

Lecture in Memory of J. C. Kapur

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“He was a towering figure in reconfiguring the new world order, a major public intellectual in Asia, and a source of inspiration for us all. I cherished his willingness to share his broad vision with me. I look forward to an opportunity to continue his seminal work on intercivilizational dialogue in Cultural China.”

As we begin to move beyond the most devastatingly violent century in recorded history, we have witnessed enough man-made disasters to acknowledge the cruel reality that the continued viability of the human species is problematical and the end of humankind is not merely an imagined possibility but could even be considered an imminent danger. While the need for action on many fronts seems obvious, strongly held traditional and modern beliefs have variously advocated that there is no need to worry about conditions of such a magnitude, that no matter how hard we try little difference can be made, that our survivability is beyond our control, that the evolutionary process will proceed anyway, or that we are doomed to failure.

Yet, we are acutely aware that the whole world as it exists is interconnected, that our planet is a part of an immense whole and that a small change in the balance of cosmic forces could destroy all life on earth.

The astronauts who traveled into outer space perceived the earth not merely as clouds, oceans and continents but as an integrated, organic whole—the stunningly beautiful blue planet, shining against the black background of the vast universe. For the first time in history, we truly saw the earth as a single globe. This image vividly symbolizes the emergence of global consciousness as a lived reality, rather than an abstract idea. Since the 1960s, the recognition that we on earth occupy a common lifeboat, implying that we are all stakeholders of the planet earth, has been floating around various intellectual circles. Mr. Kapur exemplified this global consciousness in his theory and practice for several decades.

However, while the sense that we are in this together has been greatly intensified throughout the world, the principle of interconnectedness underlying the whole ecological system from macrocosm to microcosm has been and is still being seriously violated by the overall developmental process of the human community. The relationship between the human species and nature is disharmonious and the situation is unsustainable. The technological power in the hands of profit-driven entrepreneurs motivated solely by self-interest is rapidly disrupting the delicate balance between us and our environment.

The choice is clear and the stakes are high: the very survival of life on our planet depends on the outcome of this issue. Confronting this unprecedented challenge, all spiritual traditions are undergoing the most fundamental and far-reaching transformation. The acknowledgement that the earth is the proper home for our body, heart, mind, soul, and spirit prompts world religions to shape their life-orientations according to a new global vision. Engagement in rather than departure from the world has become a basic desideratum of ethico-religious thinking. The sanctity of the

earth is taken for granted as a basic value even in otherworldly spiritual traditions. As a concerned and engaged public intellectual, a salient feature of Mr. Kapur's lifelong work was to translate his devotion to Indian spirituality into concrete proposals for global social transformation.

From this perspective, whether or not we are committed to reaching the deepest possible understanding of the human condition as a point of departure for confronting the fundamental crisis of humanity, we should have faith in the malleability, transformability, improvability, and perfectibility of the human condition through individual and communal self-effort. Even if we are not motivated by sympathy, empathy and compassion, the ethic of responsibility dictates that we challenge the assertion that what we think and do on this earth here and now is superfluous to the inevitable trajectory of the state of the world.

As we begin to explore the environmental catastrophe, we realize that distorted versions of Enlightenment mentality of the modern West that have seriously threatened the viability of the human species have also undermined the social fabric of venerable institutions in the global community—family, village, church, synagogue, mosque, temple, school, nation, and world organizations. Increasing human injustice has brought a large segment of world-population to starvation and abject poverty. Not only have we failed to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapon technologies, we are powerless in avoiding violent conflicts engineered over ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural differences.

In a deeper sense, we have lost our awareness of the organic link between past and future. We deliberately limit ourselves to the immediate and superficial present at the expense of a richly textured sense of time and space. The homogenization of our experience dictated by the market-

oriented mass media has substantially reduced the cross-generation channels of transmitting values. Peer group pressure and profit-making advertisements have rendered the traditional educational institutions—family, church and school—inoperative. If this situation continues unabated, the decline of moral and cultural values is inevitable. Understandably, Mr. Kapur was deeply worried about the current state of affairs, especially the ethos of youth culture

Nowadays, a commonly felt anxiety throughout the world is the loss of wholeness. The emerging global community, far from being an integrated, organic whole, is characterized by difference, differentiation and discrimination. The divided self and the fragmented community are not congenial to human flourishing. A clear indication of this loss of a sense of wholeness is the separation of means from ends, a separation that encourages the rise of unprincipled politics driven primarily by wealth and power. Political leadership defined exclusively in terms of calculative gains breeds mistrust and outright cynicism. As a result, all patterns of authority that maintain social solidarity have lost their legitimacy. Across the world today many societies face a decline in moral and spiritual values.

The great paradox of the twenty-first century is the built-in destructive potential of so-called empowering global trends. Increasing democratization notwithstanding, most people feel powerless against the unleashed mega forces of market, money, machines, and media. And virtually everyone is vulnerable. While economic maximization and market efficiency are supposed to benefit the human community as a whole, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening and more wealth is concentrated among the few. Faster and easier mechanisms of communication actually undermine the art of listening and face-to-face communication as individuals and

families become more isolated. Surely, the current information explosion does not necessarily enhance knowledge. An increasing number of students may suffer from educated incapacity precisely because their constant exposure to raw data has made them insensitive to learning.

Global consciousness can be characterized as a paradox: a process of convergence that intensifies divergence. Globalization so conceived is not simply homogenization, for it actually enhances local identities. We must transcend a simple dichotomous mode of thinking in order to fully appreciate the complexity of the “glocal” (global and local) process. Against this background the need for dialogue is obvious. This, I think, is the broad context in which J. C. Kapur envisioned the dialogue among civilizations.

However, there is a more specific concern that motivated him to take an active part in shaping the general direction of his dialogical agenda. Modernization theory, formulated in the 1950s in the United States, asserts that the “modernizing” process that began in the modern West was actually “global” in its transformative potential. The shift from the spatial idea of Westernization to the temporal concept of modernization is significant, suggesting that developments that first occurred in Western Europe, such as industrialization, should not be conceived simply as “Western” because they were on their way to becoming Japanese, Russian, Chinese, Turkish, Indian, and Iranian as well. This was precisely why the non-geographic idea of temporal modernization seemed to better capture the salient features of Westernization as a process of global transformation.

Implicit in modernization theory was the assumption that development inevitably moves in the same direction as progress and, in the long run, the world will converge into one single civilization. Since the developed countries, notably the United States, were leading the way, modernization

was seen as essentially Westernization and particularly Americanization. This narrative is, on the surface, very persuasive because the characteristics of modernity and the achievements of modernization, as defined by the theorists, are merely Western or American inventions. The rest of the world also regards them as ideals. The assumption that market economy, democratic polity, civil society, and individualism are universal values has often taken for granted.

Events in recent decades, including those still unfolding in the Islamic world, clearly show that democratization is widespread, that a vibrant civil society encourages active participation in the political process, and that respect for the dignity of the individual is a necessary condition for social solidarity. These developments may have prompted several scholars to argue that there is no longer any major ideological divide in the world: Capitalism has triumphed, market economy and democratic polity are the waves of the future, and “history” as we know it has ended.

Nevertheless, warnings about imminent civilizational conflict make a dialogue among civilizations not merely desirable, but necessary. Even the most positive definition of modernization allows room for debate and discussion about its feasibility. Free market evokes questions of governance; democracy can assume different practical forms; the styles of civil society vary from culture to culture; and whether dignity must be predicated on the doctrine of individualism is highly problematical. Modernization is neither Westernization nor Americanization. The fallacy of “the West and the rest,” like that of “us and them,” is its inability or unwillingness to transcend the “either-or” mentality. Globalization compels us to think otherwise.

Conceptually, globalization is not a process of homogenization. For now, at least, the idea of convergence--meaning that the rest of the world

will eventually follow a single model of development--is too simplistic to account for the complexity of globalizing trends.

On the surface, Mr. Kapur's persistent effort to underscore the vital importance of Indian, Chinese, and Russian alliance appears to be an anti-West strategy. Surely his deep worry about the domination of North America and Western Europe on the world stage was clearly visible and he repeatedly showed contempt and distaste for the hegemonic mentality of the modern West, but his vision was ecumenical. It was neither parochial nor revengeful. His call for regional integration across three continents was a reflection of his deep conviction that a world with multi-centered spheres of influence is more balanced and safer than the blatantly imposed or unconsciously assumed unilateralism.

Although I do not subscribe to all of his observations without qualification, I found much of his argumentation compelling and his overall conceptualization of the current human condition insightful. I was privileged to have been engaged in three face-to-face dialogues with him, one in New Delhi and two in Beijing. I am sure that all of us have been moved and inspired by the message that he so earnestly and thoughtfully articulated. For me, it is really an educational experience to listen to his distinctive voice.

To conclude, I would like to share my personal experience with Indian culture. I have visited India several times since my first trip to Madras to attend a philosophical seminar organized by Professor Mahadeven in 1971. I had the honor of visiting India again as a "National Lecturer" hosted by the Indian Council of Philosophical Research in 2004. I traveled to five cities (New Delhi, Madras, Lucknow, Santiniketan, and Bernaras) and gave sixteen presentations at a dozen universities. I was fully convinced that it

would be immensely beneficial for China to take India as a reference society. The contrast in developmental strategy, political organization, social structure, and cultural system, indeed life-approach and value orientation provides occasions for “edifying conversation” between the two most populous countries in the world. For China, Indian’s enduring democracy, vibrant civil society, powerful middle class, strength in information technology, and English-speaking elite are salient features worth in-depth understanding.

To reiterate a motif that is continuously emphasized in my recorded dialogue with Mr. Kapur, the most noteworthy aspect of the Indian experience as a source of inspiration for China is in the area of culture, indeed spirituality: the vibrancy of classical dance, music, art, film, devotional songs, religious rituals, and sacred sites, not to mention philosophy and literature, is a testament to the continuity and resilience of Indian spirituality. The ethical and religious landscape of India today is imbued with enduring traditional symbols which give a rich texture to the meaning of existence as experienced in everyday life. As Chinese intellectuals begin to awaken from their purposeful amnesia and calculated forgetfulness toward their own tradition and as China begins to retrieve her rich heritage, India will definitely serve as a profoundly significant reference. Thank you for listening!