

# THE SPIRITUAL ATTITUDE AND POSTMODERN HUMANISM

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COPERNICUS and GALILEO drove a stake into the integrity of our consciousness of the universe, splitting earth and man from its center;

DESCARTES established reason as the authority in knowledge, driving a stake into the integrity of being-splitting thinking from other experience and supposedly establishing modern self-awareness;

NEWTON established science in the heavens, driving a stake into the integrity of our relation with nature and splitting our relation with a supernatural God and the natural world;

DARWIN removed man from the center of creation to be another animal, splitting the integrity of our relation with all animals;

FREUD's discovery of the unconscious drove a stake into the integrity of self and mind;

JUNG's description of the collective unconscious drove a stake into the integrity of our experience of self as a separate identity;

KANT, philosophically, and EINSTEIN, physically, declaring our experience of the world to be relative and determined by structures of the mind, drove a stake

into the basis of our perceptions of reality and the fundamental integrity of *all* experience.

In Einstein's words, "It is as if the ground had been pulled out from under one with no firm foundation."<sup>1</sup>

These dichotomies-or splits of center/non-center, cognitive/experiential, supernatural God/natural world, man/animal, mind/body, self/other, objective reality / subjective reality-are some of the tensions of the postmodern mind. They have led to attitudes of doubt, insecurity, cynicism, skepticism and pessimism expressing a fundamental lack of faith in humanity; or have led to attitudes of arrogance, grandiosity, self-proclaimed myopic enlightenment, or isolation and separatism often found even among declared Humanists.

What is *your* fundamental attitude?

How do you deal with the experience of the World Wars, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, man standing on the moon, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the dismantling of Communism in the Soviet Union?

In reaction to our modern understandings, we are indeed undergoing a transformation of humankind. Let's look at how these postmodern tensions are humanity's convulsive attempt to break through into the paradigm of a Spiritual Attitude.

Spiritual Attitude in life *must* be the postmodern expression of the faith of Humanism. The Spiritual Attitude is the stake that must be driven into the heart of our negative views of humanity-the cynical, pessimistic postmodern attitudes, often with self-projected evil indictments and even oppressed Humanist ideas that suck the lifeblood of our faith in humanity. Examples of these negative attitudes were expressed in the paper by Khoren Arisian introducing this volume:

<sup>1</sup> Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Harmony Books, 1991),356.

"...maddeningly volatile century. .."

"...jury verdict [in the Rodney King trial] ...lands it in absurdity. Epistemological skepticism. .. epistemological nihilism."

"...Nietzsche to announce 'the death of God.' ...expressing the spiritual malaise. .."

"The individual. ..has often come to feel powerless and helpless."

"...implications of this doubt illuminate why the question of personal identity has once more arisen as the crux of the postmodernist dilemma."

"...disintegration of human community. .."

"...the self dissolves even as it perceives. .."

"Postmodernism is variously a negative reaction to, or. ..rejection of the whole humanist outlook."

A non-spiritual Humanism is another vampire of the postmodern world view. Like the mythical vampires who have been transformed into their condition by similar beings, postmodern Humanists have become taintedly transformed by their anti-spiritual cultural environment. And like the mythical vampires who despairingly cling to their own kind and convert others, the postmodern non-spiritual Humanist attitude despairingly clings to its own kind and attempts to engage others with this attitude-fearing the stake that must be driven into the heart of this attitude to provide liberation.

Will we continue in our negative criticisms of the postmodern world? Or, will we take heart and recognize the spiritual nature and process of understanding our human selves and history?

Let's look at what is meant by a Spiritual Attitude. I do not mean an equation with "religious" matters as usually defined in the traditional organized and doc-

trinal sense. In the words of William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

"[W]ere one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto. This belief and this adjustment are the religious attitude in the soul."<sup>2</sup>

This describes the religious attitude based on its linguistic root: *religio* = *religare*, meaning "to bind together."<sup>3</sup> This does not refer to fettered or shackled but "to bind together," to make meaning. How does one "bind together" or "make meaning" of the universe? This religious or spiritual attitude of binding together and making meaning is totally consistent with the Humanist foundation of belief in science. Science attempts to discover this "unseen order," to bind together observations into predictive theories for understanding our universe.

This definition emphasizes relatedness. In science the perspective of cause and effect, being linear, has limited our process and understanding of science since every cause is also an effect. Our current understanding of the scientific process is leading to more appreciation of the importance of relatedness as our modern science further investigates relationships of events in time and space.

Our malaise as expressed by Nietzsche comes from *not* recognizing our relationship to the spiritual-not a supernatural spirituality but a human, naturalistic spirituality. In its broadest perspective, this is more appropriately considered to be an ecohumanist spiri-

<sup>2</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, Macmillan, 1961), 59.

<sup>3</sup> *Webster's New World Dictionary* (New York: World Publishing, 1970), 1200.

tuality to emphasize our relationship to nature. Our historical identification of "spiritual" with "supernatural" has limited our ability to acknowledge a human, naturalistic spirituality.

This recognition and liberation will occur only when we do violence (or deconstruct) our own self-projected non-spiritual experience of life. We must review our own life and historical experiences to form a new paradigm that identifies our own spiritual alienation or spiritual connectedness. This process leads to a recognition of the spiritual attitude of "harmoniously adjusting to an unseen order" as a paradigm for healing. In this context I refer to the healing of the suffering schisms to which our personal and historical experience and interpretations contribute. This attitude includes thinking and rationality-but as a belief connected with feeling to a visceral level of experience commonly referred to by the word "soul." This involves the continuum of head, heart and soul. To remain in the frame of science, this is even correlated with our present understanding of the function of the brain-cortical for human thought and rationality, limbic system for emotions that links us with the remainder of the sentient animal kingdom, and midbrain and hypothalamus that controls appetitive and habitual behaviors and is the seat of addictive behaviors, which is society's current disease of the spirit!

The spiritual attitude does not call for a philosophical approach, or a psychological, or even an epistemological approach (into the study of knowing) but an ontological inquiry-into the study of "being." "I am, therefore I am." This paraphrase of Descartes better illustrates the role of "am" as the derivative of "to be."

I am also not referring to the spiritual as any kind of dogmatic belief system (including that espoused by some Humanists) to be possessively held on to as an "identity" such as described in Chogyam Trungpa's

*Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*,<sup>4</sup> but as a combination of experience, process and attitude.

Recognizing this force reveals how the Spiritual Attitude is part of the Satyagraha or spiritual "truth force" of Mahatma Gandhi.

To look further at the power of the Spiritual Attitude, consider once more Copernicus and Galileo. The nature of spirituality recognizes that we are not the physical center of the universe, but we are the center of our personal universe of experience. The "spirit" of humanity will last for the eternity of humanity, further opening a natural human definition of spiritual experience and suggesting an "eternal" soul of a trans personal but not supernatural source.

To address the Cartesian schism further illuminates the Spiritual Attitude. Spirituality does not recognize the supreme authority of thinking alone but recognizes the total experience of thinking to include its relationship to feeling, doing, and comprehensively "being" with which we include intuition, often a source of our creativity.

The Newtonian schism is addressed by recognizing that there are laws of the universe, and that part of GOD is a process-G.O.D. standing for "Good Orderly Direction," which is exactly what Newton discovered!

Or consider the Darwinian "insult," healed as the Spiritual Attitude recognizes and appreciates with awe and inspiration the incredible complexity of evolution, including human beings and the odds against us ever experiencing this moment. We are in the ultimate dice game as we try to find a system to win.

The Freudian schism shows that even within ourselves we must continue to discover, being aware of how time and our past experience and history influ-

<sup>4</sup> Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 1973), 6.

ence present experience. It is our past experience that influences how we interpret and act in the world, including our interpretation of the idea of a spiritual attitude. It is this self-determined limitation that must be broken down to provide a liberation of the human spirit.

And observe the healing of the Jungian stake in the schism of the self versus the other, as we recognize that the concept of self may not, as previously quoted, be dissolved. With the spiritual attitude interpreted as an expansion to include all others-men, women, all races, all nations-a transcendent, transpersonal, transracial, transnational experience of self is recognized. The full power of this attitude is unleashed from the understanding of the collective unconscious. This occurs as a result of a powerful transformational process described by Stanislav Grof, as mentioned in Richard Tamas's *Pas-sion of the Western Mind*(though it is noteworthy that in his conclusions Tamas got caught in the "naturalistic fallacy" of interpreting what "is" to mean it is "good" or "ought" to be.)<sup>5</sup> This transformational process is as socially powerful as  $E=mc^2$ .

And finally, for Kant philosophically and Einstein physically, the Spiritual Attitude addresses the schism of reality. This is the fundamental break that appears psychotic, mad or insane. Within this apparently psychotic relativism is the core of the true faith of Humanism. From this perceived groundlessness, we now have the full opportunity to create our reality, our paradigm, our future-

- . individual and collective
- . with inclusion of self and all others
- . free from unconscious domination by the past
- . finally with the opportunity to use past awareness to break through into a new level of choice

<sup>5</sup> Tarnas, op. cit., 425-33.

. to be truly creators, not only of our own life but collectively of humanity.

This is the ultimate in Humanism and the full expression of the human spirit-to become the Ghandian Bodhisattvas (truth force warriors) of the new millennium; to adopt the Spiritual Attitude-

- . to choose to interpret all as good, as necessary
- . in harmony with an unseen order
- . with a process including laws
- . the laws of the Universe
- . the laws of evolution
- . the laws of the unconscious
- . the laws of group process
- . the laws of developmental and psychological processes
- . and the laws of biological and physical processes;

To choose the Spiritual Attitude as our paradigm and to take action with this interpretation of personal and historical events (including those of the postmodern reaction) that empowers humanity to fully express the human spirit. It is with the same conviction of Martin Luther tacking the 95 Theses on the Wittenberg Cathedral that we must declare with a spiritual integrity our unflinching faith in the human spirit, choosing and taking action with this paradigm to create the new millennium-the Spiritual Attitude.

The opportunity is for us to choose this moment, now, as a recognition of Humanism's spiritual awakening and claim the full power of human "being" for all of humanity.



**SPIRITUAL ATTITUDE**

*J. C. Chatlos*

One. . .two. . .three. . .four. . .  
Five... six... seven  
Points  
The Big Dipper to the North Star  
That topsy-turvy schizophrenia sign  
Of humankind's place in the Universe.

The bluish-orange clouds  
At the border of our cones  
Moving forward  
Showing Gaia's harmony and balance,  
Its beauty to the Universe  
Crossing the lunar brightness  
Pointing its face to the sun.

The Trinity of Universal consciousness  
Mother Earth-with Gaia's rhythms,  
Father Sun-Ra, the power,  
Moon, a Holy Spirit in the darkness of lifenight.

This. . .the two legged Explorer comes,  
Sees,  
Feels,  
Thinks... builds.  
Life, our life  
Reaching, searching to connect with the stars  
To express this consciousness.

Trivially placed in the Universe  
Near a spiral stellar edge  
This garden to life,  
Eden-against the harsh lifeless yet others  
Whirling through space.

Timid to embrace the birth creation of  
Human  
"Being"  
The consciousness of the Universe  
Its germinal spirit grows.