

ON HUMAN UNITY

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We live in an age of contradictions. This is the best of times; this is the worst of times. The rich are too rich; the poor are too poor. There is gluttony and obesity here; there is starvation and malnutrition there. There is entirely too much freedom in some countries; there is slavery elsewhere. More countries are democratic today than ever before; torture chambers and rape rooms also exist in plenitude.

Material circumstances leading to human unity have never been better. The globe is more interconnected and more tied together than ever before. Yet there are countervailing forces that divide the earth and tear it apart. These include ethnic violence, clash among civilizations, terrorism, environmental degradation and the threat of nuclear holocaust.

We are facing an evolutionary crisis and are at the crossroads. One road leads to human unity and brotherhood; the other road leads to breakdown of human society and chaos. The choices before us are stark. Yet there is progress in human affairs. The present period is a gloom before the golden Dawn.

My essay has three parts:

- 1. Material circumstances that lead to human unity**
- 2. Factors that divide the earth**
- 3. An argument that human unity can be build only on the basis of spiritual unity. I will argue that human unity cannot be achieved through mere political arrangements such as the United Nations or world government. The political means are helpful but not sufficient.**

MATERIAL CIRCUMSTANCES LEADING TO HUMAN UNITY

Material circumstances leading to human unity have never been better. Technological advances increasingly knit the globe together. Many factors weave us together as a single race. Consider the following five.

(1) The Spread of the English Language

English has achieved the status of an international language. The business, political and academic elite in the world now communicate in English. One can get along in the English language today in most places around the globe.

Some countries do better at learning English than others. The Japanese have a particularly difficult time in mastering the English tongue. I spent a semester teaching in Japan. I found that, even after spending years trying to learn English, the Japanese students cannot speak the language with any degree of fluency. The Japanese language is far removed in structure and grammar from the English language. This makes it difficult for the Japanese to learn English. The same is true for the Chinese. The Chinese language is also unrelated to the English. Even with the difficulty noted here, the usage of English is spreading in the Far East.

In comparison, Indians have a relatively easier time at learning the English language. Two reasons account for this feature. The British ruled India for some 200 years (1757-1947). This helped spread the usage of English in India. Much more importantly, the Indian languages and the English belong to a single Indo-European language family. The Indian languages and English share many similar characteristics in grammar, syntax and vocabulary. Many of the words have common roots. For example: Sanskrit Matr is mother in English; Pitr is father; Bhrata is brother; the word Deva in Sanskrit is related to divine and Yoga to yoke. 'Ek Do Tri' in Sanskrit is one, two, and three in English. These examples can be multiplied.

(2) A Shrunk Globe

The globe has shrunk and physical distances are not what once they were. In less than a century, we have advanced from walking on foot to riding on bicycles and now to travel by car and plane.

For me, the progress from walking on foot to jet travel has been achieved in one generation. You will excuse a personal illustration. As a child, I walked nearly two miles to a village primary school in the state of Punjab. The nearest high school and college were available in a town 5 miles away. The bicycle made it possible for me to attend high school and college. My father completed only 7 grades because the bicycle was not around when he was growing up. The bicycle arrived for the common person just when I was growing up.

My college education helped me connect with the rest of the world. At the small provincial college in Sangrur (Punjab), I read Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Shelley, Wadsworth and Bernard Shaw. I also read philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean Rousseau. I can say without exaggeration that if it were not for the bicycle, I would not be where I am today. What applies to me applies to thousands of other rural kids in India. Small technological advances have great social and political impact.

While traveling recently on a jet plane, I read that the bicycle is the most efficient means of transportation. I learned that, using the same amount of effort, one travels four times the distance on a bicycle as on foot. To boot, the bicycle is pollution free and is good for health. The pace of change in the speed of travel over the past fifty years has been

phenomenal.

(3) The Internet Revolution.

A development with large implication for human unity is the computer based Internet revolution. The Internet technology is spreading rapidly in the world. A computer costs less than \$500 presently and a mere \$20 per month fee for the Internet service. It now costs little to send messages across the oceans.

Computers are a democratizing and equalizing force in the globe. During my travels in India, I find that Internet cafes have opened even in small rural townships. The cost of using the Internet in India is mere \$1 per hour, in some places even cheaper than that. What is true for India is true for other developing countries.

Because computers cost so little money, they are an equalizing force between the rich and the poor countries in the world. Whereas India and the US are far apart in the standard of living that their people enjoy, the two countries are similar in the use of computer technology. Americans and Indians use the same computers and the same software programs. That is why a great deal of the computer software work is outsourced to India and American businesses recruit hundreds of software engineers in India.

(4) Movement of Peoples across National Borders

Walls separating one country from another have been lowered. Millions of people now work and live in 'foreign' countries. People migrate both from the poor to rich countries as well as between poor countries.

People from every part of the globe have moved to America. The Census of 2,000 showed that over 11 million Asians now live in the United States, 4% of the total U.S. population. Major Asian nationalities include: the Chinese, the Japanese, the Indians, the Filipinos and the Vietnamese. America may truly be called "a global nation," meaning that all national, ethnic and religious groups have chosen to live in the United States.

The movement of the people from one country to another is a world-wide phenomenon. It is not limited to movement from poorer Afro-Asian countries to the West. Bangladeshis and Nepalese in large numbers have moved into India; many Afghans live within Pakistan; Sudanese of the Darfur region have been displaced to the African country of Chad.

On the other side of the globe, Pondicherry in South India is an international city. Pondicherry is the home of Sri Aurobindo Ashram. The Ashram attracts visitors from around the globe and many have settled there. I was told that 48 different languages are spoken in Pondicherry. I learned Sanskrit from a 20 year old girl in Pondicherry who

spoke five languages: Hindi, Bengali, French, English and Sanskrit.

The township of Auroville, about 10 miles from Pondicherry, is an evolving international community. It is an experiment in building human unity. Its 2000 residents belong to some 30 different nations. Auroville is an extension of the Pondicherry Ashram and was founded in 1968. It is recognized by UNESCO as an international community. Auroville's charter states:

- Auroville belongs to nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole. But to live in Auroville, one must be the willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness.
- Auroville wants to be the bridge between the past and the future. Taking advantage of all discoveries from without and from within, Auroville will boldly spring toward future realizations.

(5) The Spread of Democracy in the World

A democratic revolution has engulfed the globe. Out of some 200 countries in the world, 141 are classified as at least partly democratic by Freedom House surveys. This is the largest number of functioning democratic regimes in history. Competing political ideologies such as fascism and communism have been defeated. Two dark areas where democracy has failed include China and the Islamic world. Radical Islam poses the greatest challenge to the establishment of democratic institutions in the world at the present time.

The spread of democratic institutions around the globe has obvious implication for the ideal of human unity. Democratic countries are less likely to go to war with one another. Democratic regimes increase the zones of peace. Political Science research by Samuel Huntington, R. J. Rummel and others supports the democratic peace thesis.

To summarize, the material circumstances of the age—the English language, the reduced physical distances, the Internet revolution, the flow of people across national boundaries, and the democratic revolution -- have prepared the globe for human unity. The scientific advances have made the earth so small that its separate kingdoms seem now no more than the provinces of a single country.

COUNTERVAILING FORCES

There are countervailing social and political forces that divide the earth. I will list five such divisive forces.

(1) Ethnic Conflict

The increased ethnic, racial and religious strife in the world is a curse of our age. Sectarian violence tears apart many societies. A majority of the countries in the world are besieged with sectarian violence. The list of strife-torn countries is a long one and includes Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Burma, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Turkey, Russia and many African countries. Sectarian violence is not peculiar to the underdeveloped countries. It afflicts also rich countries like Germany, France, Northern Ireland, the United States, and Canada.

(2) Clash of Civilizations

Conflict among members belonging to different civilizations is a dominant feature of contemporary world politics. Professor Samuel P. Huntington of Harvard University has popularized the “Clash of Civilizations” thesis. Seven or eight civilizations are identified by him -- the Western, the Islamic, the Confucian, the Hindu, the Japanese, the Slavic, the Latin American, and the African.

Conflict is most virulent at civilizations’ “fault lines,” the area where two or more civilizations come into physical contact with each other. The Balkans region, the Palestine territory and Kashmir are examples of such fault lines. Three civilizations meet in the Balkan region: the Slavic, the Western and the Islamic, making this region extremely turbulent. In Palestine, the Islamic civilization and the Jewish civilizations confront each other. Hindu India confronts Islamic Pakistan in Kashmir.

The events of 9/11 prove that members of one civilization do not have to live in proximity to members of another civilization to pose threat. Airplanes and missiles have narrowed the physical distance.

(3) Nuclear Holocaust

Nuclear war between nations leading to mass destruction of people is a threat to the prospects for human unity. The Cold War is over. The US and the USSR no longer point their nuclear arsenal at each other. Yet, global hot spots remain. The number of countries in possession of nuclear weapons continues to increase. If terrorists acquire these weapons, humanity will face horror. Proliferation of the weapons of mass destruction is threat of major proportion to human survival.

(4) The Gap between the Rich and the Poor Nations

The gap between the rich and poor countries is ominous. A globe divided against itself cannot stand. Peace cannot prevail in a world that is half filthy-rich and half destitute. Human unity cannot foster in a world with two unequal parts: the rich and wasteful and the poor and distraught. Overeating and over-indulgence is a major source of ill health in the United States. In contrast, children in poorer countries starve for lack of

food.

This obscene economic gap strikes at the root of human unity. Unfortunately, the economic gap between nations is widening: the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer.

(5) Ideological Conflict.

The 20th century has been called the century of ideological dialectic. Four political ideologies have held sway in the 20th century: Liberalism, Fascism, Communism, and more recently Radical Islam or Islamism. The last three of these four have caused the death of millions of people. These are briefly described here.

FASCISM. Fascism is the political doctrine of the extreme right. It incorporates the idea of the one-party state, control of the economy, the denial of individual freedoms (such as freedom of speech and of religion), and propaganda through the control of the mass media. Fascists believe that certain races are superior to others. Blue-eyed, blond Northern Europeans are superior to Southern Europeans; in turn the Southern Europeans are superior to Asians, Jews and Africans.

Fascism and Nazism glorify the leader. Adolph Hitler was called “the Fuhrer,” the Leader. Mussolini was addressed as “Il Duce,” the Duke.

You have heard it said that the Nazis killed 6 million Jews in gas chambers. The truer number is larger at 17 million. The Nazi war machine burned and killed 6 million Jews, 1-2 million Gypsies (known as Romany), 1-2 million Poles (including most of the Polish intelligentsia), 5-6 million Russian POWs and 1-2 million other ‘inferior’ races.

Even though fascist regimes like Germany, Japan and Italy were defeated in World War II, neo-fascism in the form of authoritarian rulers continues to plague the human race. Many military dictatorships today are fascist regimes.

COMMUNISM. Communism in theory is a utopian ideology seeking to bring about the model of a conflict-free perfect society. As practiced in the Soviet Union and China, communism led to the he abuse of human rights on a massive scale. Stalin and Mao created totalitarian states with one-party rule, state control of the economy, regimentation of the press and denial of religious freedoms. Stalin and Mao both outdid Hitler in the number of people they cold-bloodedly liquidated. Some 30 million perished under Stalin and 40 million under Mao. Communist General Pol Pot of Cambodia starved to death over a million people.

The communist god failed. Communism is in retreat everywhere in the 21st century. Even China is adopting free market economic provisions.

ISLAMISM. Political Islam is the new challenge to civilization in our age. Radical Islam seeks to create the model of a perfect social and political order based on the 7th century Arabian society. Political Islam has emerged as a major threat to human unity during the last quarter century. The Islamic resurgence dates to the years of the oil boom in the Middle East. Radical Muslims see oil as a sign of Allah's blessings and a reward for their orthodoxy. Moderate Muslims do not share in these views.

There is great urge in Islam for equality and justice, but radical theology negates this urge. Radical Muslims are engaged in secessionist violence in some twenty places around the globe.

Radical Muslims have spread terror against the following groups:

**Roman Catholics on Mindanao in the Philippines
Roman Catholics on Timor in Indonesia
Confucians and Buddhists in Singapore and Malaysia
Hindus in Bangladesh
Hindus in Kashmir and within India itself
Russian Orthodox Catholics in Chechnya
Armenian Christians in Nagorno-Karabakh
Maronite Christians in Lebanon
Jews in Israel and in all other places
Animists and Christians in Sudan
Ethiopian Orthodox Christians in Eritrea
Greek Orthodox Catholics in Cyprus
Slavs in Bosnia, Kosovo and Albania
Coptic Christians in Egypt
Ibos in Nigeria
Christians and Jews in the United States
Moderate Islamic Regimes in Egypt, Jordan and Turkey**

Militant Islam is in ferment everywhere. The Islamic world has bloody borders. Religious liberals tend to minimize the seriousness of the threat to civilization posed by radical Islam, which is a totalitarian ideology masquerading as religion.

In summary, it may be stated that technological advances have shrunk the globe and brought the peoples of the earth together, but political divisions continue to strike at any possibility of human unity. Science and technology unite, but politics and religion divide.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The Failure of Previous Attempts

The past efforts at building human unity utilized international organizations such as the League of Nations and the United Nations. Unfortunately, these attempts at building human unity did not succeed. Take the case of the League of Nations. The League was founded in 1919 after the Great War; it was a loose confederation of some 40 member states. President Woodrow Wilson spearheaded its creation. The League of Nations had a short 20 year history. Germany withdrew from the League after Hitler came to power in 1933. Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1937 and the League failed to prevent the aggression. The League of Nations became irrelevant.

The United Nations was founded after World War II. Fifty-one countries signed its charter in 1945. The membership has grown to 191. The UN has not succeeded in completely maintaining international peace. Although the world has been spared a nuclear holocaust, wars have been all too common. Examples include: the Korean War, the Indochinese war, the war between India and Pakistan, the Iran-Iraq war, the Nigerian civil war, the present war in Iraq.

The 20th century is the bloodiest century in all human history. Some 20 million lives were extinguished during World War I, and 40 million during World War II. Nazis massacred and burned close to 17 million people; Stalin eliminated nearly 30 million and Mao Tse-Tung of China close to 40 million. Zbigniew Brzezinski estimated that some 190 million people were liquated in wars and under totalitarian ideologies in the 20th century.

What has gone wrong? Is the UN charter defective? Does it need to be revised?

A few years ago, a Bahai student of mine brought a copy of the Constitution of the Earth. He was committed to international peace. He felt that the first step toward bringing international peace was to adopt a proper constitution for world government. The model for such a constitution is the instrument adopted by American founding fathers in Philadelphia in 1787. When people think about human unity, invariably they think about writing a new constitution for world government. This proclivity is common in the United States. In order to bring about order in Iraq, American authorities are drafting a new constitution for the country.

REASON FOR THE FAILURE

The reason for the failure to build human unity is not a defective constitution. A constitution is a piece of paper. A true constitution is written in the hearts and minds of men and women. The initial attempts at human unity failed because political means were used to foster unity without a corresponding change in heart and mind of the human race. In the present conditions of the human race, a healthy unity of mankind cannot be brought about by mere political machinery, such as world government or a federation of states.

SRI AUROBINDO'S VISION (1872-1950)

My views are drawn from the vision of Sri Aurobindo, a sage and a seer of the first half of the 20th century. Sri Aurobindo is a renaissance figure. He was born in Bengal in 1872, spent his formative years in England as a student and settled in the southern Indian city of Pondicherry to study and do yoga. He was steeped in Western classics as well as Hindu scriptures, the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita. Sri Aurobindo wrote extensively on religion and spirituality as well as on social and political subject matter. One of his books is titled *The Ideal of Human Unity*.

Sri Aurobindo observes that when material circumstances favor a great change, but the heart and mind of the race are not really ready, failure may be predicted. The solution to the problem of human unity lies in the “soul of man, in its spiritual tendencies.” It is a spiritual evolution that alone can create a perfect human order. It is a spiritual evolution that alone can override the vital nature of man and unfold the law of love.

The law of love cannot be found in the vital instincts, or even in reason, where it can be met by opposite reasoning. It is in the soul that love and brotherhood find their root.

What is needed is the birth of a spiritual religion. A spiritual religion does not mean the old type religion based on creed, dogma and outward ceremony. It is an inward turning in the soul that is meant here.

A spiritual religion of humanity is the hope of the future. By this is not meant what is ordinarily called a universal religion, a system, a thing of creed and intellectual belief and dogma and outward rite. Mankind has tried unity by that means; it has failed and deserved to fail, because there can be no universal religious system, one in mental creed and vital form. The inner spirit is indeed one, but more than any other the spiritual life insists on freedom and variation in its self-expression and means of development. **

A spiritual religion affirms that we are unified in one spirit, that we are all children of One God. A religion of humanity means the growing realisation that there is a secret Spirit, a divine Reality, in which we are all one.

The knowledge that we spring from one source has ethical implications. It leads to a kinder and gentler world.

The knowledge that we spring from one source has political implications. It leads to the ideal of human unity.

There must be the realisation by the individual that only in the life of his fellow-men is his own life complete. There must be the

realisation by the race that only on the free and full life of the individual can its own perfection and permanent happiness be founded.

A spiritual oneness would create a psychological oneness. It would not be dependent upon outward uniformity or political machinery.

If such a realization could develop in mankind, we might then solve the problem of unification in a deeper and truer way. The higher hope of humanity lies in the growing number of men who will realize this truth and seek to develop it in themselves. The truth of the Spirit may then step in and lead humanity to the path of its highest possible perfection.

THE ROLE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

The individual plays a key role in human transformation. Therefore the individuals who will most help the future of humanity in the new age will be those who will recognize a spiritual evolution as the destiny and therefore the great need of the human being. “All great changes...find their first clear and effective power and their direct shaping force in the mind and spirit of an individual or of a limited number of individuals. The mass follows, but unfortunately in a very imperfect and confused manner.”

“A society that lives not by its men but by its institutions is not a collective soul, but a machine.”

How long will such a transformation take? Sri Aurobindo answers: Nature secretly prepares the ground over a long span, and then a miracle like transformation occurs. We are in the midst of such a transformation.

CONCLUDING THOUGHT

There are signs that the Old Age of division and disorder is in the grips of death. Humanity is on a path to great progress. Slavery has been abolished. Hitler and Mussolini have been toppled. Statues of Lenin and Stalin have come down in Russia. Mao is in disfavor in China. An untouchable President sat on the throne in India in 2000. Surely, the election of a woman President in the United States is not too far off. Religious extremism poses the most serious threat in our period. Religious extremism too will be defeated.

A glimmer of light and hope is seen in the atmosphere. Amid the clash of civilizations, a spiritual force is planted in the earth's sphere. It is seeking to manifest in a fuller measure. The New Thought churches in the West now teach a universal religion, not sectarianism. More and more, religion is based less on dogma and creed and more on authentic experience. Meditation retreats, yoga centers, theosophy, Unitarian and Universalist churches and metaphysical Christianity are gaining wider acceptance.

Our role as individuals in building human unity is vital. We are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. The ideal of human unity rests on our shoulders. Peace cannot be left to politicians.

****Endnote:** The quotations from Sri Aurobindo are from two of his political writings: *The Ideal of Human Unity*, and *The Human Cycle*, both published at Pondicherry and available at Lotus Light, Wilmot, Wisconsin 53192. Information on Sri Aurobindo and his yoga are available at: www.auroville.org, and www.sriurobindosociety.org.

Postscript on Sri Aurobindo

From age seven onward, Sri Aurobindo was educated in England at St Paul's School and then at the Kings College, Cambridge. He was a brilliant student of the Classics and won numerous prizes in Latin and Greek competitions. He also wrote poetry at a young age.

Upon his return to India in 1893, Sri Aurobindo taught English and French literature at Baroda College. He rose to become the vice-Principal of the College. During this period, he taught himself Sanskrit and translated portions of the Mahabharata from Sanskrit into English. Sri Aurobindo came to represent the best integration of the scholarship of the East and the West.

Soon Sri Aurobindo was drawn to the nationalist anti-British fervor sweeping India at the turn of the century. He was influenced by the writings of nationalists like Bankim Chandra, Vivekananda, Gokhale and Tilak. He joined the radical wing of the nationalist movement and wrote for *Bande Matram*, a fiery publication.

In 1907, he was jailed for a year by the British for his writings and speeches. This was a period of great transformation for him. In solitary confinement at the Alipore jail, Sri Aurobindo practiced deep meditation and yoga, and studied the scripture. He was blessed with a vision of the Supreme Reality; he realized in his being that Vasudeva (Krishna) was the author and creator of all that surrounded him.

His life was radically changed; he gave up all political activity, and upon release from jail, he moved to Pondicherry in South India, then under French rule. He did intensive Tapasya (yogic austerities) for many years. An Ashram grew up around him, which now draws devotees from around the globe.

Sri Aurobindo was a prolific writer and a poet. His works appear in thirty-five volumes. He commented on the works of Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, and Racine, among others. He also wrote commentaries on the Veda, the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. His *Essays on the Gita* provide

a very insightful and original interpretation of that Hindu scripture.