

## MEETING OF EAST AND WEST

Honolulu, Hawaii  
Pluralism is one of the most troublesome—and one of the most discussed—problems of our time. Modern religious and cultural values are fractured. How then can that minimal unity, cooperation and understanding necessary for the peace of the community be achieved?

In the United States, most discussions of pluralism center around the deep divisions in our own society—among our various religions on the one hand, and between the forces of “religion” and “secularism” on the other. In Hawaii this summer the discussion was broadened.

At the third East-West Philosophers Conference, held at the University of Hawaii from June 22 to July 31, forty scholars from Europe, Asia and the United States met to consider “the practical implications of comparative philosophy for cultural institutions as a basis for world understanding and cooperation.” The program members were all distinguished, and some of them were famous: F. S. C. Northrop, D. T. Suzuki, S. Radhakrishnan, N. Bammate, Sidney Hook, Hu Shih, and Paul Mus, for example, were among the participants. For six weeks, in public sessions and in private conversations, they explored together the major themes of the Conference: the relation to practical affairs of philosophical theories, natural science and technology, religion and spiritual values, ethics and social practice, and legal, political and economic philosophy.

This Conference was supported by grants from a number of foundations, and the grants were wisely made. Until our time it was not terribly urgent, from a practical standpoint, that East and West should understand each other’s philosophical traditions. Until this century the world was not only divided; each of its major units was more or less self-contained. Autonomous civilizations, closed systems of intellectual and religious values, were possible. But modern technology has changed this forever. The globe has shrunk and in the next few decades it will shrink still further. Our old concepts of distance will soon have lost all meaning. Isolationism of the mind and the spirit have thus become as impossible, pathetic, and practically dangerous as isolationism of national states. Science has quickly accomplished what centuries of religion failed to do: it has involved each of us in the fate of all others, and the discussions at the University of Hawaii this summer were a striking witness to this fact. They were a witness also to the problems we face in any effort to keep the development of cultural understanding in some pace with the march of scientific events.

The final week of the Conference was given over to a summing up of the preceding discussions. The philosophers did not seek for any synthesis

of their various positions (They were, fortunately, too wise to attempt such foolishness) but they did search after some coherent “conspectus of practical implications for world understanding and cooperation.” At the opening session of this week, Professor E. A. Burtt, of Cornell University, raised what was perhaps the relevant question of the Conference. In the light of the meetings, he asked, can we even define “understanding”? Can we ever really empathize with an alien culture and see it as an alternative to our own?

Professor Burtt’s question, and the discussions (and sometimes confusions) of the previous weeks, reminded me of a request George Santayana once made to a group of philosophers gathered at the Hague to celebrate the tercentenary of the birth of Spinoza: “I will ask you today,” Santayana said, “provisionally, for an hour, and without prejudice to your ulterior reasonable convictions, to imagine the truth to be as unfavorable as possible to your desires and as contrary as possible to your natural presumptions; so that the spirit in each of us may be drawn away from its accidental home and subjected to an utter denudation and supreme trial.”

I first read Santayana’s plea when I was an undergraduate, and I have thought of it ever since as one of the saddest pleas I ever heard. “Human kind cannot bear very much reality,” T. S. Eliot reminds us. History indicates that human kind cannot bear very much “understanding” either. In the effort to understand things alien to ourselves, we are easily perverted into dogmatizing our own positions or, worse, sentimentalizing all positions, so that none seems to matter at all. I doubt if many of the philosophers in Santayana’s audience could really imagine the truth to be as contrary as possible to their own presumptions, and as an observer at the East-West Conference I saw little evidence that these philosophers could, in Professor Burtt’s words, empathize with alien cultures and see them as alternatives to their own. What was achieved during these six weeks, rather, was a more modest “understanding”—the definition of the genuine, as opposed to the imagined, differences between East and West.

And this was an honorable achievement, because the dream of a universal system of values, of a world society in which agreement on ultimates will be found, is a sentimental dream. It is also a dangerous dream, because the advance of science, the shrinking of the globe, do not give us time to look for so unlikely a millenium. Before any significant number of men will be able to draw themselves away from the accidental homes of their own cultures, or effectively empathize with values that are alien to their own, the final destruction of all cultures may have come to pass.

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