

天地之中（嵩山）

—— 华夏文明与世界文明论坛

The Center of Heaven and Earth (Songshan)—Forum on Chinese and World Civilizations

从轴心文明到对话文明

From Axial-age Civilizations to Dialogical Civilizations

论稿集

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论稿集目次

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Keynote Speeches • 主题演讲

LEONARD SWIDLER: FROM AXIAL-AGE CIVILIZATION TO DIALOGICAL CIVILIZATION	5
Sergey Horujy: CONTRIBUTION OF THE EASTERN-ORTHODOX TRADITION TO THE FORMATION OF THE DIALOGICAL CIVILIZATION.....	18
Richard Falk: Can We Overcome the Global Crisis: Obstacles, Options, and Opportunities	29
Livia Kohn: DAOIST CONTRIBUTIONS TO A SANER WORLD	46
李申：儒教与儒教研究	56
彭国翔：发言稿待定	70
欧洲与中国文明对话的新开端 欧阳哲生	71
一个美国来华传教士对中华文明的认知 高艳丽	81
古代普世人性信念与现代差异性人性的最低伦理 尤西林	111
《中庸》：全球化时代对话文明的政治哲学 谢遐龄	113
对话文明中的共享性中华核心价值观初探 关世杰	115
“浑沌之死”与轴心时代中国思想的基本问题 陈赟	133
普世价值——不同文明对话的坐标 刘利华	167
与时偕行的中国农耕文化 罗志田	194
“天地之中”：神话、宗教与历史的纠结 王邦维	203
儒学在东亚邻国和中国少数民族地区的传播：几点观察 韩孝荣	215
龙年说龙——中国龙神话的历史社会学阐释 董正华	220

农本商末应是人类的主流文化 雷原	228
文明对话语境中的《论语》公理化诠释 甘筱青 曹欢荣	243
“愉悦”何以可能？——《论语》首章新析 朱承	261
文明转型中的中国式探索 郝雨凡	271
民间媒体与西方宪政文化传播 徐建平	276
历史的文明和文明的历史 王立新	279
从世界轴心文明到对话文明 沙宗平	287
道德实践的内在资源 朱卫平	291
儒道佛“三教融合”的三个维度 张家成	303
从“大易不言有无”到“体用同源” 鲁鹏一	305
“筷子神学”刍议 陈驯	315
民族性与普世性之间 傅有德	327
儒伊关系的一种解释 阿里木·托和提	337
轴心时代以来中国儒学发展的基调 陈荣开	346
张之洞与晚清儒学 陆胤	379
宋代明体达用之学的发蒙与奠基 张昭炜	395
事神致福——儒学修身的一元论旨趣发微 關長龍	399
文明的革命与哲学的革命 卢风	401
仁义礼智信与中华文化的核心价值 景海峰	423
“孝”与中国人的安身立命之道 李翔海	435
艺术交流是文明对话的重要途径 任平	447
论中国佛教思想的现代价值 李明友	451
“生命危，知礼仪”——礼源礼质的人类学与文献学考察 易宏	457
中古时期音乐和佛教艺术在亚洲地区间的传播、演化与创新 顾万发	475
About Speaker	493

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“浑沌之死”与轴心时代中国思想的基本问题 陈赟	133
普世价值——不同文明对话的坐标 刘利华	167
与时偕行的中国农耕文化 罗志田	194
“天地之中”：神话、宗教与历史的纠结 王邦维	203
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民间媒体与西方宪政文化传播 徐建平	276
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民族性与普世性之间 傅有德	327
儒伊关系的一种解释 阿里木·托和提	337
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LEONARD SWIDLER: FROM AXIAL-AGE CIVILIZATION TO DIALOGICAL CIVILIZATION

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I tell my freshman students that in order to embark on a voyage of Critical-Thinking they have to start by at least addressing the three W-Questions: *What? Whence? Whither?* *What precisely* are we talking about? Because this is such an obvious move to make, it is widely overlooked. *Whence* asks about the validity of the sources of the statement, and *Whither* asks what the implications are—would it lead to a *reductio ad absurdum* when extended? Here I want to be certain to address the W-Question—*What precisely* are we talking about?—as carefully as possible.

I. Civilization

The first key term in the title of my lecture is “civilization.” Essentially, as the very Latin-rooted term tells us, *civilization* (from the Latin, *civis*, city) means *city-ization*. The great leap forward that a civilization provides is a combination of security and division of labor. Seventeenth-century philosopher John Hobbes wrote a seminal book in which he referred to the State as the *Leviathan* (the hugely powerful mythical biblical monster). The *Leviathan* greatly reduced the ceaseless “war of all against all,” as Hobbes described the pre-*Leviathan* condition of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, thereby making progress beyond a Sisyphus-like rate possible. The division of labor, because of the large numbers of people living very close together in cities in relative security, allowed specialization of all of the skill and arts, making prodigious progress over generations.

II. Religion

A term that is implicit in Civilization is what Western languages refer to as religion. There are numerous descriptions and definitions of religion. I offer my relatively simple, but comprehensive one:

Religion is **An explanation of the *ultimate* meaning of life, and how to live accordingly, based on some notion and experience of the Transcendent.**

Normally all religions contain the four “C’s”: **Creed, Code, Cult, Community-structure**, and are based on the notion and experience of the big “T,” the Transcendent.

Creed refers to the cognitive aspect of a religion; it is everything that goes

into the

“explanation” of the ultimate meaning of life.

Code of behavior or ethics includes all the rules and customs of action that somehow

follow from one aspect or another of the *Creed*.

Cult means all the ritual activities that relate the follower to one aspect or other of the Transcendent, either directly or indirectly, prayer being an example of the former and certain formal behavior toward representatives of the Transcendent, like priests, of the latter.

Community-structure refers to the relationships among the followers; this can vary widely, from an egalitarian relationship, as with Quakers, through a “republican” structure like Presbyterians have, to a monarchical one, as with some Hasidic Jews vis-a-vis their “Rebbe.”

The *Transcendent*, as the roots of the word indicate, means “that which goes beyond” the everyday, the ordinary, the surface experience of reality. It can refer to spirits, gods, a Personal God, an Impersonal God, Emptiness, etc.

It should also be noted that today there are many persons who would not affirm any kind of Transcendent, but opt for some kind of Immanent Humanism. Their Immanent Humanism functions in their lives as does religion for believers in the Transcendent. Clearly, neither position can prove its claim—if it could there would be no division of stances—any more than there would be division over, e.g., the claim that there exists a star which we call Sun, or that two plus two equals four. Thus, the everything in this definition of religion also applies to all forms of Immanent Humanism, except that there is no Transcendent.

What, then, was the connection between a civilization and religion? Every civilization had at its heart a religion, which both reflected the civilization and shaped it—in dialogic fashion. As the civilization, the State (Leviathan), was the life-preserving and fostering structure holding external and internal chaos at bay, it tended to be absolute, exclusive.

Although *Homo sapiens sapiens*—modern humanity—arose in central Africa perhaps 70,000 years ago, and spread from there, the first civilizations arose only about 2-3,000 B.C.E. Thus Humanity moved then from tribal culture into the *Age of Civilizations*. The most ancient civilizations were four: 1. Middle East or Fertile Crescent of Mesopotamia/Egypt; 2. Greece; 3. Indus valley; 4. Yellow River valley. Karl Jaspers noticed all four of them took a dramatic leap forward in the humanization process more or less simultaneously and independently, all reaching the critical

“tipping point” (800-200 B.C.E.) to move into what he called the *Axial Age*.^①

III. Axial Age

Rather than the ordinary folk or the political leaders, those who effected the radical change that led to the “tipping point” were philosophers and religious teachers. The change they brought about was so radical that it affected all aspects of the culture, for it transformed consciousness itself. It was within the horizons of this new form of consciousness that the great civilizations of Asia, the Middle East, and Europe developed. Although within these horizons many changes occurred through the subsequent centuries, the horizons themselves did not change. It was this form of consciousness which spread to other regions through migration and explorations, thus becoming the dominant, though not exclusive, form of consciousness in the world. To this day, whether we were born and raised in the culture of China, India, Europe, Africa, or the Americas, we bear the structure of consciousness that was shaped in this Axial Age.

What is this Axial structure of consciousness and how does it differ from pre-Axial consciousness? Prior to the Axial Age the dominant form of consciousness was *cosmic, tribal, mythic, and ritualistic*. This is still the characteristic form of consciousness of primal peoples. It is true that between these traditional cultures and the Axial Age there emerged great empires in Egypt, China, and Mesopotamia, but they did not yet produce the full consciousness of the Axial Age.

The consciousness of the *tribal* cultures was intimately related to the *cosmos* and fertility cycles of nature. Thus there was established a rich, creative harmony between primal peoples and the world of nature, a harmony which was explored, expressed, and celebrated in *myth* and *ritual*. As they felt themselves part of nature, so they experienced themselves as part of the tribe. It was precisely the web of interrelationships within the tribe that sustained them psychologically, energizing all aspects of their lives. To be separated from the tribe threatened them with death, both physical and psychological. However, their relation to the collectivity often did not extend beyond their own tribe, for they often looked upon other tribes as hostile. Yet within their tribe they felt organically related to their group as a whole, to the life cycles of birth and death and to nature and the cosmos.

The Axial Age then ushered in a radically new form of consciousness. Whereas primal consciousness was tribal, Axial consciousness was *individual*. “Know thyself” became the watchword of Greece (according to Socrates, “only the examined life is worth living”; the Upanishads identified the *atman*, the transcendent center of the self; Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha charted the way of individual Enlightenment;

^① See Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Zurich: Artemis, 1949), pp. 19-43; trans. Michael Bullock, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).

Confucius taught that the goal of every person is to become a *Ren*, a fully authentic individual human person; the Jewish prophets awakened individual moral responsibility. This sense of individual identity, as distinct from the tribe and nature, is the most characteristic mark of Axial consciousness. From this flow other characteristics: a consciousness which is *self-reflective*, *analytic*, and which can be applied to nature in the form of scientific theories, to society in the form of social critique, to knowledge in the form of philosophy, to religion in the form of mapping an individual spiritual journey.

What became important was the interior intention—*kavanah*, in Hebrew—and hence individual personal ethical action. This self-reflective, analytic, critical consciousness stood in sharp contrast to primal mythic and ritualistic consciousness. When self-reflective *Logos* emerged in the Axial Age it tended to oppose traditional *Mythos*, although mythic and ritualistic forms of consciousness survive in the post-Axial Age even to this day, but they are often submerged, surfacing chiefly in dreams, literature, and art.

In brief, the Axial Age ushered in the paradigm shift: 1. from the external (ritual) to the internal(intention), 2. from the communal (tribe, *hoi poloi*) to the individual (personal responsibility, *Ethos*), 3. from mythic (*mythos*) to the reasonable (*Logos*).

IV. Modernity

Thomas Kuhn revolutionized our understanding of the development of scientific thinking with his notion of paradigm shifts. He painstakingly showed that fundamental “paradigms” or “exemplary models” are the large thought frames within which we place and interpret all observed data and that scientific advancement inevitably brings about eventual paradigm shifts—from geocentrism to heliocentrism, for example, or from Newtonian to Einsteinian physics—which are always vigorously resisted at first, as was the thought of Galileo, but finally prevail.^① This insight, however, is valid not only for the development of thought in the natural sciences, but also applicable to all major disciplines of human thought, including the social sciences and humanities.

Thus, as mentioned just above, there was a huge paradigm shift that took place in all four of the ancient civilizations in the Axial Age, 800-200 B.C.E. There were, of course many paradigm shifts of various magnitude that occurred since then in all civilizations. Everyone can easily think of several major ones, such as the fall of the Roman Empire in Western Europe, the coming of Islam in the seventh century, the rise of Western Christendom in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, etc. A truly major paradigm shift that deeply affected not only a section of the globe, but soon the entire world was the eighteenth century Enlightenment (the English term “Enlightenment” is

^① Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed., 1970).

simply a direct translation of the German term *Aufklärung*, made popular by perhaps the most influential philosopher of Modernity, Immanuel Kant [1724 -1804], when he wrote an essay answering the question: *Was ist Aufklärung?* “What is Enlightenment?” in 1784), which started in Western Europe and has subsequently enveloped the globe. It launched what is often called Modernity. In a very profound way the Enlightenment brought the core values of the Axial Age to fulfillment by lifting up the shift to the ethical (free, and therefore responsible) behavior of the individual person (*Ethos*) and the centrality of reason (*Logos*).

Modernity, however, greatly expanded the reach of Axial *Ethos* and *Logos*, declaring that not just 10% of the population (as in “democratic” Athens) could fully claim these two values, but “All men are created equal,” as the American *Declaration of Independence* broadcast in 1776. Hence, it is important that we analyze more deeply Modernity.

Anyone hearing or reading my words, I would argue, is living in the mental world of—not Postmodernism—but Modernity. I understand Modernity as a world that cherishes (1) *freedom*, the Axial individual *Ethos*, at the core of being human; (2) *critical-thinking* reason (Axial *Logos*—not limited to discursive thought) as the arbiter of what to affirm or not. However, Modernity added a third core value (3) *history-evolution*, process, dynamism seen as at the heart of human life and society, and, indeed, all reality. This third core characteristic of Modernity was anticipated in the late eighteenth century by the German *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Drive), stressing the dynamic, but came fully into its own in the first third of the nineteenth century (often referred to by German historians as the *Spät-Aufklärung*—Late Enlightenment) with the development of scientific history, and shortly thereafter biological evolution and then process philosophy. By the end of the nineteenth century the fourth core characteristic of Modernity began to take the stage: (4) the conscious recognition of cultural/religious *pluralism*—and, hence, the consequent need to engage in Dialogue (*Dia-Logos*). Said in brief: I understand Modernity to have four main characteristics of being human: (1) a sense of radical freedom; (2) a sense of automatically asking whether something makes rational sense; (3) a sense of perceiving all human experience in its specific historical-evolutionary context; and, because of the relationality of all knowledge, (4) the need to engage persons with different views and experiences in *Deep-Dialogue* so as to learn more.

We cannot avoid Modernity, even if we do not allude to it and are not consciously aware of it. Modernity is all around us. It is the very air that we breathe, even when we might be vigorously trying to reject some part of it. (1) In our bones we feel *free* and feel outraged when we learn of others being robbed of their freedom. (2) We cannot help but involuntarily ask of every new or old idea or bit of information that comes along whether it *makes sense*, whether we “buy” it, whether it is *reasonable*.

(3) We are increasingly aware that reality around us is *constantly changing*, that

old givens do not necessarily hold anymore, and that, consequently, we constantly ask whether old saws are still valid or are something from a past context. (4) Also increasingly we do not automatically discount those who are different from us but are more and more inclined at first to tolerate them, then to open out to them, and then even to seek them out.

Modernity makes up our mental world just as water is where fish live, or the air is for us mammals. We do not even notice it, unless it is severely damaged and we start to choke and even die. We automatically resist when our freedom is threatened and protest when something unreasonable is being forced down our throats. We would do the same if our radios and TV's—or now increasingly our computers or smart phones—were taken from us and we were forced to go back to living in the older context, or if we no longer could learn new things from those elsewhere in the world. This is all true even if we do not think about it—until part of it might be taken away.

Consequently, if a hoary tradition is to find a helpful, creative place in our life, we must undertake two important steps. First, we need to reflect more intensely and consciously on what our mental world of Modernity is. We need to learn in greater depth what its elements are and how they intertwine to constitute the atmosphere in which we “live, move, and have our being,” as St. Paul wrote in quoting an ancient Greek poet. Contemporary philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) put it thus: “History does not belong to us; but we belong to it.”

V. Post-Modernity?

At the same time, as an intellectual/cultural historian I am constantly astonished that so many of my colleagues in academe are still describing their thinking as “postmodern,” or “postmodernism.” Any “movement” that cannot articulate what it is about, but can only say what it is *not* about, strikes me as intellectually suspect or, perhaps more kindly, “adolescent,” immature, not very well thought through. More importantly, as it slowly began to become clear what most “postmodern” writers seemed to be talking about when they used the term “postmodernity,” it appeared to refer to: (1) *hermeneutics of suspicion* and the resultant *sense of pluralism* and consequent *need for dialogue*, (2) a stress on *particularity*, and (3) an *a priori rejection of any “over-all” understanding of anything*.^① Concerning the hermeneutics of suspicion, pluralism, and dialogue, one must ask: Have these writers been unaware of the scholarship of the past two centuries? Hermeneutics of suspicion began

^① See Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), pp. 16–18, wherein he lays out a variety of post modernities; and Roger Haight, *Jesus, Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, NY: OrbisBooks, 1999), pp. 331–334, wherein he lists four characteristics of post modernity: radical historical consciousness, critical social consciousness, pluralist consciousness, and cosmic consciousness.

flooding into Western thought already before the middle of the nineteenth century.^① Stress on the particularity of history started even earlier in the eighteenth century (for example, Johann Georg Hamman [1730–88], Johann Gottfried von Herder [1744–1803], Johann Wolfgang von Goethe [1749–1832], and *Sturm und Drang* [1765–85]). It intensified in the nineteenth century with the launching of “critical history” by Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) and others who attempted to describe the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (how it really was), and Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), the father of “Liberal Protestant Theology.” It has continued unabated into our twenty-first century in, for example, thinkers like Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005).

Yes, all knowledge is interpreted knowledge and is affected by our “place in the world” and hence is limited. As a result of this growing awareness of pluralism, the consequent need for dialogue precisely with those who experience reality differently from us began increasingly to be felt—exemplified already in the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Knowledge, we increasingly understand, is far more complicated and layered than was realized before the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, and, because of our ever-deeper understanding of how we humans understand reality, necessarily in a dialogical manner, we are moving ever closer to an endlessly more fully accurate picture of reality.^②

For over 200 years we have been becoming increasingly aware of the ever further dimensions of our human *Ratio/Logos*, which is not at all limited to abstract syllogistic reason or the like. We are constantly learning that there are depths under depths in the intelligibility both of our humanity and indeed of the entire cosmos. Cosmologists now are even speaking about all reality’s being ultimately units of “information.” (Perhaps Pythagoras, 572–497 B.C.E., was not so crazy when he talked about the world’s being composed of numbers!) At the center of this ongoing expansion of our knowledge is our expanding awareness of the pressing need for dialogue with those who experience reality from standpoints different from ours.

As far as the Postmodernist rejection of any and all attempts to understand an object of study in some “overall way” is concerned, the rejection also strikes me as quite naive, as being unaware of how we humans *necessarily* think. We *always* want to try to relate one thing to others. It is an unavoidable move by our *Ratio/Logos*, whether it is the first step of *analysis* or the subsequent step of *synthesis*. We *automatically* try mentally to break things down into their component parts and then

^① Although Haight “heuristically” used the “postmodern” in his Jesus book to describe the above-noted characteristics of what he is content to call “postmodernity,” still he is not wedded to the term: “I have no interest in defending this title, for it may lend too much substance to intellectual developments which singly have not yet come to maturity or collectively coalesced in such a way that a clear cultural threshold or boundary has been crossed” (Haight, *Jesus*, p. 317).

^② For a more detailed analysis of the increasing awareness of the limitations of our knowledge and the consequent need for dialogue, see Leonard Swidler, *After the Absolute* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990). Available online at <http://www.global-dialogue.com/swidlerbooks/>

try to understand how they are related. Our very language tells us that is how we think. In the initial analysis portion of our thinking, we say that we can or cannot “grasp” what is being explained. We “grasp” the various portions of an idea by detaching them from the rest and then attempt to understand how the parts are related. For instance, the idea of “falling” is understood to contain the “parts” of above, below, and movement from the former to the latter. The same “automatic” intellectual movement is reflected in other synonyms of “to grasp,” such as “comprehend” (Latin *com-prehendere*, to put our mental arms around something), or “conceive” (Latin *con-cepere*, to grasp around), or “define” (Latin *definere*, to draw a limit around).

No doubt we make many defective “syntheses.” We often will not be aware of certain dimensions of a subject and hence “get it all together” in a way that is only partially accurate or perhaps even terribly mistaken. The *wie es eigentlich gewesen* historians will strive to “tell it like it is” as best they can and may well stop there as historians of a specific area—like workers on an assembly line doing only their part. However, they will have to tell themselves *not* to follow their natural movement of the mind to relate the studied portion to contiguous portions of the story. In philosophy phenomenologists even deliberately have to put mental “brackets” around the object they are studying; but the purpose of such an *epoché* (Greek, “to hold back”), as they name those mental “brackets,” is later to relate it to a larger context. Even if completely “reductionist” so-called “Postmodern” thinkers claim that there is no connection between what they are studying and the rest of reality, they contradict themselves by positing just such a connection by thinking of it—negatively. If there were no larger commonality, one would not be able to claim that there is, or is not, a lesser commonality.

Far from being “Postmodern,” it should be clear that all these developments of the past 200 years were/are in fact a continuation, a deepening, of Modernity, of the turn toward the self-aware, free, critical-thinking, ever-changing, driven-to-dialogue Subject. We are, in fact, becoming, not less, but more Modern than ever. Hence, at the beginning of the twenty-first century we are not at all “Postmodern.” We are increasingly Modern, Expandingly Modern.

VI. Dialogue

1. Dialogue is the Very Foundation of the Cosmos

Dialogue is something deeper and pervasive in not just our humanity. Rather, dialogue is the very foundation of the cosmos. Dialogue—understood at its broadest as the mutually beneficial interaction of differing components—is at the very heart of the Universe, of which we humans are the highest expression: from the basic interaction of matter *and* energy (in Einstein’s unforgettable formula, $E=MC^2$; energy equals mass times the square of the speed of light), to the creative interaction of protons *and* electrons in every atom, to the vital symbiosis of body *and* spirit in every human, through the creative dialogue between woman *and* man, to the dynamic relationship between individual *and*

society. Thus, the very essence of our humanity is dialogical, and a fulfilled human life is the highest expression of the *Cosmic Dance of Dialogue*.

In the early millennia of the history of humanity, as we spread outward from our starting point in central Africa, the forces of *divergence* were dominant. However, because we live on a globe, in our frenetic divergence we eventually began to encounter each other more and more frequently. Now the forces of stunning *convergence* are becoming increasingly dominant.

In the past, during the Age of Divergence, we could live in isolation from each other; we could ignore each other. Now, in the Age of Convergence, we are forced to live in one world. We increasingly live in a global village. We cannot ignore the Other, the different. Too often in the past we have tried to make over the Other into a likeness of ourselves, often by violence, but this is the very opposite of dialogue. This egocentric arrogance is in fundamental opposition to the Cosmic Dance of Dialogue. It is not creative; it is destructive. Hence, we humans today have a stark choice: dialogue, or death!^①

2. Dialogues of the Head, Hands, Heart in Holistic Harmony of the Holy Human

For us humans there are three main dimensions to dialogue, corresponding to the structure of our humanness: Dialogue of the *Head, Hands, Heart*, in *Holistic Harmony of the Holy Human*.

a. The Cognitive or Intellectual: Seeking the True

In the Dialogue of the Head we reach out to those who think differently from us to understand how they see the world and why they act as they do. The world is too complicated for anyone to grasp alone; increasingly, we can understand reality only with the help of the other, in dialogue. This is important, because how we *understand* the world determines how we *act* in the world.

b. The Illative or Ethical: Seeking the Good

In the Dialogue of the Hands we join together with others to work to make the world a better place in which we all must live together. Since we can no longer live separately in this “one world,” we must work jointly to make it not just a house but a home for all of us to live in. In other words, we join hands with the other to heal the world—*Tikun olam*, in the Jewish tradition. The world within us and all around us is always in need of healing, and our deepest wounds can be healed only together with the other, only in dialogue.

c. The Affective or Aesthetic: Seeking the Beautiful, the Spiritual

In the Dialogue of the Heart we open ourselves to receive the beauty of the other. Because we humans are body and spirit—or, rather, body-spirit—we give bodily-spiritual expression in all the arts to our multifarious responses to life: joy, sorrow, gratitude, anger, and, most of all, love. We try to express our inner feelings, which grasp reality in far deeper and higher ways than we are able to put into rational concepts and words; hence,

^① See Leonard Swidler, with John Cobb, Monika Hellwig, and Paul Knitter, *Death or Dialogue: From the Age of Monologue to the Age of Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990).

we create poetry, music, dance, painting, architecture—the expressions of the heart. (Here, too, is where the depth, spiritual, mystical dimension of the human spirit is given full rein.) All the world delights in beauty, and so it is here that we find the easiest encounter with the other, the simplest door to dialogue.

d. Holiness: Seeking the One

We humans cannot live a divided life. If we are even to survive, let alone flourish, we must “get it all together.” We must not only dance the dialogues of the **Head, Hands, and Heart** but also bring our various parts together in **Harmony** (a fourth “H”) to live a **Holistic** (a fifth “H”), life, which is what religions mean when they say that we should be **Holy** (a sixth “H”). Hence, we are authentically **Human** (a seventh “H”) only when our manifold elements are in dialogue within each other, and we are in dialogue with the others around us. We must dance together the **Cosmic Dance of Dialogue of the Head, Hands, and Heart, Holistically**,^① in **Harmony** within the **Holy Human**.

VII. Second Axial Age

Following the lead of Ewert Cousins,^② if we shift our gaze to the latter part of the 20th century and on to the present time, we can discern another transformation of consciousness, which is so profound and far-reaching that he called it the *Second Axial Age*.^③ Like the First Axial Age, it is happening simultaneously across all civilizations, and today that means all around the earth, and also like the first it doubtless will shape the horizon of consciousness for future centuries. Not surprisingly, too, it will have great significance for world religions, the first of which were constituted in the First Axial Age. However, the new form of consciousness is different from that of the First Axial Age. Then it was individual consciousness, now it is global consciousness.

This global consciousness which is generated on a “horizontal” level through the world-wide meeting of cultures and religions, is only one of the global characteristics of the Second Axial Age. The consciousness of this period is also global in another sense, namely, in rediscovering its roots in the Earth. At the very moment when the various cultures and religions are meeting each other and creating a new global community, our life on the planet is being threatened. The very tools which we have used to bring about this convergence—industrialization and technology—have been

^① Those who know Western medieval philosophy will recognize that these are the “Metaphysicals,” the four aspects of Being Itself, perceived from different perspectives: the one, the true, the good, the beautiful.

^② I am in this section especially indebted to Ewert Cousins’ essay “Judaism-Christianity-Islam: Facing Modernity Together,”

Journal of Ecumenical Studies, 30:3-4 (Summer-Fall, 1993), pp. 417-425.

^③ For a more comprehensive treatment of Cousins’ concept of the Second Axial Period, see his book *Christ of the 21st Century*

(Rockport, MA: Element, 1992).