

## QUO VADIS?

### CULTURAL REORIENTATION – OUR SHARED JOURNEY

Four key words - One direction

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Who would dispute that a spiritual renewal of our culture is long overdue? The profound impact of the severe economic crisis we are experiencing has led to many concerned analyses. These are often limited to the shortcomings of the market economy. But is that appropriate? Wasn't this crisis inevitable? Is it not the symptom of a culture which has lost its bearings? The contribution of science and technology to a substantial improvement and betterment of our quality of life is indisputable. The age of Enlightenment paved the road for 'responsible man', freed from abuse of power by church and monarchs. But has this 'autonomous man' overestimated himself by closing his eyes to the greater Reality from which we are inseparable?

Our culture has become imbalanced by the one-sided focus on the material, at the expense of non-material values. The economy reigns supreme. Economic considerations are the decisive factor in most sectors of society. Just think of how materialism has dominated education and the media. A public sector, in which the principle of profit has supplanted that of serving the public interest. The vulgar self-enrichment that has penetrated even the healthcare system. The world of sports, corrupted by money, where players are sold for millions of dollars! In the business world too, we see the devastating effects of the pursuit of immediate financial gain. Short-term thinking undermines the continuity of the enterprise.

A healthy economy is vital to society. Hence the need for a critical reflection on the pillars on which it rests. Especially now it has become increasingly clear that the current pattern of production and consumption is not sustainable on a global scale. The current culture of greed is based on three fatal misconceptions:

- The first: That man has infinite material needs which must be satisfied.
- The second: That everything must grow; permanent growth is considered to be not only desirable but even necessary. Yet permanent material growth within the limits of our habitat on this planet is impossible.
- The third: A completely free market, unconstrained by rules, effective supervision or a moral/social context. This paved the way for irresponsible decision making, objectionable practices and large-scale fraud. The disastrous consequences were not confined to the financial sector. The entire economy was dragged into a deep crisis.

How can we break the stranglehold of the economy on our culture?

First by becoming aware of the collective madness of this dance around the golden calf. A modern idol, hypnotizing us with the lure of the dollar. For this idol, even the elite of our society go down on bended knee.

People are trampled in the frenzy of this macabre dance around the Mammon, and the necessary conditions for a decent, "humane" existence for future generations are sacrificed. And all this to satiate the greed of those now living! Short term thinking abounds.

But do these symptoms of moral decay not follow from a loss of the sense of the transcendent, the loss of a greater horizon? Is this not the reason that man has lost the rudder and thus the view of his true destination? Václav Havel had already come to this conclusion in the years of his imprisonment. The philosopher Hans Jonas expressed this insight even more powerfully in his seminal work: “*The Imperative of Responsibility*”. Jonas referred to the loss of the notion of transcendence as “perhaps the greatest mistake in history.”

This time of change demands a view of life that provides structure and coherence. After all, here lies the key to our deepest motivation. This determines our behavior, and the way we relate to people, matter, and nature itself.

*People.* Our culture is dominated by forces that degrade people and objectify them, reduce them to *Homo Economicus*, a number, a cash cow for unscrupulous financial experts. Have we forgotten that man is a person, imbued with inalienable dignity and fundamental rights that deserve respect?

*Matter.* Are we master or slave to our worldly possessions? Driven by the pursuit of more, regardless of the consequences? Or do we realize that the essence of life is found in our human relationships? That matter should serve well-being.

*Nature.* Object for boundless exploitation? Or recognition of, and thus respect for the intrinsic value of nature? She is to be handled with care. This is an absolute requirement, as our natural environment is the fundamental condition for our continued existence. Hence the need for an economy that develops within the limits dictated by nature.

Our view of life is the source of inspiration for personal commitment to a peaceful, sustainable and truly human society. A source that will flow abundantly when one strikes a balance between concern for one's own well-being and for the common good. A source that allows people to flourish in freedom and responsibility, endowed with a spirit of empathy and independence that allows them to turn against the forces that threaten life.

Would it not be possible, in our individualistic society, with its colorful diversity of philosophies of life, to rally support for a shared creative vision that leads to a reorientation of our culture?

Can we find common ground to set course for a sustainable, more livable society? I believe that we can, as the sources for this shared vision are indeed present in science, religion and other philosophies of life. Let me make an attempt to identify the fundament of a common approach.

The starting point is an experience of reality that we can all identify with, regardless of differences in belief. We all live in world under threat, humanists, agnostics and believers alike. We must chart a new course together.

The ingredients for that joint reflection are present in four key words that everyone can relate to.

## Keywords

1. Interconnectedness
2. Vulnerability
3. Yearning (desire)
4. Awe

The first two, *Interconnectedness* (1) and *Vulnerability* (2), are based on hard facts. *Desire* (3) lives in every human being. The fourth word, *Awe* (4), reflects a fundamental experience that is repressed in our culture, but potentially present in every human being.

It goes without saying that these keywords may be differently rooted in a humanist or agnostic than in a monotheist. However, the values they inspire are shared by all. Some of these are: responsibility, respect for life, peace, justice, solidarity, and moderation.

### 1 - Interconnectedness.

Science in particular has deepened our understanding of the fundamental *interconnectedness* of all ecosystems. Many religions too have propagated this for centuries. This insight is crucial, both for the individual and for society as a whole. It can contribute to the replacement of the sterile egocentric *culture of individualism* by a *culture of connectedness*, based on relating and caring. The global *Campaign of Compassion* works towards this end. This inspires values like justice, solidarity and the pursuit of peace. In political terms, it means caring for the poor and weak in society, social and just taxation, a humane immigration policy, etc. This notion of interconnectedness is also of particular relevance in our rapidly globalizing world. Growing awareness of connectedness can promote the development of international agreements (e.g., for raw materials, water) that take into account the legitimate interests of all countries, including the weaker partners. The increased interdependence among nations requires it.

### 2 - Vulnerability

Is it still necessary to elaborate on the vulnerability of our ecosystem after the impressive documentary *Planet Earth*? Don't the facts outlined in the reports of United Nations experts speak loudly enough? We are headed for an environmental catastrophe within the next decades. The current environmental crisis is largely caused by the unsustainable pattern of production and consumption of about one fifth of the world population. Three fifths of the world is now following this globally untenable model of development at an accelerated pace. How could we close our eyes to the severity of the situation, given that the problem is further compounded by explosive population growth?

In order to repel ultimate global catastrophe, cooperation between science, religion and other views of life is required. Only then can the colossal forces that have been developed in recent decades be controlled. Science can contribute predominantly in the field of technology. Our view of life can inspire the necessary behavioral change. This partnership is essential for a sustainable economy on a global scale. An economy that respects the boundaries dictated by nature.

### 3 - Yearning.

Doesn't everyone cherish a deep desire for happiness, for a world where living is good? A world in which peace and justice are not just empty words. A world which provides future generations with the opportunity to enjoy the beauty and diversity of mother nature.

The current deterioration of the necessary conditions for life thwarts the realization of this deepest desire. This has stirred the primordial instinct - the will to live. This force manifests itself in the surge of creative initiatives to promote sustainability in business and other sectors, and also in numerous groups, movements and NGO's. We're in this battle for the long haul, and the courage to persist despite adversity is crucial. That's why access to a fountain of hope is indispensable. Hope springs eternal!

The necessity of a more responsible way of relating to man, matter and nature is greater than ever, hence the urgency of a thorough reconsideration of the premises of our culture of greed. This is where religions, other philosophies, and science - each in their own way - share a joint responsibility. That applies equally to all who bear responsibility in politics, economy, business, the media, and culture. They are the ones who shape the process of change.

Many religions preach a resounding call to change our way of life, to leave this misguided path. Science provides indispensable analyses and suggestions for creative new directions. Politicians and managers are faced with the challenge of paving those ways!

### 4 - Awe.

A single word, which so aptly captures the sense of rapture we experience when faced with the wonder of that which transcends us, the miracle of life in the boundless Universe. It is a word that evokes a fundamental attitude of profound respect and reverence for the source of all Being. For the religious man, it is rooted in his relation to God. The Holy Books bear witness to this living relationship. The Psalms beautifully sing its praise. But the non-believer too can identify with this fundamental principle. In the international Pugwash Movement, I have met many leading scientists who - being agnostic - were fulfilled with awe in their contemplation of the structure and interconnectedness of the micro- and macrocosm.

The advancing scientific understanding of the precision of the laws that enable life on earth adds to the sense of awe for the origin of all Being. Indeed, progress in scientific discovery can lead to a greater sense of awe.

This fundamental principle also emerged during the installation of the major European telescope on the Spanish island of La Palma, in the presence of Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands and other European heads of state. A famous astronomer pointed out, that this telescope allows us to penetrate even further into the secrets of the Universe, "but that everything we do here is nothing more than reflecting on the great miracle that it exists".

The sense of *Awe* is fueled by wonder and contemplation of Being; by the primal force of nature, as well as her beauty and elegance.

In our Western culture, the vision and feeling for what transcends us is often lacking. In 'flatland', the horizon remains limited, there is no depth dimension. This is where banality and greed thrive, while humanity and integrity languish.

For many, this sense of Awe is an unknown experience. The Self, elevated on a pedestal, is mainly governed by the horizontal dimensions of counting and measuring. A hurried and hectic existence leaves little time for reflection on fundamental questions of life. Moreover—thanks to science – many commodities have become a given. When we come to understand a trifle of the process of life, we tend to believe that we therefore have a handle on it.

That the principle of life in itself is a great miracle too often escapes attention. And precisely that insight might help us gain perspective on Man's place in the *Ultimate Reality*.

### **A Vision of Interdependence**

Nobody can ignore these four key words, because they determine the *human condition*. Each of them in turn has the power to inspire change, but a cultural reorientation at this critical stage requires a clear vision of their interdependence. Only then, the indispensable synergy will be engaged. This vision of intimate interdependence is currently lacking. A serious shortcoming, because the very fusion of all four key words can shift the balance in favor of the change that is now underway.

To clarify the above, I mention the mindset of some leading environmental scientists who expect total salvation based on a pragmatic approach. But precisely this blind spot for the deeper spiritual underpinnings of the environmental crisis (the fourth key word) hinders the progress of sustainability.

On the other hand, there is a form of religiosity which leads to resignation and passivity, rather than the required engagement. Single-minded fixation on the fourth key word – and the consequent attitude of *awe* – can sometimes lead to a failure to take a stance based on the factual *Interconnectedness* (1) and *Vulnerability* (2).

Each of these four words is an important signpost. But the decisive impetus for cultural change comes from a clear view of the cohesion between these key words. Together they provide a basis for a joint reflection on the continued existence of humanity in a humane, sustainable society.

### **A Common Platform**

The much-needed reorientation of our culture would benefit tremendously from cooperation beyond perceived differences. The vision of the cohesion between the key words provides a starting point for people of different views of life to come together and set a new, common course.

Might that be possible for science and religion, too?

Certainly, the relationship between them has historically been tense. Especially when each exceeded the boundaries of their own competence by taking a stance on matters which belong in the domain of the other.

Essentially there is no need for contradiction, because each has its own domain, with its own methodology and a different objective.

Science focuses on analysis, the explanation of phenomena and the study of regularities.

Religion and philosophy focus on giving meaning, and identifying a code of life that make a society livable. They focus on insights that provide structure and cohesion to life, and promote personal development that combines freedom and responsibility.

In the important book - *The Great Partnership* - renowned British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks provides a powerful argument for cooperation between science and religion. Both are aimed at promoting human well-being. And precisely that is what is now threatened by the irresponsible way of relating to man, matter, and nature. The disturbing perversion of the essence of religion by fanaticism, extremism, and violence does not need to deter us from collaborating with the vast majority of moderates. A radical minority might distort our perception of the essence of a religion, but can never strip it of its original meaning. The famous Swiss theologian Hans Küng rightly distinguishes between true and false religiosity. His criterion is whether the well-being of man is served. In this context, the importance of dialogue within religious denominations is further emphasized. Like the cooperation between religions and other views of life, it deserves more attention from spiritual and political leaders.

The fundamental *Interconnectedness* (1) and *Vulnerability* (2) demand that we take effective action in the short term. Hence the urgency of joint reflection of believers and nonbelievers, science and religion, the cultural sector, economy, and politics. Our collective survival under humane living conditions is at stake.

*Religion without science is blind, but science without religion is lame.* (Einstein)

### **Love - The Keystone**

The preceding discussion avoided the use of the big word, "Love". This is due to the widespread misconception that a 'soft power' is irrelevant in a formal discussion of cultural change. Mistakenly so, because Love is one of the most powerful forces known to man. It can bring the mighty to their knees, and move people to act in favor of a fellow human in need, even at the expense of personal sacrifice.

It is also Love that gives a powerful impetus to our awareness of the four key words. Certainly, reason forces us all to do so, but without love we end up in a cold, harsh society.

Love is universal, we are steeped in it in the womb and it is transmitted to future generations. Love is the keystone in the dome created by the four key words. It is the unifying force, and has left its mark on each of them.

*It is the highest form of connectedness  
the most sensitive and fragile  
fulfills our deepest yearning  
and deepens the sense of awe.*

Love is central to many religions. For the Christian it is rooted in the love of God, which is embodied in Jesus Christ. The inner knowing that nothing - neither might nor powers, in life or death - can separate us from that love is a constant source of inspiration, strength, independence and courage to persevere.

In our formalized society, a rediscovery of the rejuvenating power of love is essential. Not merely for the individual, but for all of us. It is about more than sustainability: Ultimately, it is love that makes society livable.

### **Discussing a Viable Route Together**

For a new inspiration of our culture, a realistic assessment of the critical situation in which we find ourselves is required. Against the backdrop of the relationship between the four key words, we might ask some of the following questions:

- How can we promote development towards a culture with a well-balanced relationship between matter and spirit? How can we get rid of the dominance of the economy?
- Are we ready for a revision of the purpose of the economy? Shouldn't its purpose be: *The responsible use of the limited resources available to promote the general and individual well-being of present and future generations?*
- Shouldn't production, distribution and consumption of goods and services be aimed at a just and sustainable society in which the limits that nature sets are strictly adhered to? Is the economy a goal in itself, or an instrument at the service of human welfare, *within the limits made by nature?*
- How do we liberate ourselves from consumerism? A sustainable economy is impossible when it is driven by the assumption that man has infinite material needs to be satisfied. Man is more than a craving animal. He does not live by bread alone, but also by spiritual resources that inspire a full, meaningful life. Does not a highly developed society require moderation? If so, then should we not limit the frenzy of material greed stimulated by intrusive advertising?
- Does not the pursuit of unlimited material growth - given the limits of our habitat on Earth - inevitably lead to a global environmental catastrophe?
- How can we safeguard job security while adapting our pattern of production and consumption?
- Should the calculation of GDP be adjusted in order to obtain a more realistic picture of the qualitative development in a society?
- How can the growing gap between rich and poor be reduced?
- How can the interests of citizens be protected in the public services?

The current crisis offers a unique opportunity for the emergence of a new, sustainability-oriented economy. This requires innovative policy, not a return to the past.

Finally: Whether we will succeed to achieve the required fundamental cultural reorientation in time depends on whether a tipping point can be reached, where enough people are willing to promote it. Hence the importance of a well-founded view of life, which determines the way of relating to man, matter and nature.

The decisive factor may be the answer to the ultimate question posed to each of us:

What have I done in my lifetime, with my abilities, in this critical phase for humanity? Was this a "self-centered" existence, focused on money and blind to the distress of the world? Or did I try - in a spirit of empathy - to promote a more peaceful, humane, and sustainable society?

To this question, Herman van Rompuy, the current president of the European Council, offers a profound and guiding answer in a Haiku of only nine words:

*God, goedheid, liefde  
gekregen en gegeven  
vullen een leven.<sup>1</sup>*

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*God, goodness and love  
both received and given  
give meaning to life.<sup>1</sup>*

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1. Van Rompuy, Herman. *Haiku*. Karakters, Gent (2001). [www.poeziecentrum.be](http://www.poeziecentrum.be)

PS

I would be grateful for your suggestions and constructive thinking.  
How do we get this process going? Through what channels?  
What can you do yourself?

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### **About the Author**

Edy Korthals Altes (1924) is a former Dutch diplomat, with a degree in economics, who served as Deputy Permanent Representative at the EEC in Brussels, and as Ambassador in Warsaw, and finally Madrid. He resigned in 1986, in connection with his public stance on the arms race. Since then, he has been an outspoken proponent of global peace and security, inter-religious cooperation, and spiritual renewal as Vice Chairman of the Dutch chapter of the Pugwash Movement (1987-'95), Chairman of the Section International Affairs of the Netherlands Council of Churches (1990-'96), Co-president EECOD (European Ecumenical Commission on Development, 1991-'93), Member EKD Advisory Commission for Development Affairs (1992-'97, Germany) and President of the World Conference of Religions for Peace (1994-'99, Honorary president 1999-2004. He is currently a Fellow of the World Academy of Art and Science..

### **Relevant Publications by the Author:**

Heart and Soul for Europe: An Essay on Spiritual Renewal. Van Gorcum Ltd, Assen (1999).

Spiritual Awakening: The Hidden Key to Peace and Security, Just and Sustainable Economics, A Responsible European Union. Peeters Publishers, Leuven (2008).

<http://www.peeters-leuven.be/boekoverz.asp?nr=8406>

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### **Translation**

This essay was translated from the original Dutch text by Caspar van Lissa (1985), MSc, grandson of the author and PhD candidate researching the role of empathy in conflict resolution at Utrecht University.