



***“All is contained in the Divine Breath,
As is light in the darkness before dawn.
Knowledge transmitted by proof
Is like the dawn to one half drowsing.
He perceives what we speak of as in a dream,
But that gives him a clue to the Breath.”
—Ibn Al-‘Arabi***

The Need for Global Vision in an Era of Modernity

The following passage from cultural historian and Islamic scholar, Marshall G. S. Hodgson, offers insight into the contemporary challenges of modern life and the vulnerability of tradition including traditional religious values. By Great Transmutation, Professor Hodgson means the deep and comprehensive change from a traditional society based on ancestral customs to a rational society based on the intellectual competence and social power of individuals. The passage is offered as food for thought. Is such a transmutation necessary for the development of human potential? Should we retain loyalty to the values preserved by tradition and expressed in religious language? Will the Great Transmutation encourage the development of world citizens and the emergence of world culture? Some editing has been made for clarity and brevity.

Perhapsa pervasive Modern problem is the unsettling of moral allegiances which modern technicalism tends to bring. The pressure on natural resources and the disruption of cultural traditions lead not only to strains in the political and social spheres but also strains within the individual.

The strains are twofold. Negatively, as everyone has heard, we face a steady erosion of old norms and loyalties. In some lands even a sense of family solidarity has been undermined by the repeated contrasts between the generations and by the increasing sphere of personal life, which is regulated or fulfilled, even in youth, outside the home. All kinds of traditional notions, including

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those most specifically of religion, are constantly threatened by the penetration of cosmopolitan science and scholarship through the schools and the mass media of communication. The old ideas of the universe and the nation, of morality and propriety, may not be explicitly replaced, if they were the object of explicit loyalty, but they tend to be attenuated and made innocuous.... But even when a family solidarity can be maintained and a religious outlook reinterpreted to be less vulnerable to facts, a positive moral outlook is called for... This new moral outlook absorbs more and more of an individual's attention and time. Ideally the modern individual should be a paragon of 'democratic' virtues which were never called for before; he must not only adapt to the clock and to precision tooling and be ready to retrain as his old skills are superceded; he must develop a whole new psychology of egalitarian co-operativeness. He must be able to work as a member of a "team". He must renounce dominating over his wife (who may get an independent job, and can divorce him) and can less and less pre-ordain his children's careers... On the job, he must adjust himself to committee work or joint projects where command and obedience is replaced by something like "collective leadership", and an ad hoc company loyalty. To the educator, the physician and the psychiatrist falls the duty of eliminating everything that may block his full and open responsiveness and prevent him from becoming the intelligent and responsible citizen required; and he must be prepared to follow their technically expert guidance at every step, from the clinic for pre-natal care to the centre for maintaining an active old age.... But the new moral outlook presents us with pervasive problems. It may make for human greatness or for the reverse. In itself, technological skill calls for a certain number of moral qualities in a population – openness to new ways, industriousness, a sense of precision, a certain level of public honesty and dependability: and at least at its creative centers, inventiveness and intellectual courage. In its origin, at least...., modern life calls for a general appreciativeness of diverse human potentialities, especially for knowledge and for a certain level of humanness, of respect for the inviolability of the individual and liberty, and even of egalitarian social consciousness.... The greatest moral significance of the Great Transmutation is probably not what it requires but what it merely makes possible; that by clearing away old limitations it opens the way to a fuller unfolding of the diverse potentialities of the individual in all spheres of living.... But such an opportunity may or may not be fulfilled. And in fact precisely the technical specialization and disruption of tradition threatens to frustrate this. It is readily possible to imagine technology leading to the inane pursuit of meaningless comfort portrayed in Huxley's *Brave New World*, with any one individual impotent to change the vastly complex social patterns in which he is reduced to helpless conformity along with billions of others all watching identical television sets round a world undifferentiatedly up-to-date in its technical efficiency._ We may suppose that the outcome can hinge on the quality of moral vision available to people. Thus, it has been pointed out that the widespread problem of juvenile delinquency and of youthful rebelliousness in general which troubles most ... lands, ... might be in two ways. It might be in the

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way of *Brave New World*, by teams of teachers and social workers and psychiatrists and city planners who learned how to persuade each youth to identify with the established order and find his greatest pleasure in conforming to it; or it might be solved by inspiring enough youths with a vision of something great to do with their lives that they would set new and creative fashions among their peers. But greatness of vision is problematic. The structure of modern society stresses identification with the national social body and encourages a viewpoint limited by specialist training, at the expense of breadth or loyalty or the sort of transrational, non-utilitarian outlook which, as religion, was so formative of the great pre-Modern heritages. Yet the nations are incomplete units, incapable within their boundaries of providing fit horizons for youthful vision. ...Great vision must now be world-wide. Moreover, it is unclear how greatness of vision – unlike utilitarian practicality – can be rooted simply in that ever-changing pattern of expertise which goes to make up technical Modernity; our poets suggest that on that level life remains simply absurd. Vision must transcend mere technalistic goals. The deepest problem of the Modern world is to find a vision both challenging and genuine.

Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, Volume 3, pp. 425-27