, and now, as I mentioned earlier, the watchword is 'dialogue', and there are many for whom the encounter with Buddhism and other Asian religions demands a radical rethinking of traditional Christian formulations and spiritual practices. And beyond the orthodox systems there are echoes of ancient nature religions, pantheisms, polytheisms which find in traditions such as Daoism an inspiration for new more holistic, more ecologically sound ways of theorising our relationship with nature.

Finally, the environment itself is, of course, a key issue which will take more than the power of two strong men to grapple with, but exchanges between European and Asian thinkers in this area are certainly beginning to make an important contribution. There are of course sharp differences here between those in Europe who admonish Asia's emerging economies for recklessly polluting the environment, and those in Asia for whom such admonitions are simply a new form of imperialism. Philosophically there are more emollient exchanges taking place concerning the most appropriate paradigm with which to confront these most urgent environmental questions.²⁴

An important point of East-West contact concerning environmentalist thinking, involving a re-examination of fundamental assumptions about our relation to the

24 See for example Callicott, J.B. & Ames, R.T. (eds): *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, Albany, 1989.

natural world, is Daoist philosophy which, along with Buddhism and Hinduism, is increasingly seen as a catalyst in environmental thinking. What is particularly intriguing about Daoism in the context of contemporary thought is not only its relevance to urgent environmental problems, but also at a more abstract level its openness to difference, its perspectival/relativist outlook, and its recognition of the shifting and ungrounded nature of all knowledge. Daoism is, of course, along with Confucianism and Buddhism, one of the so-called 'Three Teachings', a syncretistic model which offers us an interesting mode of reflection on contemporary concerns with plural identities and multiple perspectives. Forged in China over a period of more than two thousand years, it is popularly associated with such aphorisms as 'Every Chinese person is a Confucian, a Daoist, and a Buddhist. He is a Confucian when things are going well, a Daoist when things are going badly, and a Buddhist when he is approaching death'. This syncretistic model succeeded, in spite of tensions and conflicts, in maintaining in the long run a harmony, a balanced tension between the three teachings, and was important in the construction of the Neo-Confucian synthesis in Korea as well as in China.²⁵

The very notion of syncretism has had a poor reception in the West, and right from the time of the first Jesuit missionaries in China in the 16th century has been identified with lack of principle, superficial eclecticism, and shoddy compromise of truth in pursuit of utilitarian goals. Yet the ability of syncretistic tendencies in China to maintain on the one hand the identity of different strands of thought and practice, each with its own unique and richly distinctive outlook, and on the other the possibility of cross-fertilisation and productive dialogue between them, has, as Wing-tsit Chan has argued, considerable relevance today on a much wider stage.²⁶ In particular it provides a useful antidote to certain patterns of cultural reflection which have predominated in the West, of which Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* thesis is perhaps only the latest, and which has tended to see culture as a homeric battlefield in which different heroes struggle with one another to death. Even in Darwinism nowadays the old emphasis on competition is giving way to the idea of co-operation as the main key to survival.

The Chinese syncretistic model is not one that can simply be copied, but it is, I believe, a source from which we can draw inspiration for the cultivation of a new openness and dialogue between the two ends of the earth, indeed an inspiration that can be drawn not only from the traditions of China, but also from the Neo-Hindu traditions of India, and the hermeneutical traditions of Europe; all of these in their unique way promise to contribute to the opening up of a new post-orientalist discourse that can transcend without obliterating 'border, breed and birth'. Some fifty years ago Arnold Toynbee, the historian of civilisations, was asked what he thought would be singled out by future historians as the most important event of our time, and he answered: not the century's catastrophic political and economic events, but rather the impact of West on East and of East on West leading to the end of the

25 See Berling, J.: *The Syncretic Religion of Lin Chao-en*, New York, 1980, and Chung, E.: *The Korean Neo-Confucianism of Yi Toegye & Yi Yulgok*, Albany, 1995.

26 See C.A. Moore (ed): *The Chinese Mind*, Honolulu, 1967, p.67.

age-old parochial divisions of the civilisations of Asia and Europe.²⁷ His further prophecy that this global convergence would result from a world-wide religious renewal seems to me implausible, even frightening. Nevertheless a convergence in some form is already taking place, and offers us the alluring prospect of a creative dialogue arising out of single world of many different centres of culture, value, and thought, different yet co-operating, diverse yet convergent. In an alarmingly unstable world this not an inevitable outcome, but it remains an ideal to be struggled for, a formidable undertaking for scholars and educators, as well as for politicians, though not an impossible one for those willing to meet face to face, 'though they come from the ends of the earth'.²⁸

27 Arnold Toynbee: *Civilization on Trial*, Oxford, 1948, p.213.

28 Some of these points have been elaborated in greater detail in my book, *Oriental Enlightenment: the Encounter between Asian and Western Thought*, London, 1997.