

REVIEW ARTICLE

DIALOGICAL TRANSCENDENCE AND HOPE

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HOPE AS THE UN-DECONSTRUCTIBLE

“Japan has everything except hope.” This is a phrase that has become current to explain the social climate of contemporary Japan, such as the problems of bullying in schools and workplaces, the high suicide rate, people who have withdrawn from society, ethnic discrimination, and so on. These are not accidental problems, but historically and socially structured ones that have surfaced as expressions of the modern forms of individualism. They are not isolated phenomena found only in Japan, but may be seen as aspects of a broader crisis of global modernity. How can we transform this desperate, self-destructing social situation and find a sustainable future? This line of questioning is one of the crucial problems in this critically important book by Prasenjit Duara.

Duara quotes a phrase from Lu Xun’s *Guxiang*, “I thought hope is not something that can be said to exist or not. It is just like a road on the ground. On the ground itself there is no road, it is made only when many people walk on it,” and offers us the following interpretation:

Hope, like its ally, justice (beyond particular laws), belongs to the class of what Derrida calls un-deconstructible elements. It is a summons, a call that was not constructed and cannot be taken apart; it arises even when it has been destroyed. The golden moon that guides the travelers on the jade-green Earth lights the path between what exists and what does not, the space between and beyond the subjective and the objective (pp. 282–83).

The whole book is dedicated to un-deconstructible elements such as hope and justice found on the “path between what exists and what does not, the space between and beyond the subjective and the objective.” This structure of in-betweenness is a key to understanding the concepts of transcendence and universality that he tries to elaborate.

DIALOGICAL TRANSCENDENCE

Transcendence is a complex concept. Due to its strong theological connotation in the West, the invocation of this concept is often limited in an Asian context. There is, moreover, an oft-repeated cliché that Asian culture is based upon immanence rather than transcendence. This is the very point that Duara tries to tackle in his book. In a very subtle way, he introduces a new concept of “dialogical transcendence” as follows:

I distinguish two traditions of transcendence in Eurasia: the radical transcendence, or strict dualism, and the more dialogical religious traditions, where transcendence is interwoven with immanent, polytheistic, pantheistic and plural religious practices. Although radical transcendence is often associated with the Abrahamic religions, I hope to avoid an East versus West essentialization by distinguishing the two traditions in order to allow us to see dialogical trends and sects within the Abrahamic traditions as well as radical tendencies in non-Abrahamic ideas of transcendence (p. 120).

Historically, a less radical, “dialogical transcendence” has pervaded most Asian societies. The ultimate truths and ethics of these traditions to which the *virtuosos* – who are not necessarily the elite – have special access through their knowledge and cultivation of the practices of the mind and body, are open to most people with the material, social, and spiritual capacities to access these truths. Despite the harsh forms of discrimination levied against them, even the Untouchables in Indian society, like slaves in other societies, could develop and access forms of transcendence drawn from but also opposed to the wider cosmology that oppressed them. This kind of transcendence is *dialogical* insofar as it permits coexistence of different levels and expressions of truths (p. 6).

Duara goes beyond the simple, essentialized dichotomy between East and West, or between transcendence and immanence. What is at stake in “dialogical transcendence” is a return to justice for the oppressed and for minorities, by finding a way to transcendence in their practices. The *dialogical* is not the Hegelian movement to attain a sublated One by absorbing and appropriating the Other, but to maintain the transcendent and the immanent at the same time in order to find a dimension of hope in our engagement in everyday life.

In order to find this “dialogical transcendence” in Asian traditions, Duara refers to an impressive passage from the Chinese classic, *Guoyu*, in the following way:

Anciently, men and spirits did not mingle ... [...But later] men and spirits became intermingled, with each household indiscriminately performing for itself the religious observances which had hitherto been conducted by the shamans. As a consequence, men lost their reverence for the spirits, the spirits violated the rules of men, and natural calamities arose. Hence the successor of Shaohao, Quanxu, charged Chong, Governor of the South, to handle the affairs of heaven in order to determine the proper places of the spirits, and Li,

Governor of Fire, to handle the affairs of the Earth in order to determine the proper places of men. And such is what is meant by cutting the communication between Heaven and Earth (p. 163).

This passage indicates that even if the Chinese emperor insisted on exclusive access to Heaven, ordinary people could have access to it as well. It is difficult to “cut the communication between Heaven and Earth.” As far as “men and spirits became intermingled,” the access to transcendence was already permitted to ordinary people. “A panoply of god, spirits and ancestors could be worshipped by the rest of the population to satisfy their desires for ‘human flourishing’” (p. 164). In this sense, “dialogical transcendence” is shared by all people.

ENGAGED TRANSCENDENCE

If that is the case, “dialogical transcendence” may be understood as a synonym for “engaged transcendence.” We know that there have been new trends in certain religions such as “engaged Buddhism” or “engaged Christianity.” Duara speaks about “engaged transcendence” in this way:

Dialogical transcendence, which emphasizes the plurality and openness of these faiths, has often been translated as well into engaged transcendence. To be sure, this worldly engagement has to deal with modern cosmology of history in which the truth of change tends to trump the truth of transcendence. Yet, I believe we are in an era where the quest for transcendence is not confined to the yearning for an absolute and substantive truth that has been foreign to most traditions in the region. Transcendence today clusters around spirituality, ideals, reverence, justice and hope – human aspirations that do – dialogically – transcend history (p. 238).

With transcendence clustering around “spirituality, ideals, reverence, justice and hope,” people engage in the secular, social activities to support civil society and to maintain the sustainability of our society. This is what Duara wants to make as the central claim of this book. As one of the best examples of this “engaged transcendence,” he introduces Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) as follows:

What is Gandhi’s truth that transcends history? Gandhi’s truth was not scientific, but moral. It is only our moral experience in society and the world, whether in the midst of war, such as in the *Mahabharata*, or in everyday social activities, that we experience what it is to be truthful. But while firmly located in society, the core of being human for Gandhi was to embrace “truth” beyond the world of society and politics. As such, it was a dialogical, but engaged, transcendence (p. 228).

On the one hand, “*engaged* transcendence” [emphasis mine] supports “our moral experience in society and the world,” but on the other hand “engaged *transcendence*” [emphasis mine] never forgets the dimension of “‘truth’ beyond the world of society and politics.” However

what supports this unique structure of “engaged transcendence” or “dialogical transcendence?” That must be rooted in Asian traditions, but nourished in the modern circulation of concepts such as religion and the secular. We have been confronted by the critical problems of global modernity. In the face of these problems, Duara points toward a different direction, escaping from a fundamental return to tradition and a simple prolongation of global modernity. By elaborating modern concepts such as religion and the secular, he tries to find a way to understand the transformation of our society into one that is sustainable. In this respect, the notion of “spirituality” plays an important role.

SPIRITUALITY

Duara talks about Gandhi’s “spirituality” in the following way:

While Gandhi drew his ideas from both local Hindu and Jain traditions of his Saurashtra homeland in Gujarat, he also imbibed the Vendantist thought of *Vivekananda* [emphasis mine] and nineteenth-century reformers. But, even more, Gandhi drew on a global spirituality which had already circulated through India several times. The ideas of the American Transcendentalists, which had flowed from India to the West, returned to Gandhi via the theosophists and others. He was also deeply influenced by Christian ethics and the anarchist ideals of Tolstoy, among others (pp. 228–29).

Swami Vivekananda (1863–1962) was one of those who advocated “spirituality” as a modern concept to the globalizing world. In 1893, he attended the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago. When he discussed this notion in the Parliament, Shaku Sōen (1860–1919) was present. Also attending this Parliament, Suzuki Daisetz (1870–1966) contributed to Shaku Sōen by translating his own talk into English. In this fashion, the notion of “spirituality” was taken up by Suzuki afterwards.¹ Here, we can find the circulation of a translated and transformed notion of “spirituality.”

The “spirituality” that Suzuki sought to differentiate from “spirit” was not defined as a heavenly but rather as an earthly universality. He stated:

Religious consciousness with regard to heaven, quite simply, will not be brought forth by heaven alone. When heaven descends to earth, man can feel it in his hands; he has knowledge of heaven’s warmth because he can actually touch it. The potential in cultivated land derives from heaven’s light falling to earth. For this reason, religion bears its greatest authenticity when it appears among peasants and farmers who live and work on the soil.²

Spirituality may appear to be a faint and shadowy concept, but there is nothing more deeply rooted in the earth, for spirituality is life itself.

The depth of the earth is bottomless. Things that soar in the firmament, and

1 Kamata 1995, p. 371.

2 Suzuki 1972, p. 42.

things that descend from the sky, are wonderful, but are nonetheless external and do not come from within one's own life. The earth and the self are one. The roots of the earth are the roots of one's own existence. The earth is oneself.³

As a modern intellectual, Suzuki knew the power of Christianity that had a notion of heavenly "transcendence," but he tried to find an earthly universality in Buddhism. The "Japanese spirituality" he tried to articulate was not a Japanized one. Rather, it had to be a universal spirituality that emerged via Japanese experience.

In this respect, Suzuki's view on "spirituality" and "transcendence" is quite similar to what Duara tries to elaborate. Duara defines "spirituality" as follows:

A zone often associated with traffic is the *modern* realm of "spirituality", which in Euro-American modernity is seen as arising simultaneously with the secular. Peter van der Veer has ably discussed modern spirituality as being distinct from – though also produced in mutual interaction with – both secular and institutional religion. Spirituality may be a vague concept, but it is not at all marginal to modernity. Indeed, it allows for the kind of individuated religious choices that Charles Taylor suggests is the hallmark of modern religiosity, especially in the West. At the same time, spirituality can become tied to both the nation and more universal communities (p. 196).

As a *modern* concept, "spirituality" is different from "both secular and institutional religion." Nonetheless, it contributes to our society including "both the nation and more universal communities" and manifests a religiosity based upon transcendence. If we might call it "earthly spirituality," as Suzuki did, we can understand why Duara has been thinking of "redemptive societies" for such a long time. They are the places in which "spirituality" plays an important role to transform our living world into an ethically better one.

REDEMPTIVE SOCIETIES

In the situation of postwar Japan, Suzuki enthusiastically advocated the spiritualization of Japan in his "Construction of Spiritual Japan" (1946) and "Spiritualization of Japan" (1947). However his endeavor was largely neglected at that time and afterwards. This neglect may be seen as a symptom of the secularization of postwar Japanese society. Duara, by referring to the attempts of redemptive societies in Asia, tries to find a possible alternative to a simplistic understanding of the secular.

Duara has given attention to "redemptive societies" for many years, locating some in China as well as Manchukuo. He named such societies as "redemptive" because "salvation was vital to their agenda" (p. 176). He thinks of the characteristics of "redemptive societies" as follows:

Many of the redemptive societies sought to work with the state as long as they were given the space to fulfill their spiritual obligations in relative peace. In

3 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

other words, their conception of transcendence made it possible for them to attain salvation through this-worldly activity (p. 186).

This characteristic of having both transcendence and this-worldliness made the situation of “redemptive societies” very complicated in Chinese history. For modern examples, under the regimes of Manchukuo, the Kuomintang (KMT), and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), “redemptive societies” were and are often attacked or banned with ferocity, because they include a “logic of access to transcendent power” (p. 187).

In this respect, Japan was not exceptional. Rather, Japan stands as a much severer case. Duara notes, as follows:

Various traditions of dialogical transcendence existed both before and after the 1868 restoration, but the Meiji state revealed a greater capacity to “submerge” these movements or subordinate them to its own newly crafted confessional nationalism of the imperial cult (p. 193).

Asia – especially Japan – received “confessional nationalism” and “secularism” as a result of the modern European Enlightenment. In other words, religiosity or access to transcendence had to be monopolized by the state. Other religious activities, including “redemptive societies,” were regarded as an enemy of the Enlightenment in the Kantian sense.

If Duara’s reasoning makes sense, we can understand why Suzuki advocated “spirituality” against the “imperial cult.” It was an attempt to recover access to transcendence for all people and their societies. However, why did Suzuki fail to recover “redemptive societies” in the “spiritualization of Japan” in the postwar context, in which the “imperial cult” had been toppled by the defeat? Was it due to the further development of secularization? Or did a form of “confessional nationalism” remain in place? Duara’s reasoning helps us to explore such complicated questions regarding postwar Japan.

Duara himself poses a very interesting question. Why didn’t China succeed in submerging “redemptive societies” by inventing an “imperial cult” which reshaped state ritualism in the Sinosphere tradition? He suggests two answers to this question. One is that the Chinese emperor could not be treated as a god, because China had a much stronger tradition of transcendence; another is that the cost of a “confessional state” based upon Confucian religion or ritualism would have been too high under the weak state of Republican China (p. 193).

However, can we continue to apply these two answers to China in the second half of the twentieth and early years of the twenty-first centuries? The marginalization of “redemptive societies” in China allows us to think how different it is – or is not – from pre- and postwar Japan. As a hint to this question, Duara proposes the following idea:

Yet, the Chinese state has still to tackle the transcendent aspirations of its people, who are seeking faith-based religions, be it Christianity, Buddhism or the redemptive traditions of dialogical transcendence. The case of Hong Kong, Taiwan and elsewhere clarify that when the state does not deny religions their right to express their aspiration for transcendence, they tend to be engaged but happily non-political. In Taiwan, after 1987, when the

democratizing state permitted the once-banned Yiguandao and other religions to practice in the open, piety and engagement followed a civic religion model. Without providing adequate space for these historical traditions of dialogical transcendence, the PRC will find it difficult to achieve a just and ultimately sustainable society (p. 194).

For a “sustainable society,” Duara calls to open a space for the “transcendent aspirations of its people” not only in China, but also elsewhere in the world. This is crucially important at our present moment in which new religious wars occur, intolerance spreads, and extreme nationalism reappears.

ASIAN COSMOPOLITANISM

While “dialogical transcendence” focuses on localities and regions, it never relinquishes universality. Duara says: “Dialogical transcendence does not only authorize personal and experiential transformation but also, reciprocally, motivates commitment to the universal” (p. 186).

What type of universality does Duara envision? He refers to current Chinese discourse on *tianxia* 天下 (‘All-under-heaven’) especially in the work of Zhao Tingyang. Zhao introduces the concept of *tianxia* as a concrete example of Chinese universality as follows:

The modern dream will not go too far because it cannot withstand its retributive consequences. Therefore, the world needs a global dream.

As I have often argued, a renewed all-under-heaven system (*tianxia*) and the relational rationality (*guanxi lixing*) could be universal ideals because they can withstand, theoretically, the “test of imitation” and would ideally lead to a compatible and peaceful world.⁴

It is effective as a world concept that is simultaneously Chinese and universal.

If China cannot develop the system of concepts, discourses, and knowledge that are universalizable in the world, there does not exist Chinese spirit having a universal meaning. In other words, the foundation of Chinese spirit must be the universalizable system of thought and it should not be satisfied with Chinese culture with local characteristics. “Culture” is only a local knowledge. That is why discourses like “Chinese culture” or “Culture China” are ones that provide a flippant self-satisfaction. We cannot regard them as Chinese dream. Chinese dream comes true when it embodies the world-ness.⁵

According to Zhao, the “Chinese dream” can embody universality going beyond local “culture” and “develop the system of concepts, discourses, and knowledge that are universalizable in the world.”

4 Zhao 2014, p. 141.

5 Zhao 2006.

Significantly, Duara does not seem to be satisfied with Zhao's way of thinking of universality. He criticizes it as follows:

While Zhao acknowledges that the post-Qin ideal of *tianxia* is transformed, his conception continues to offer a top-down method of political ordering as the essence of the *tianxia* system. I submit that I have trouble with this model. [...] With regard to the contemporary utilization of *tianxia*, it seems rather odd to be applying an ancient system quite so mechanically to an entirely changed world. Moreover, since the political system is not based upon democratically elected leaders, we do not know who will represent world government and its vast resources. While Zhao's effort to create a blueprint for an alternative to the Westphalian/Vatellian/UN order is laudable, it seems quite impracticable for the foreseeable future (Duara 2015, 25–26).

Instead of *tianxia* as a top-down system, Duara refers to *tian* 天, 'Heaven,' for a "new universalism." He interprets it as follows:

Tian remained very powerful in projects of self-formation and self-cultivation from such Confucian ideals of righteous service, remonstrance and renunciation to syncretic ideals of spiritual and bodily empowerment and ethical duty. It is in these modes and methods of self-cultivation and their extension to wider levels of community and universe that we might find the historical sources of a new universalism (p. 26).

While Duara refers to *tian* as the source of transcendence, he tries to find a bottom-up and self-critical or self-restraining aspect in the coming universality. The coming universality would be open to differences, otherness, and self-criticism by thinking of "dialogical transcendence" in its full meaning.

On this point, it is noteworthy that Duara invokes three modern Asian intellectuals who advocated "cultural anti-imperialism" and "Asian cosmopolitanism" (p. 252): Okakura Tenshin (1863–1913), Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), and Zhang Taiyan (1868–1936). He interprets Tagore alongside Jürgen Habermas as follows:

Tagore's cosmopolitanism, which he derived from the Advaita or the monistic philosophical tradition, has some unexpected parallels with contemporary thinkers from different traditions such as Jürgen Habermas. Tagore's commitment to the universality of reason, as made possible by working through difference, resembles Habermas' idea of communicative rationality as emerging from the negotiation of various value claims of different groups and communities (p. 252).

We can find some heuristic possibility to contribute to the coming universality based upon the "negotiation of various value claims of different groups and communities" in their "Asian cosmopolitanism." However, Duara points out, "Asian cosmopolitanism" was easily

hijacked by political powers in the past. We are faced with the limit of their ideas as follows:

However, their thought was in advance of their time in that it could not be sustained by the political societies in which they lived. Ideas of race, culture, anti-imperialism and imperialism to be found in pan-Asianism all spelt a lethally close relationship with the dominant trend of nationalism. In the case of Okakura, pan-Asianism became easily absorbed by Japanese imperialism; in the case of Zhang, nationalism took priority because of the circumstances. In the case of Tagore, the nationalism of his time made his ideas and institutions irrelevant for a long period.

The spatial vision of Asia that these thinkers possessed was based not on the actual interactions of people from the different countries – of which there was a great deal – but on an abstract and essentialized notion of culture and civilization formed in the mirror image of the Western concept of civilization. Just as that celebration of the superior achievements of a race and religion – apart from specific classes and areas – worked to further a program of domination of the Other, so, too, the idea of Asian civilization was hijacked by Japanese militarism (pp. 252–53).

In the present, then, how should we approach the coming universality in the wake of this “Asian cosmopolitanism” based upon an “abstract and essentialized notion of culture and civilization?” We have to consider that it must be based upon the “actual interactions of people from the different countries.” I will even dare to suggest that this is a call to think of “earthly universality” instead of “heavenly universality.”

Needless to say, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) also spoke of “earth” at the core of his philosophy. What type of difference do we find between Heideggerian ontology and the “earthly universality” particularly embedded in Suzuki’s spirituality? My sense is that the “earthly universality” Suzuki articulated never appropriated Japanese “Spirit” [*Geist*] as the essence of Japan, but it opened up a transformable and trans-universal aspect, even in a “Japanese spirit” which was open to the “negotiation of various value claims of different groups and communities.”

CONCLUSION

How can we realize a sustainable society by confronting crucial global problems? Addressing this question, Duara tries to find a sense of hope by elaborating concepts such as “dialogical transcendence,” “engaged transcendence,” “spirituality,” “redemptive societies,” “cosmopolitanism,” and so on. In short, this hope is supported by the *religious*, which is distinct from institutionalized religion. In our history, it is nevertheless true that the *religious* has been hijacked or re-appropriated by many types of political power. We are asked to be responsible in the face of the crisis of global modernity, when it is necessary for us to think of this subtle and weak dimension of the *religious*. For our hope for the future, I would like to quote the last passage of Duara’s book and in so doing conclude this review:

The custodians of this sacred space, as we have seen, are turning out to be the networks of hope constituted by the coalitions of civil society, local communities and their allies. Their vibrant and jostling character causes them to resemble the traditions of dialogical transcendence rather than the institutionalized custodians – churches, priests or mandarins – who seek purification in the name of the transcendent. In many respects they represent a weak force but can be sufficiently resilient to outlast the strong. One of their great strengths as a moral force is their ability to mediate the sacred with the rational. Armed with scientific, legal, technical and, not least, local knowledge, these coalitions represent our principal hope (p. 288).

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