

Toward a New World Dharma: Reconceptualizing Citizenship, Community and the Sacred in the Global Age - Trevor Carolan

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ABSTRACT / SUMMARY

This dissertation addresses the problem of how, in a global future, humanity is to comprehend the singularity of the place, the biosphere it calls home. Will communities, nations, and the earth itself, for example, be regarded as ‘one’ place in which many live, or as the product of many separate, but linked compositional elements? The ‘many in the One’, or the “One in the many”? From the perspective of International Relations, in a global future will ‘integration’ at the individual level necessarily imply ‘homogenization’ at larger intercultural levels? Might the conditions of existence in a global future be understood rather as the universalization of certain key values and practices that respect the diversity of distinct regional differences? What spiritual or ethical ideas will serve as a unifying meta-narrative in a global age? These are questions of keen interest to those whose lives are touched in some way by the growing convergence of cultures, especially by the stream of classical East and South Asian wisdom paths now flowing into the West.

For such individuals, and for those whose understanding of the world is tempered by the findings of contemporary dynamic systems theory and its groundings in Western cognitive science, the coordinates of these steadily arising mutualities may be observed as the manner in which, for example, Taoism, Hinduism and Buddhism respectively recognize the concept of ‘from the beginning interdependence’ – *pratitya samutpada*, or dependent origination, and that which China’s ancient animists understood as *Tao*. Similarly, contemporary Western scientists such as David Suzuki now expound the idea of ecological ‘innerconnectivity’ that leads organically to the Gaia Hypothesis, viewing Earth itself as a self-regulating planetary

biological system – as a sentient being.¹ This is summarized from a contemporary position by the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh as ‘Interbeing’ (1995: 11; 1996: 37; Pagels, 1995: xx).

Conceptually, interbeing or interdependence has profound ramifications in terms of the social, cultural and political dimensions of authority. As a scientifically verifiable condition of existence increasingly compatible to both Asian and Western world-views, it shapes a method by which the societies of Western liberal democratic traditions and Asia’s Confucian and Sanskrit-inflected worlds alike respond to the deeper challenges of a global future. In terms of citizenship, as American author Maxine Hong-Kingston suggests, there is a seed of border-crossing opportunity; a possibility in which both Asian and Western cultures can ‘heal the wounds of history’ in moving toward a shared, global future in the 21st century.²

Yet globalization as an idea has already encountered widespread international resistance. Given that a truly global age has not yet properly emerged, in what capacities might ‘healing’ opportunities develop within the narrow, ethically amoral, investor-driven economic interpretations of reality which, so far, have defined ‘globalization’?³ How, this thesis inquires, may a ‘global future’ be comprehended as a new, or renewed world-view; one that embodies contemporary intercultural and ecological realities of diversity, complexity and interconnectedness?

New ages of awareness require new epistemologies and historiographies. In forging ideas of interconnectedness with the more worldly concept of ‘commonwealth’, this thesis questions and examines what the fuller meanings of a global future may be, arguing that any new civilizational paradigm must engage the challenge it poses to such concepts as ethics, progress, rule of law, self-reliance, and sustainable economic development.

¹ Suzuki, David (2003), “Human Activities Give Rise to New Diseases,” *Common Ground*, August, 2003:7

² Hong Kingston, Maxine (1998), *Hawai’i One Summer*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.

³ Identified by George Soros (1998) in “World Capitalist Crisis” as, “...characterized not only by free trade but more specifically by the free movement of capital. The system is very favourable to financial capital which is free to pick and choose where to go, and it has led to the rapid growth of global financial markets. It can be envisaged as a gigantic circulatory system, sucking up capital into the financial markets and institutions at the center and then pumping it out to the periphery either directly in the form of credits and portfolio investments, or indirectly through multinational corporations” (p.4).

Amplifying the idea of interdependence as ‘commonwealth’, it considers contemporary and classical ideas of what individual citizenship itself has meant. Indeed, since Aristotle, the very idea of citizenship has been understood as an ethical linkage between the individual and *polis*, between human community and physical place: the universal is found in the local.^{4 4}

Borrowing from Futures Studies in International Relations, this thesis seeks to critique and construct what R.S. Slaughter identifies as “a pattern of interpretation”⁵, or a mandala of consciousness representing the unity between individual, larger community and ecological place – between the local and universal, between physical and metaphysical. In this enterprise one is not far from the approach of the Master, Confucius, who seeks similar order in Book III.8 of the *Lun Yu*, or Analects.⁶ For purposes of clarity, and because an explicit vocabulary is useful in leading toward common expectations, the thesis identifies this pattern of interpretation as an expression of ‘literacy of place’. Heuristically, it is the cultivation of such literacy of place that forms the knowledge base from which one can begin examining interdependency and ‘commonwealth’ as renewing *seeds* in the articulation of what Foucault identifies as an *episteme*.⁷ Conceptually, this episteme will be a form of *new world dharma* for the global age.

⁴ Aristotle (1970), *Politics*. Trans. T.A. Sinclair. London: Penguin.

⁵ Slaughter, R.A. (2002), “Beyond the Mundane: reconciling breath and depth in futures inquiry.” *Futures*. August, v34 i6 p 493(15). Retrieved 1/30/2004. Bond University Academic Library, Infotrac: <http://web4.infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/818/308/45995159w4/purl>

⁶ Confucius (1979), *The Analects*, trans. D.C. Lau. London: Penguin.

⁷ Foucault, Michel (1972), *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Trans. Alan Sheriden. London: Tavistock.