



China Centre Tübingen Opening Ceremony, 21.04.2016

Keynote Speech: Prof. Tu Wei-ming

“On Humanity: Spiritual Humanity as an Emerging Global Discourse”

Rector Engler, Chairman Schlecht, Dr. Dongqi, Prof. Schmidt-Glintzer, distinguished guests!

I am greatly honoured to have this rare opportunity to witness the establishment of the China Centre at Tübingen University, China Centre Tübingen, CCT, is an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural forum as well as an institute of higher learning.

It is the realization of a two-fold idea to broaden the knowledge of China in Germany and through scholarly communication to enhance mutual understanding of our common destiny in a restless world today. This joint venture between an eminent university dedicated to the cultivation of the life of the mind and a foundation, the Karl Schlecht Foundation, noted for its commitment to the world ethos that will help cultivate a fiduciary community of trust throughout the world is in, my view, profoundly significant and important. As a beneficiary of these two great institutions and in the presence of both benefactors I would like to share a personal idea for your critical reflection. When I use the word personal I don't mean private. I mean something that I cherish personally and consider meaningful for me as a person, as a member of a community and it is of course publicly accountable, discussable, debatable, and even falsifiable. Many of you consider it highly idealistic but this is intended to be so.

The “Alliance of World Civilizations” is going to hold its annual meeting in Baku, Azerbaijan, on the 25th. It raises a very challenging question; are there still universal values that bring humanity together? More essential, I suppose, is the question: Is humanity itself a universal value that can evoke a sense of togetherness in a global community? And the word humanity in the Chinese can also be rendered as “ren” (仁) or benevolence.

Various significant attempts have been made to revitalize humanism as an enduring concern for reconfiguring a world order [such] that human beings can live together in an inclusive society (which is, of course, a major challenge right now in Europe). The deliberate effort to transcend abstract universalism in which harmony is misinterpreted as uniformity and the seemingly all-embracing idea of common destiny is merely disguised as a strategy for domination makes all sophisticated advocates of humanism in the 21st century wary about unilateralism.

Understandably the recognition of cultural diversity features prominently in humanistic thinking today. Many humanists are concerned with difference or accept difference as a precondition for harmony; harmony without uniformity; “he er bu tong” (和而不同) or, more positively, harmony that tolerates, recognizes and respects difference is the right path, whereas the demand for

conformity to a preconceived and often ideologised pattern of control is a distorted version of harmony.

Globalisation arguably is the more intensified process of modernisation, but in a deeper sense it is also a profoundly significant departure from modernisation, not to mention Westernisation. The spatial idea of the west and the temporal idea of the modern both imply a developmental strategy that leads to convergence and even homogenisation. Yet, globalisation also enhances localisation, nationalisation and regionalisation. It enables us to see a whole new spectrum of colour, sound, smell, taste, mood, emotion and sentiment associated with ethnicity, race, gender, language, age, place, class and faith. The human community has never been so differentiated and at the same time, due to advances in science and technology (especially information and communication technologies), it has never been so interconnected.

How do we envision harmony and diversity in a differentiated and interconnected community? I would like to offer an idea tentatively characterised as “spiritual humanism” as a response. From this perspective humanity is differentiated from and simultaneously interconnected with all modalities of being in the universe. It is unique but inseparable from everything else. The evolution of the human in its most authoritative story known to the scientific community today is a microcosm of the macrocosmic narrative of the so called Big Bang, 13.8 billion light-years involving the emergence of the sun, of the earth; in a planetary scale, the emergence of life, of animals and human species, is also an integral part of the same narrative. In this sense, to say that heaven and earth are our parents, as all Chinese say, is not a romantic assertion but an empirical statement. The sanctity of the earth is taken for granted, as of now; our universe is saturated with intrinsic value and numinous quality. This reality cannot be proved by empirical data, nor can it be grasped by reductive logic from natural sciences such as neurobiology. Rather, it is a religious faith which may or may not be theistic. The critical issue is to recognize that it has taken billions of years of fine-tuning all the elements - air, water, soil and numerous other factors - for us to emerge for a very brief moment.

We can dismiss the whole story, as many scientists do, as senseless; so much time, so long a period of time, and so short a duration of human life. However, we can also follow major and minor creation stories to accept the thesis that there is teleology in our existence. Of course, there are numerous other options. The onto-theological idea underlying Spinoza’s philosophy, which was a source of inspiration for Einstein, seems to be an excellent candidate - [though] it’s only one candidate - for articulating such an idea as the legal scholar Ronald Dworkin. In his book: “Religion without God,” in addition to Einstein, he also cites Paul Tillich and Carl Sagan to support this thesis that we should reject naturalism (in other words, it is just natural) and materialism (the world is made of nothing but material), and [should instead] have faith in what he calls the objective reality that there is meaning in life and nature has intrinsic value.

From the spiritual humanistic point of view this is acceptable, however we can accept this religious premise that the universe is intrinsically valuable and the world is intrinsically meaningful. But he has also anti-theistic position; that is, without God. From his spiritual humanistic point of view this is unacceptable. The criticism of his position by [Ronald E.] Osborn in the concluding remark of his review argues: “In the final analysis this is why onto-theology ([Tu’s aside]: this is the kind of Spinoza, Einstein and Dworkin’s idea) must always be resisted. There is dignity and decorum in it;

but no deeply humanizing community or life sustaining joy.”¹ Indeed, the hope that physicists and astronomers eventually will answer the ultimate question when they discover the theory of everything is too optimistic and too symbolic.

We live in a very strange universe. Atoms make up only four percent of the visible universe; dark matter that we cannot see makes up 24 percent and dark energy we cannot see, and is associated with empty space, makes up 72 percent. It is reasonable to assume that there is always mystery beyond human rationality. The grammar of theism, believing in god – theism - strikes a sympathetic resonance in spiritual humanism. Sacred places - cathedral, church, temple, mosque, synagogue, hymns, songs, prayers, dances, festivals - are beyond prehension of scientific philosophical or theological control; no matter how philosophers argue with our god, these very important activities continue to inform the meaningful life of every human being. All three great theistic religions have spiritual sources and intellectual depths to inspire us to sing songs of hope and express our gratitude to divine love. They have made a profound contribution to human religiosity. One assumption of mine is that every human being is not only social, political, historical but also spiritual or religious. Nevertheless, spiritual humanism may be theistic or pantheistic, but it embraces atheism and a variety of ritualism characteristic of most indigenous traditions, such as the Japanese Shinto, as well. It differs from monotheistic religions in several essential ways. It takes the sanctity of the earth for granted - the earth is sacred, the earth is not profane or secular. It subscribes to the idea of the continuity of being - all beings are connected. If we can imagine the reality of God, Allah, Brahman, Logos, it is continuous with the human self-understanding. By implication it does not believe in radical transcendence such as the “holy other” which has nothing to do with the human community at all, such as the classic - I think - misunderstood Rudolph Otto’s notion of “numinous.” “Numinous” is something sacred but is never human. To use Herbert Fingerette’s idea it regards the secular as sacred; what is secular to us really, in an outward sense, has sacred meaning. In other words the lifeworld in itself is intrinsically meaningful; it is where the ultimate meaning of life is realizable and ought to be realized.

To a humanist of this kind, we are rooted in earth and community especially the family. Our body is the proper home for our mind, soul and spirit; we learn to be fully human through earth, community and body. Our spiritual transformation is not a departure from where we are but a journey to the interiority of our being, paradoxically the innermost core of our being. The source of our self-knowledge is none other than the microcosmic reality ingrained in our existence; our existence as human beings today is indebted to the Big Bang ever since 13.8 billion years.

Surely earth, community and body constrain us - they shape us into concrete forms; we are inescapably in a sense earthy, communal and bodily. Hitherto spiritual traditions in general have instructed us to free ourselves from these constraints; a great human aspiration is to be liberated from the mundane bondage, to escape from the prison house of the soul. But, in this form of humanism, these are not simply constraints, they are *enabling* constraints. The vehicles that carry us forward in our destiny, they are instrumental in offering each of us the unique path for self-realization. Without them (meaning ethnicity, gender, faith, place, age and so forth), we cannot exist in any concrete form; they are our incarnations.

¹ The review which Tu is quoting can be found here: <http://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/winterspring2015/ronald-dworkins-onto-theology>

A human being so conceived is not a creature but an active agent in the cosmic transformation as an observer, a participant, indeed often a co-creator. Even though there may not necessarily be the “holy other,” the creativity that seeds the Big Bang has never been lost, but has cumulated in every segment of the evolutionary story: in sun, earth, life, animal, human. We are the inheritors of the cosmic energy; we are charged with the responsibility to see to it that what has been endowed in our nature continues to give generative power to new realities and life forms.

Spiritual humanism believes that human life has transcendent meaning, that there is always mystery to be comprehended and that theism as well as other manifestations of human religiosity teaches us to rise above secularism. We are finite beings, but in our finite there is the constant presence of infinite divinity. Spiritual humanism is a faith in humanity, the task of learning to be fully human is to form one body with heaven, earth and the myriad things for there is intrinsic unity between immanence and transcendence.

Why should we care about heaven above and earth below and the world in between? Simply put, the viability of the human species is at stake. Is spiritual humanism a practicable option to emerge from the current human condition as a new way of thinking, a new cosmology and indeed a new ethics? In the year 2018, the World Congress of Philosophy is going to be held in Beijing. The topic chosen is “Learning to be human”. It is time for us not only to learn about earth, learn about the world but also learn about ourselves, learn about humanity. In our modern age secular humanism has become the dominant ideology - we’re all part of it. It is so prevalent that it now overshadows virtually all religious and ideological persuasions. For almost a century, the intellectual ethos in China has been overwhelmed by scientism, materialism and instrumental rationalism. Even now, it is characterized by economism and consumerism with profound negative impact on the environment. But a pivotal change is in the offing. We are desperately in need of formulating effective critiques of the unintended negative consequences of modernity, as Max Weber already predicted (such as aggressive anthropocentrism regarding the human as the only locus of meaning and possessive individualism, individuation of the young, of me, of mine, of my own position in reference to everything else), by advocating the unity of heaven and humanity, a sense of reverence to heaven to respect and care for the earth and peace for all under heaven.

Spiritual humanism, then, underscores harmony through dialogue and reconciliation. The opposite of harmony is uniformity, but a precondition for harmony is the recognition and celebration of difference. The emergence of an ecumenical and cosmopolitan consciousness is precondition for us to envision a truly authentic culture of harmony. All organized religions, when confronted with the dual challenges of ecological degradation and dysfunctional world order, are impelled to cultivate - in addition to their particular religious grammars of action - the language of this kind of humanism for global citizenship. We choose to be Christians, Buddhists or Muslims, but inevitably we are human as well. Put differently, we may choose to be human through the Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Confucian on numerous other ways, but we are obligated by the current state of the world to be responsible for cultivating a sustainable relationship with the earth.

Spiritual humanism can guide us to survive and flourish in the 21st century by deepening the intellectual and moral depth of our environmental awareness. In order to change the ethos of international politics the time is right that we engage in dialogues on core values across cultures - core values in Germany, core values in China, in many other countries – and in various kinds of dialogues. Universal values embody the enlightenment mentality of the modern West and are often

called universal values. [These values], such as liberty, rationality, legality, human rights and the dignity of the individual, should be fruitfully compared and substantially enriched by other universal values embodied in virtually all cultures past and in present, great religious traditions as well, such as rightness, justice, fairness, civility, responsibility and social solidarity.

The focus is on commiseration, sympathy, empathy and compassion, if one were to single out one value the world really needs in order to regain our humanity, that value is variously understood as commiseration, as sympathy, empathy and compassion or the common word “love”. An important spiritual exercise in this connection is to extend our own sympathetic feelings to encompass an ever-expanding network of human and non-human relationships. The idea is to form one body with heaven and earth and the myriad things.

The great advances in communication and information technologies have substantially enhanced the human capacity to learn, to re-learn and to un-learn. Space-time have collapsed into a new reality enabling us immediate access to data, information and knowledge about heaven above earth below and all things in between. This also provides us with the great opportunity to enlarge the scope and refine the quality of our conscience. These opening lines of a statement by a Chinese thinker in the eleventh century have often been noted as a very romantic assertion about something which is not real, but I think it is very very helpful. This thinker, by the name Zhang Zai (張載), in the opening statement of the “Western Inscription” says, “Heaven is my father and earth is my mother, even such a tiny creature as I finds intimacy in their midst. All that fills the universe is my body, and all that directs the universe is my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters and all things are my companions.”

This vision requires that we embrace and respect nature as an integral part of our communion, nature is not [just] a collection of objects. In addition to ourselves, community and our nature, most scholars in China accept these three dimensions: the importance of the self, of human relationships and nature. But they reject the fourth dimension, and for me the fourth dimension is heaven or God or Allah or Brahman or Logos, the transcending reality. A defining characteristic of spiritual humanism is the awareness that we ought to show reverence for heaven. (This is something totally lacking in China now, to me worrisome.) Heaven is omnipresent and omniscient but perhaps not omnipotent. We are obligated to assist in transforming a nourishing process of heaven and earth. In so doing we can form a trinity with heaven and earth; our human responsibility is not for the anthropological world but for nature and even beyond.

Through my own interreligious dialogue over the years, I’m convinced now that we will understand this idea of a humanistic, common humanistic vision. Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Muslims and all kinds of other religious traditions are willing to share this vision without losing sight whatsoever of their spiritual and religious commitment. As a comprehensive and integrated humanism there are four dimensions of this commonly shared human experience. These four dimensions ought to be understood comprehensively and in an integrated vision.

The first one is the question of the self and the quest for the autonomy, independence and dignity of the person, and this is not negotiable - this is very Kantian, you treat the person as a person because embodied in the person is freedom of self-realization. Any force outside of the person that imposes upon the person by snatching that sense of the person away is an imposition not allowable. But a person is never an isolated individual, a person is always a centre of relationships and, as a centre of relationships, a person is relational and holistic, so the dimension of community is not separate from

the person. You cannot imagine any person without community, either the family or even larger. So, the idea of the community, the interaction between the person as an individual and community variously understood (the family, the global community), this, our second dimension, is critical. The third one is nature. This is something the whole human species and every religious tradition will have to learn. The current Pope is encouraging because, even in the Catholic tradition, the sanctity of the earth or the sacredness of earth is beginning to be recognized. Nature is not just a collection of objects, nature is very much a part of our own communion. And finally, the idea of God, the idea of Allah, the idea of Heaven. How we are going to have not only a sustainable and harmonious relationship between the human species and nature, with the animal kingdom, plants, rocks, rivers and air, but also mutuality, a mutual responsiveness between the human heart and mind and the way of heaven?

China is now at a crossroads, it must pursue its own exceptional and unique path, but its path cannot be exclusively Chinese. China should live up to its own cultural ideal, to be cosmopolitan and spiritually humanistic. What the University of Tübingen and the new China Centre will be able to offer China is not only advanced science, technology, law and economic development, but also a deep-rooted spiritual sense of the human that is not only related to the human community but related to nature and related to the transcendent spirit. Thank you!

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