

THE UNITED NATIONS, RELIGION, AND GLOBAL PROBLEMS: FACING A CRISIS OF CIVILIZATION

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Now that humankind faces the danger of self-destruction through nuclear holocaust or through ecological death, it is essential to mobilize all spiritual forces in order to overcome this crisis. The United Nations as a universal world organization created by the peoples of the world to guarantee its peace and prosperity is the only multilateral institution which can effectively mobilize all nations to cooperate in the face of this urgent task.

This was, for example, the very reason why the late Secretary General, U Thant, a devout Buddhist intellectual, initiated the organization of UN conferences on global issues such as the environment and overpopulation.

He also created the United Nations University in hopes that intellectuals, especially the intellectual youth, could come together from different cultural horizons and diverse spiritual traditions, to provide a global vision indispensable for coping

Buddhism and Nonviolent Global Problem-Solving

with these "pressing global problems of human survival, development and welfare" (UNU Charter, paragraph 1).

Indeed, a universal vision taking stock of different spiritual traditions is required in face of the contemporary world crisis since this crisis is not only economic, political and social, but fundamentally a crisis of civilization.

A crisis, according to the ideograms composing this word in Chinese, is a combination of "danger" and "opportunity." The contemporary global crisis is, indeed, a danger for the whole of humankind to annihilate not only itself but also all living beings under the sun. It is also an opportunity to go beyond the present Eurocentric civilization, which owes all its major features to historical developments which took place in Europe since the sixteenth century, to a truly global civilization built on the rich multifarious cultural and spiritual heritages of humankind.

The modern Western secular civilization has provided the different peoples of the world with the material base for a better standard of living as well as with the ideological foundation of a society guaranteeing the fundamental freedom and inalienable rights of each individual person.

Beyond all superstition and obscurantism inherent in premodern religious cultures, Western atheism proclaimed the fact that human beings, i.e. all the peoples of the world, were the master of their own destiny. Western secularism guaranteed the social progress of civil societies supported by the states.

However, this process of human liberation and social progress was accompanied by a process of accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of a few nations and transnational bodies. It also led to social and ecological exploitation and depletion so that nowadays the civilizing process originating in Europe has reached its limits.

Facing a Crisis of Civilization

The contemporary world crisis is nothing but the consequence of this globalizing trend of Western civilization. It has now reached the point where the very sustainability of its growth is questionable, in terms of (1) ecological sustainability, (2) social sustainability and (3) spiritual sustainability. In ecological terms, the very support systems indispensable to life have been over-exploited to such an extent that if the current consumerism is not curbed life cannot continue. In social terms, the sustainable development of societies with an accumulation of wealth and power is becoming unsustainable if it is at the expense of the weak and the poor and if such exploitation continues. In spiritual terms, the very roots of legitimacy of any social/political/economic institution are unsustainable unless the human persons constituting different communities regain their identity and full autonomy beyond the present trends toward alienation. We now face a crisis of human values where the very driving forces of the present materialistic and secular civilization, i.e. wealth and power, lose their purpose of enriching and empowering the people and turn instead into sheer greed and pure thirst for power.

Since this is indeed a spiritual crisis there is an opportunity for different spiritual traditions to play a constructive role in building a new civilization beyond the present material and secular civilization. Here, perhaps, resides the only hope.

Buddhism, among other religions, has several teachings needed in the current crisis. First, it has a specific mission in enlightening all peoples of the world in seeking to free their minds from greed and power. Second, the pluralism of the middle path guarantees mutual tolerance among different ideologies. Third, its teaching of *ahimsa*, nonviolence and care for all living beings, is the only base upon which the coming global civilization can be sustained.

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It is in this sense that the UN University has conducted a project on Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Christian perceptions of desirable societies. The UN University considers it essential to develop an in-depth dialogue among these and other spiritual families.

This dialogue should be a search that digs the wells of each religious tradition in hopes of finding common underground water currents. It should not be a mere shallow mutual concession for the sake of peace among religions.

This dialogue should not be an exercise of pure philosophy but rather it should emphasize a praxis which manifests compassion for and empathy with the "last child" as it was so well put by Gandhi.

In representing this worldwide movement of the various peoples of the world, the United Nations should search for the underlying spiritual force indispensable for solving the present crisis.

This is why the Ulan Bator seminar is of the greatest importance to the United Nations.