

To Live in a World with No Center and Many Centers

by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

We human beings were born to live a life with a center, to wonder in the circle of existence while aware of the center to which both the circumference and the rays of the circle point, the center which turns chaos into order. Throughout history in fact traditional humanities lived in a world dominated by the two realities of origin and center which bestowed meaning upon both life and thought. Nor was traditional Christian civilization any different in this respect. Christ referred to himself as the beginning, the alpha, which means that in the Christian universe he has of necessity to be also the omega in the same way that in Islam God refers to himself in the Quran as the First and the Last. Moreover, many Christian mystics referred to Christ as the center of the circle of existence while in the context of Islam the Persian Sufi poet 'Aṭṭār sang,

Come you lost atoms to your Center draw,
And be the Eternal Mirror that you saw:
Rays that have wonder'd into darkness wide
Return, and into your Sun subside.

(*Manṭiq al-ṭayr* - trans. E. Fitzgerald .p.187)

Western civilization, which developed after the Christianization of Europe, created a world with a center, which was at once spiritual, ethical, intellectual and artistic and even extended to the socio-political realm. The theology, philosophy and cosmology, the ethical norms and laws, architecture, painting and music as well as nearly every other realm of human life reflected the realities of the world of faith with its theocentric character which in the Christian context was naturally also Christocentric.

This world with a center, whose reality one can still experience in a medieval cathedral, was to be challenged step by step during the centuries which followed the medieval period. Art soon became humanistic and individualistic; science quantitative and divorced from the metaphysics of unity despite the quest of some of its proponents for unity; philosophy became rationalistic; the socio-political realm became ever more segmented and even the Christian religion in the West itself became divided from within with more than one center claiming ultimate legitimacy and authority. This process continued unabated in many realms but at least in the field of ethics, a manner of acting morally based upon Christian and Jewish precepts continued without being seriously challenged on the level of practice of the common people, even if agnostic and atheistic philosophers challenged and rejected the claims of all religiously based ethics.

It is only during the last few decades that in both Europe and America the very foundations of the ethical norms within whose confines something of the unity of Western civilization had been preserved, as well as the following of those norms, have become challenged on a wide scale. Parallel with this development, new nihilistic philosophies and various attempts at the revisionism of history, and deconstruction of sacred scripture and well-known works of literature have created an ambience in which, not only the few, but a large number of educated people may be said to be living in a world without center. If a continental art historian has called modern European art, a circle without center, the latest phase of modern or what some prefer to call post-modern life can itself be called almost chaotic activity in amorphous and centerless space, a space in which human beings move without an ultimate point of reference, as if on a rudderless ship wondering in the ocean, capable of ever greater speed to move but without knowing where to go and what direction to take. The life of so many has become like that of the mythical flying Dutchman sailing upon the sea of life in constant motion but without an ultimate aim.

In this atmosphere of relativization and destruction of absolute values, the flag of pluralism has now been foisted with the expectation that all those who are riding with the tides of the times and want to be up to date must rally around this perspective. This is especially true of America where a

microcosm of the whole globe has been created within a single society during the past half century. It is true that after the tragic destruction of the Natives, the Europeans settlers in present day America created a Protestant white society based on Protestant ethics, despite making use of slave labor. But new waves of migration to America began to challenge this conception of the newly founded society of European origin. First there was the Catholic migration of the 19th and early 20th centuries followed by a number of Greek Orthodox. But one could still speak of a society based on Christian values. Then there was the extensive Jewish migration in the early and middle part of this century following the great tragedies taking place in Europe and the term Judeo-Christian began to be used.

During the last decades, as a result of both migration and conversion, Islam has spread rapidly in America and the third of the three monotheistic religions has now about as many adherents in this country as Jews and Episcopalians and some now speak quite rightly of the Abrahamic family or tradition to which Judaism, Christianity and Islam all belong. But even beyond these worlds, there are now a notable number of Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs in this land not to speak of the survival of the Native American Shamanism as well as specifically American religious phenomena from Mormonism to present day "New Religions".

Nor is the loss of a single center of a homogeneous universe

of discourse challenged by the multiplicity of religions. There are also diverse philosophical currents and ethnic groups. Some of these groups possess the same religion such as the Irish, Hispanics and most African Americans, but with divergent cultural perspectives different languages, races, etc. Moreover, the unity of Western civilization and therefore the very existence of a single center which would function as its heart has been challenged by philosophical and cultural current that now threaten the very foundations of Western civilization as created by the spread of Christianity in Europe. Furthermore, various secularist philosophies have not only challenged Christianity but have combatted and continue to confront each other to such an extent that in the present day academic setting the word "truth" has become an embarrassing term avoided as much as possible in discourse having to do with philosophy and the humanities. As for modern science, while it has preserved a coherent point of view within the confines of the limitations set upon it by what one can call its boundary conditions, its extension beyond those limits in the form of scientism and its applications in technology tied most often to a system driven to a large extent by greed have had a withering effect upon the coherence of a world-view based upon the primacy of the Spirit, while resulting in an environmental crisis which now threatens human existence itself.

It is in such a condition that pluralism is presented as the

only possible solution for the educational system as well as for the individual's way of living and acting in society. To be sure there is now too much diversity to simply negate or ignore the phenomenon? On the religious level, it becomes even more difficult to assert the truth of only our religion while denying any truth to the religion of others. On the cultural level surely it is no longer possible to view only the canvases of Rembrandt or van Gogh as serious works of art while ignoring Sung scroll paintings, Persian miniatures, Native American sand paintings or the wall paintings of Ajanta. Nor can one disregard completely the glories of classical Indian or Arabic music no matter how much one is immersed in the spiritual depth of the music of Bach or the sheer delight of Mozart.

But what about the question of truth? And what about the principles of human action, the ethical norms by which we must live as individuals and also members of a human collectivity? Can we simply affirm pluralism with total disregard for the truth and falsehood of things or have a view of the world or a *Weltanschauung* without a frame of reference? And on the practical level can a society survive if, for many of its members, there are no ultimate ethical values since there is no ultimate reality which would bestow ultimacy upon those values? These are the questions which cannot but be asked as the younger generation enters the arena of life in society.

In reality, however, the choice is not only between a world with a single center which we identify as "ours" and one with no center where all is relative in a pluralism which would deny any reality to absolute values. There is also another possibility, which is to be able to live in a world with many centers while confirming the reality of the center of our own traditional universe. The other religions and cultures, which are now living realities in America, whether they be Islamic, Buddhist or Hindu, African American, Chinese, Arabic or Persian, are also based on world-views with a center and moral, social, intellectual and artistic values based upon the vision of a centered universe. The great challenge before the present generation and especially you young men and women, most of whom have become already exposed to this multiplicity through your university experience, is to help create, in the larger society into which you now enter, a condition which will respect this diversity without being wooed by the siren calls of sheer relativism and nihilism.

There are of course, those who speak of the death of other civilizations and a new global civilization in which all the richness of traditional cultures are reduced to a least common denominator and then glorified in the name of human freedom while in reality one extolls the vices of greed and excessive consumerism. And then there are others who, aware that such a scenario is not a possibility, speak not of the legitimacy of diverse civilizations with their distinct worthiness but rather

of "the clash of civilizations" which is even adopted by them as a model for the future of human history. But why must the diversity of civilizations also imply inevitable clash? This question becomes especially pertinent when one realizes that beyond the diversity of external forms, there is a remarkable unanimity in the various traditional religions and philosophies, which form the guiding principles and presiding ideas of various traditional civilizations and cultures, concerning the meaning of human life, the significance of the good as the principle of human action and the presence of a transcendent dimension to human existence.

The theological differences in the understanding of the Tao, *sunyāta*, Allāh, Brahman and God are certainly there but these are overshadowed by the reality and presence of the Ultimate, known by these and many other names, in worlds as far apart as that of the Navajos, the Italians, the Germans and the Burmese, the Arabs and the Japanese, the Jews and the Chinese. The presence of a center which is also the Center for each traditional world in question is of far greater import in the present day context of humanity than the attributes and qualities by which that Center is described and approached. Furthermore, even on the level of qualities and attributes, there are remarkable correspondences and congruities in the understanding of the Ultimate and its imprints upon human life. Can one find any description of the Ultimate and its manifestations in the traditional worlds which

excludes compassion and mercy on some level? The emphasis is certainly different. Islam and Judaism emphasize the oneness of God and Christianity His triune nature. The monotheistic religions speak of the personal aspects of God while Confucianism and Taoism look upon the Tao as being impersonal. For the Abrahamic world God is the supreme Object while Hinduism speaks of the Ultimate Reality as both Supreme Object and Supreme Subject or *Ātman*. And yet again, Buddhism speaks only of the Immanent Deity identified with the state of *nirvana* rather than an objective Reality.

Yes, there are these and other differences but they remain secondary in comparison with the unbridgeable chasm between a world-view based upon a center and one without a center. It is possible to live in any of these centered worlds, clinging to the center of one's universe while realizing the legitimacy and pertinence of those other centers without any eclecticism and superficial mixing of various sacred forms. It is possible to realize that if those belonging to other traditional universes with their own spiritual center and transcendent axis are not "one of us", they are nevertheless one of His, to use the monotheistic language.

The much more difficult problem is to confront the abyss of nihilism and the loss of center imposed upon so many by the rationalistic and later anti-rationalistic philosophies of the

modern world which, having arisen in the West, have now spread all over the globe. We have become like passengers of a rudderless ship wandering aimlessly without a compass in hand. Our souls, having lost their center, seek to an ever greater degree the satiation of desires outside of ourselves, or more precisely by means of material objects. Turned outward, we seek to satisfy the deepest yearnings of our being through the gratification of the senses, usually through the possession of things which soon tire us, or the use of substances which for a few moments at least gratify only to lead to tragic consequences. We have created and also become the targets of an avid consumerism which has already wreaked havoc upon the natural world and now threatens our very earthly existence while having already rung the death knell for numerous species of the animal and plant worlds.

The loss of center within first of all fragments our psyche and mind. Then it turns upon all that remains of the social order based upon community and centeredness. The family, which has always nurtured the individual and helped human beings to be brought up in an environment where the needs of the young for love and psychological nourishment have been to a large extent fulfilled, despite the imperfections that characterizes all that is human, has already become threatened and to a large extent fragmented as has the immediate community whose loss now causes us to call for the need of a human support system. On a larger

scale, the social fabric, which despite all the attacks against Christianity during the past few centuries in the West was still held together by an ethics of essentially Christian origin, is now also threatened as never before. And of course our unity with the web of life and the remarkable harmony that persuades nature has been rent asunder. We therefore sense the urgent need to repair that relationship based on the unity of life, which itself implies a center without which unity is impossible, before the very opportunity for the survival of our species is lost.

Human beings need to possess a center in their emotional, social, intellectual and artistic life to the same extent that the human body needs that invisible center which is the heart in order to continue to live. Once the center becomes eclipsed and dies, the whole unity and order of the body terminates and it falls apart. The same is true of our life in the larger social order except that the falling apart of that order takes a longer time and is therefore perceptible less immediately. As human beings, we have no choice but to seek a center which also means direction for our life. The quest for meaning, which is indissolubly related to having a center is as essential to life as the air that we breathe.

Herein lies the great challenge that faces the younger generation which must seek to find life's center by itself more than perhaps any other generation in history. The certainties of

theology, ethics and social patterns are criticized and relativized by a truncated vision of reality which equates information with true knowledge and the analytical powers of the mind with intelligence itself. The very presence of other centers belonging to alien worlds, which have now become present in our world even within America is itself used to destroy our sense of the absoluteness of our own spiritual world. It is as if one argued that since there are other suns in the galaxy, our sun is no longer the sun of our planetary system.

The reality of the situation is, however, the reverse of what we surmise on the surface of things. The very presence of other cultures, which still remember their center and origin, should be seen as a divine gift to compensate the loss of the center of our own world and even abet in the re-discovery of that center. In any case, this is the existential condition in which we find ourselves, situated between the two poles of the loss of our center and the complete relativization and finally annihilation of the world which has provided meaning for human beings over the ages, and the discovery of the reality of other centers, other ways of seeing and experiencing reality.

Each of you, as you enter upon a new stage of your life, will have to find a way of leading life while facing the tension between the pull of the center of your own world and its destruction from below on the one hand, and the presence of other

centers which challenge the uniqueness of your own center but not its reality and truth on the other. The great challenge is to discover a way to live before the Face of the Absolute while acknowledging the multiple Faces which the Absolute has presented to different humanities and at the same time to live in a world which negates the very possibility of the reality of any Face of the Absolute. Your future, as well as that humanity as a whole, depends on finding a *modus vivendi* whereby you can live at peace with the center of your own being as well as with the center of planetary systems other than yours. The challenge is certainly a daunting one fraught with danger but at the same time it affords unforetold opportunities. In facing this challenge let us finally remember that no matter how formidable the task, there is always hope for as the Bible asserts, "With God all things are possible", and to quote the Quran "His mercy encompasseth all things."

