Can Religion and Culture bring Harmony and Peace?

Today’s Holism as Laying the Foundations for a Planetary Earth Federation

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(World Thinkers and Writers Peace Meet, Kolkata, India, December 2015)

Religion and the New Holism

Indian sage Sri Aurobindo writes that “God in man is the whole revelation and the whole of religion” (1972: 714). Aurobindo’s statement is a statement of holism. God is not ontologically separate from the world and from humankind. God is an immanent-transcendent dimension within the holism of the cosmos. Western theologian Raimundo Pannikar concurs. He argues that “the great challenge of Christian thought for the incoming third millennium consists in overcoming theism, deepening the experience of the Trinity in the direction of a cosmotheandric intuition” (Matthews & Varghese, 1995: 298). The “overcoming” of theism means conversion to the holistic paradigm that understands the entire cosmos, including its divine depth dimensions, as consisting in a dynamic unity in diversity. God and the world are one reality. Panikkar writes:

Every being has an abyssal dimension, both transcendent and immanent. Every being transcends everything – including and perhaps most pointedly “itself,” which in truth has no limits. It is, further, infinitely immanent, i.e., inexhaustible and unfathomable. And this is so not because the limited powers of our intellect cannot pierce deeper, but because this depth belongs to every being as such. (1993: 61)

However, both Aurobindo and Panikkar understand that religion is not ultimately about concepts such as “theism” or “depth dimensions.” The heart of religion is spiritual realization. Spiritual realization brings with it peace. Religion requires a culture that promotes spiritual realization, the realization that “I am you and you are me,” the realization that the different names by which we call our different religions do not divide us from one another, nor the different nations in which we were born, nor our different cultural or racial backgrounds. Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas points to this truth when he writes: “I am a testimony, or a trace, or the glory of the Infinite” (1998: 170) and recognizes the consequences of this realization in the words of Isaiah: “Peace, peace to him who is far and to him who is near, says the Eternal” (Isaiah 57: 11).

The new holistic paradigm understands that the world is not a composite of semi-autonomous parts but rather a dynamic set of interrelated processes and fields interlinked by their internal relationships with one another. It understands that everything is interconnected with everything else and the realization of this interconnectedness is the actualization of peace. We are all parts of one another and all manifestations of the dynamic divine holism of the cosmos. “Peace to him who is far and to him who is near, says the Eternal.”

Peace will come about when there is a deep cognitive and spiritual realization of the truth behind the holistic paradigm. It will about when people realize what I called in Millennium Dawn “planetary maturity,” the maturity of a direct intellectual, existential, and spiritual realization of the depths of existence manifest in all things and testified to in our common humanity. A culture of peace can promote mature human self-realization, and mature religious teachers can promote this, but much more is needed as I try to point out below.

The new holistic paradigm of the 20th century was established not by theologians or philosophers, but by scientists. It consists in the discovery, across the spectrum of sciences—from physics to chemistry to biology to anthropology to linguistics to systems theory—that the world does not exhibit a machine-like character, reducible to parts called atoms, as the early-modern Newtonian Paradigm imagined. Rather the world is a dynamic, evolving holistic intersection of fields within fields, constituted entirely by relationships in which parts and the wholes that make them what they are intersect though a multiplicity of internal relations not reducible to their separate components.
There is a vast literature coming from the scientists testifying to this holism that I will not go into in this paper. I have covered some of this testimony in Chapter Three of my *Ascent to Freedom* (2008) and in every chapter of my *One World Renaissance* (2015). Famed physicist, Werner Heisenberg, for example, writes: “The world thus appears as a complicated tissue of events, in which connections of different kinds alternate or overlap or combine and thereby determine the texture of the whole” (in Harris, 2000: 85-86). And physicist David Bohm concludes that:

A centrally relevant change in descriptive order required in the quantum theory is thus the dropping of the notion of analysis of the world into relatively autonomous parts, separately existent but in interaction. Rather, the primary emphasis is now on *undivided wholeness*, in which the observing instrument is not separable from what is observed. (Ibid.)

Relatively autonomous parts would be parts in *external relations* with one another, and this perspective of the early-modern paradigm not only characterized the science of the 17th to 19th centuries but the cultural, economic, and political institutions that developed during that era. These institutions include the basic ideas of capitalism as well as the founding principles of the system of sovereign nation-states. Hence, under capitalism corporations and persons are looked at as “atoms of rational self-interest” competing with one another in largely external relationships for markets, economic advantage, and profits.

Something similar informs the system of sovereign nation-states that many scholars date to the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648. Some early-modern philosophers recognized this system for what it was and is: a “war system” in which the very nature of the external relations between these semi-autonomous entities has the character of lawlessness and war. Hence Thomas Hobbes declared that sovereign nations confronted one another in the “posture of Gladiators,” Spinoza contended that any two sovereign states “are enemies by nature,” and Hegel asserted that if states disagree “the matter can only be settled by war” (Harris, 2000b: 57).

There was tremendous influence on worldwide culture by this early-modern set of assumptions. These assumptions did not foster peace and harmony but rather external relations, fear, and misunderstanding. The world was assumed to be made up of a vast collection of fragmented differences: nation-states, races, cultures, languages, religions, etc. When differences are taken to have a semi-autonomous reality in their own right (as they are under the early-modern paradigm), then peace is undermined and war is empowered.

These paradigm assumptions operate across the spectrum of cultures, religions, and institutions. Hence, traditional religious ideas, practices, and texts that are framed within early-modern assumptions emphasize the incommensurable differences between “my religion” and those of the others. This paradigm also promotes religious fundamentalism: the traditional scriptures give not a symbolic interpretation of sacred history and the divine-cosmic revelations but rather a literal account, which means that the claims to truth in these texts are incommensurable with the claims to truth by religious texts in other traditions. My truth contradicts their truth and engenders a relationship that can be termed a *defacto* war-relation. “I am not you and you are not me.”

On the other hand, theologians who have understood the paradigm-shift to a holistic understanding of the cosmos understand that religion must undergo a similar shift to a holistic understanding of the divine, the cosmos, and humans in relation to these dimensions. The paradigm-shift to holism, Christian theologian Hans Künig asserts, has provided for the first time a “foundation for universal values, human rights, and ethical criteria” (1991:41-42). The “new covenant” is holistic and inclusive, not fragmented and divisive:

Even in the natural sciences, which for a long time regarded the world as a well-oiled machine, since Einstein’s theory of general relativity, Heisenberg’s quantum mechanics and the discovery of elementary particles, a holistic way of thinking has become established and with it a paradigm change from the classical mechanistic physics of the modern world. Instead of the domination of nature, what Ilya Prigogine calls a ‘new covenant’ between human being and nature is becoming urgently necessary. (1991: 13)

This new covenant means that the world and everything in it is now understood as a web of relationships, not as a collection of parts. The dimension of the divine, the cosmos, nature, and humanity all exist as a series of interconnected fields characterized by their webs of relationships. God can no longer be conceived as an autonomous being independent
of the created world, and humans can no longer be understood as creatures in the “image of God” fundamentally different from the natural world. Similarly, the new paradigm understands that humans evolved as a single species out of the natural world and that civilization is a whole, developmentally moving forward as a manifestation of our common humanity. All religions, therefore, express the divine depths of things and all religions articulate, as Sri Aurobindo puts it, the identity of “God in man” everywhere.

Here we have the groundwork for peace among the world religions and for a vision of peace emanating from the world religions that encompasses the whole of humanity. The first foundation for peace is holism: recognition of the interdependence and interrelationship of all things and all persons within the evolving divine-cosmic whole that we call the universe. This leads to the realization that speech, the common capacity of all human beings, is, at the most fundamental level dialogical. We exist in internal relationships to one another and can therefore grow in mutual understanding and recognition. Christian theologian Jürgen Moltmann writes:

The era of the mechanistic world picture was also the era of subjectivity and of the sovereignty of human beings over against nature. The subjectivity of human existence and the reification of natural being conditioned each other mutually. If this bifurcation of the world we share is not to lead to the destruction of both nature and human beings, we must replace it by a new paradigm of a communicative community of culture and nature resting on reciprocity. (2012: 68)

If we look back into the scriptures of the various world religions with thoughtfulness and holistic assumptions, we can see that these scriptures were talking about a universal holism all along, and that the fragmented interpretations of religious fundamentalism are shallow and ignorant, often reinforced by the early-modern atomistic set of assumptions. All the world’s religions provide authentic paths to the divine. The basis is laid for religious harmony and reconciliation, and for recognition of the unutterable “depth dimension” pointed to in the quotation from Raimundo Panikkar above.

Cultural Harmony and Holism

The term “culture” is extremely broad: indicating human thoughts and practices throughout the entire range of human activities, including religion, economics, group practices, and nation-states. As with religion, the new holistic understanding of humanity and civilization makes possible dialogue directed toward mutual understanding fostering a growing harmony and peace among human beings worldwide. Yet we have seen that there are two global institutions that defeat holism and inhibit the ability of human beings to treat one another with consideration, respect, and mutual understanding. These institutions are global capitalism and the system of sovereign nation-states, both established centuries ago when the early-modern paradigm dominated Western thought.

Capitalism assumes a world fragmented among competing economic, profit-seeking corporations and individuals. These competing atoms exist largely in external relations with one another. Hence, if you are forced to work for starvation wages because the global market invests in your Third World country, those who seek a return on their investment are not considered morally responsible for your suffering and deprivation. The “laws” of economics operate “objectively” among externally related economic entities. A person recognizing the holism of our human situation, however, might realize that the relation between First World investors and Third World workers is an internal relation. Their profit constitutes the theft of the worker’s life-blood, of the worker’s life. It manifests a relation of domination and exploitation.

The capitalist ethos dominating the world economic system, therefore, tends to defeat spread of mutual understanding under the culture of holism, creating its own counter-culture of external relations, exploitation, fragmentation, and domination. Even in the early 20th century, Indian thinker Rabindranath Tagore recognized this fragmentation and its devastation of our primordial human holism:

Man in his fullness is not powerful, but perfect. Therefore to turn him into mere power you have to curtail his soul as much as possible. When we are fully human, we cannot fly at one another’s throats; our instincts of social life, our traditions and moral ideals stand in the way. If you want me to take to butchering human beings, you must break up that wholeness of my humanity through some discipline which makes my will dead, my thoughts numb, my movements automatic, and then from the dissolution of the complex personal man will come out that abstraction, that destructive force, which has no relation to human truth, and therefore can be easily brutal or mechanical. Take away man from his natural surroundings, from the fullness of his communal
life, with all its living associations of beauty and love and social obligations, and you will be able to turn him into so many fragments of a machine for the production of wealth on a gigantic scale. (2011: 177)

Capitalism turns people into “fragments of a machine for the production of wealth.” But human wholeness is associated with our communities, our relation to nature, and our deep religious and cultural traditions (that we have seen eroded by the domination of capitalism and the early-modern paradigm). As many writers have pointed out, capitalism also promotes the imperialism of nation-states seeking market domination and hegemony. It also promotes the militarism of nation-states since great profit is to be made through war industries and war preparations. Under the domination of global capitalism, war, imperialism, domination, and exploitation are encouraged and culturally promoted worldwide.

A culture of harmony, mutual understanding, and peace becomes next to impossible, even assuming that the religions of the world have converted to holism and are achieving greater mutual understanding. Peace can only flourish among a few intellectuals and thoughtful persons who have realized planetary maturity in their own lives. The dominant global culture is one of fragmentation, again fostering external relationships and war. Capitalism fosters war in more than a metaphorical sense because it has always been historically inseparable from the collection of sovereign nation-states that engage in war. As contemporary social scientists Terry Boswell and Christopher Chase-Dunn conclude: “A system of sovereign states (i.e. with an overarching definition of sovereignty) is fundamental to the origins and reproduction of the capitalist world economy” (2000: 23). This connection between capitalism and sovereign states is spelled out further by world systems scholar, Thomas R. Shannon:

A central goal of international competition is for each state to obtain the best possible conditions and opportunities for its national capitalists. A successful national capitalist class contributes to state power by providing the necessary economic resources for state activities. World-system theorists point out that states in which the struggle for power resulted in a politically powerful capitalist class were the states that succeeded best in the quest for national power. The political power of the capitalist class reinforces the tendency for the state to support the national capitalist class. As a consequence of this interstate competition, the world-system has been characterized by repeated wars and shifting military alliances. (1989: 35)

The government of each sovereign nation-state is supposed to be looking out for the economic well-being of its citizens. However, upon closer inspection, the capitalist ruling class within each nation colonizes the government to serve its interests, both domestic and foreign. Governments in this system are never neutral in this respect. Just as investors in the First World live off the suffering and stolen life of workers in the Third World so First World nations maintain a relation of domination and exploitation with the poor nations of the world. Relations are considered external, and political and economic “realism” determines foreign economic and military policy. As Shannon points out, the perpetual wars of the modern era are a consequence of this system.

Hence, the world is institutionally structured according to global capitalism that is structurally inseparable from the system of sovereign nation-states. Some 193 nation-states with absolute borders are territorially divided into competing economic and political entities. These massive global institutions naturally have immense influence over the cultures and practices and informational structures of the world. The world system is inherently a war system. A global culture of peace becomes impossible because the dominant institutions structurally promote a global culture of competition, war, and pervasive external relationships.

In a recent speech, world famous political analyst Noam Chomsky (2015) distinguishes between individual stupidity and “institutional stupidity.” Individual corporate CEOs or heads of state may be highly intelligent as individuals, but their behavior is conditioned by the “institutional stupidity” of the systems within which they perform. As Chomsky points out, this institutional stupidity has already brought the world to the brink of nuclear holocaust a frightening number of times. Institutional stupidity, he affirms, is much more resistant to change and difficult to cure than individual stupidity. My contention is that institutional stupidity is built into the very structure of capitalism and the system of sovereign nation-states.

The holistic nature of the cosmos, through and through, from human communication to the human species to the ecological interdependence of the planetary environment to the galaxies and the cosmos as a whole, tells us that a peaceful and harmonious world will only come about when we have converted human cultures, practices,
communications, and institutions to holism. Only a total holism that does not contradict the intrinsic nature of things will make peace possible and likely. There can be no religion and culture that establishes world peace unless we convert the dominant institutions of the world to holistic institutions. This means an economic system directed to human well-being, not to the private profit of the few at the expense of the many, and a global political system directed to the common good of humanity (which includes both peace and ecological sustainability), not the private and fragmented “goods” of some 193 militarized territorially bound nation-states.

Earth Federation as the Foundation of World Peace

The Constitution for the Federation of Earth establishes planetary economic and political holism at one stroke. Under the Earth Constitution the concept of profit is substantially “socialized” to include the common good of the people of Earth. Article 4 of the Constitution brings the resources of the planet necessary to the well-being of citizens under control of the Earth Federation. Article 13 guarantees every person adequate social security, free health care, decent housing, pure food and water. The productivity of the world’s economic system is now redirected to human well-being. Private profit is not abolished but is given a secondary role to the planetary common good (cf. Martin, 2010).

The planetary common good, a concept almost bankrupt and impossible of actualization under global capitalism and the system of sovereign nation-states, now becomes the foundation for government and economics. Article 8 of the Constitution establishes a planetary public banking system. Investments and loans and banking are directed to the well-being of all, no longer the private profit of massive banking cartels that now dominate the economics of most of the nations of the world. Global public banking (Article 8), along with the control of essential world resources (Article 4) and the dedication to the well-being of all (Article 13), is now directed to planetary peace and environmental sustainability, both aspects of the same common good that mandates the universal well-being of citizens.

The Earth Federation government will also, of course, have an immense influence on the educational institutions worldwide. Already the Provisional World Parliament has passed World Legislative Act number 26 that requires all educational institutions receiving world government funding support adapt their curricula to the teaching of holism. Students will study world citizenship, the requirements of world democracy, the global problems faced by humankind and the requirements of universal dialogue and communication directed to the common good. Culture and religion will rapidly transform on a planet-wide basis under these structural and educational dimensions of holism.

At this moment in history, a cultural and religious holism promoting peace cannot possibly be pervasive enough to be effective in the face of the massive institutions of global capitalism interconnected with militarized sovereign nation-states. The latter institutions structurally condition the thinking of peoples living under their domination and thwart the culture and religion of peace at every turn. Only by replacing these fragmented institutions with global holism under the Earth Constitution can human beings bring about peace as well as environmental sustainability. As philosopher Errol E. Harris states:

The same individualism has spawned the capitalist self-interested pursuit of profit in economics, to which all else has been subordinated, creating an ever-widening gulf between the rich and the poor. In international relations, the nation-state, in keeping with the prevailing separatism, insists on its independence and gives precedence to its own national interests at the expense of the common interests of humanity. (2000a: xi--xii)

Both economics and the nation-state system, Harris says, promote fragmented self-interests at the expense of the common good of humanity. Article 1 of the Earth Constitution presents the “broad functions” of the Earth Federation government. All of these are directed toward our planetary common good. There are six broad functions corresponding directly to the most compelling global needs of the human community, which must be actualized if we are to have a viable future at all on this planet. These are (1) end war and secure disarmament, (2) protect human rights worldwide (3) end extreme poverty globally and work to diminish social differences, (4) regulate world trade and resources in the service of our planetary common good, (5) protect the environment and the ecological fabric of life for the people living today and for future generations, and (6) address all global problems that are beyond the scope of the nation-states.
Peace can only mean *world peace*, and peace can only seriously mean “positive peace,” rather than the “negative peace” that sometimes occurs when nations momentarily stop fighting with one another. For the present world economic and political system is inherently a war system, as we saw the philosophers Hobbes, Spinoza, and Hegel point out above. Culture alone can never give us peace because fragmented institutions will thwart the efforts of culture at every turn. Peace can only be created when a world peace system is established that includes not only culture but holistic economic and political forms as well.

Contemporary philosophy of law recognizes the holism of humanity and the intrinsic nature of law to human civilization in general. John Finnis in *Natural Law and Human Rights* recognizes self-evident aspects of human practical reason and human flourishing that are applicable to all human beings. Lon Fuller in *The Morality of Law*, shows in what ways legislators (in any nation or culture) have a moral duty to the citizens to establish a “reasoned harmony” making a flourishing life possible. Ronald Dworkin in *Taking Rights Seriously* says that behind the positive law lies the spirit of the law as “integrity” in which those administering the law from all societies have moral obligations to establish and foster fairness and justice.

In all these cases the philosophy of law reveals the universal moral principles behind the law that apply to all of humanity: all cultures and all nations. Sovereign nation-states by definition recognize no effective laws above themselves and therefore are in a perpetual state of war, as Immanuel Kant pointed out in his 1795 essay “Perpetual Peace.” To live without the rule of enforceable law is to live in a world where force and the threat of force ultimately determine relationships between nations. The rule of effective law directed toward the common good of human flourishing is intrinsic to the very concept of law and is a presupposition of the very possibility of civilized human relationships. That is why Kant called the relations among sovereign nation-states “savage and barbaric.” They recognize no effective law above themselves by which disagreements might be settled without violence and war.

Since the dominant global institutions constitute a “war system,” it is impossible that there should ever be peace under this system, no matter what cultural initiatives people might take. The only route to world peace is, therefore, to establish a world peace system in which the rule of enforceable law is dedicated to promoting the common good of the people of Earth through a cooperative economics and through disarming the militarized nation-states. Within this framework alone will the majority of human beings be able to actualize planetary maturity: the spiritual realization that at bottom “I am you and you are me.”

The World Parliament created under the *Earth Constitution* draws people from all around the world into dialogue about the future of our planet under the framework for acting on the common good provided by the *Constitution*. There is no other path to effective action as we have seen, for example, from the failure of the giant environmental conferences at Rio de Janeiro, Johannesburg, Kyoto, and Copenhagen. Peace can never be established under the current world system because that system is institutionally fragmented rather than holistically structured. The holistic synergy of proper economics, federated nations, and planetary education can alone establish peace.

My conclusion, then, is that a holistic world culture and holistic world religions are necessary but not sufficient components of a peaceful world civilization. To have sufficient conditions for world peace one would need holism not only in the spiritual and cultural dimensions but in the economic and political dimensions as well. Holistic economics would be a global economics directed toward “socializing” the concept of private profit into arrangements that benefit the common good of everyone on the Earth. Holistic politics means the system of sovereign nation-states is transformed into a federated Earth in which nations become non-military administrative units like states within the United States or like Pradesh within India. Humanity exists as a holistic common reality: which includes our universal ethical principles, our common biological identity, and the legal foundations of civilization that require enforceable world law. Holism means peace, but is must be a holism across culture, religion, economics and political arrangements.

Let us put all our efforts, therefore, into promoting and ratifying the *Constitution for the Federation of Earth*, which provides our best bet for providing all these four aspects of planetary holism. It provides our concrete hope, and perhaps
our only hope. In the words of Isaiah: “Peace, peace to him who is far and to him who is near, says the Eternal.” Let us work together to make this world peace system a reality.

**Works Cited**


