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# Perspectives of Humanism in a Globalized World

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## Abstract

A research project coined “Humanism in the era of Globalization” developed fundamentals to an elaborated form of humanism capable to bridge the borders between the world civilizations and to overturn their competitive or sometimes hostile manners. This new intercultural humanism must evolve as result from international debates incurring participants from every continent and culture of the world. This intercultural humanism envisages to supersede the present-day modern humanism as it originated in the Western world of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. While the modern humanism entailed a great bulk of appropriate ideas and values, it still suffered from some shortcomings such as ethnocentrism. It is therefore necessary to formulate a higher developed form of humanism – the intercultural humanism – to have a basis available to address and to surmount the many tensions and conflicts that exist today between the divergent civilizations inhabiting the current world.

## 1. Introduction

Julian Nida-Rümelin (2006) has defined humanism as the prime intellectual and political orientation of our time, as a kind of philosophy or ideology, greater parts of people, including politicians and intellectuals, can follow and are willing to share. However big differences concerning party preferences, ideological orientations or values between different people may amount, most people regard humanistic ideas, norms, and orientations as a general framework of mind they resort to. Especially those who are more engaged in politics and public affairs than common people use to do, that is, those who follow daily news on politics, especially world politics on a global scale, recognize humanistic ideas and values as a general orientation. This kind of humanistic philosophy seems to have superseded older ideological commitments such as nationalism, religion, Marxism, or whatever.

Jörn Rüsen, as a member of a joint project on “Humanism in the Era of Globalization – An Intercultural Dialogue on Humanity, Culture, and Values”, sponsored by the Stiftung Mercator and by the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut in Essen, intends to enlarge this idea and to work it out as a theory of international relations. In a couple of articles and books he has discussed several aspects of humanism to develop it as a fundamental orientation for the contemporary world and the near or far future to come. His theoretical departure is the phenomenon called “clash of civilizations” (S. Huntington) in the globalized world. Due to advancements concerning communication and transport systems, and the international

exchange of goods and services, news and information, travels and movements of people have increased a lot. Borders between different countries hamper people lesser and lesser from transgressing them for the exchange of commodities and information and for travels or migrations to study or work abroad, or to establish international networks for whichever goals. Different civilizations and cultures increase their contacts and relations this way, tending to usher interwoven social systems and interrelated networks in politics, sciences, education, economy, and entertainment industry. Different cultures, formerly disconnected from each other by missing or little contacts and by geographical distance, stay in a permanent contact today and are forced to find common ways to bridge the still given differences in behavior, values, and traditions. Without tremendous exertions in finding conflict solutions and universal standards of communication, the cultural differences threaten to amount and to expatiate in conflicts and disturbances.

There is another point of view to add to the description of social affairs as they are developing in the globalized world. The Western World, dominated by the USA and partially also by Europe, worked more or less as a world police and secured some kind of order in world politics, however this Western dominance may be judged as successful or as contributing for the good of humanity. Some common standards and values prevailed in the world resulting from this Western hegemony. Nowadays humankind though lives in a multipolar world with many centers and powers struggling for influence and relevance. There are no common values and standards anymore of whom could be said that they determine international contacts and communication. Therefore, “clash of civilizations” instead of international partnership – based on common views and norms – seems to evolve as dominant characteristic of international encounter.

According to Rüsen (2020/1, 2004/1, 2012), these problems of globalization can only be encountered and solved by the development of humanistic thought that is capable to unify the different world cultures. Therefore, intellectuals, scientists, and politicians from the whole globe must develop together a new kind of humanism that is capable to address every single world culture and to find their support. A new transcultural and global humanism is required that does not represent only one world culture but comprises all of them. That is the only solution to the problems as they exist today and in future alike. The humanism needed is by now not existent and developed. Rüsen sees the research project mentioned as contribution to the development of that kind of humanism that humankind requires to surmount those difficulties that take root in the current process of globalization. A kind of humanism has to be devised that understands the legitimacy of goals and values of other civilizations and tries to find perspectives that mediate between different civilizations. There are to find superior viewpoints that transcend the limited and idiosyncratic perspectives of single nations, cultures, and civilizations. The development of more general viewpoints than those provided by single nations and cultures is needed to usher a common life in a global world. The kind of humanism, developed by the West, is a good starting point but must be improved and enlarged to devise that kind of humanism fit for the challenges the clash of civilizations in the globalized world deliver (Rüsen 2020/1, pp. 22, 34, Kozlarek, Rüsen & Wolff 2012/3, p. 15).

## 2. Development of humanism in world history

Rüsen sees the true origins of humanism in the axial times, taking its root in Europe and Asia about 500 B. C. The term “axial times” was coined by Karl Jaspers (1949) to outline an emergence of thought and enlightenment, that created more

elaborated stages of self-reflection and self-consciousness. Higher developed understandings of human life, of how to handle social and moral problems, and how to develop the sense of human life on earth, came into being. The world religions such as Buddhism and Christianity or philosophies such as those of Plato and Aristotle, Confucius or Mencius were eminent manifestations of this new stage of mind or of this axial time. The origins of humanism must be traced back to these intellectual movements and exertions (Rüsen 2010/3, pp. 285-288; Eisenstadt 1986; Canzik 2012).

Before the dawn of axial times archaic humankind lacked some crucial concepts and essential understandings related to humanism. Pre-axial archaic cultures constrain the understanding of being a human being to members of the own group or ethnicity only. Therefore, the name for the own people is often simply “humans”, providing that every single tribe or folk restrict the adherence to human race solely to the own group. Tribe or folk names such as Bantu, Apache or others simply mean only “humans”. Accordingly, individuals of other tribes or peoples are not related to humans and have therefore no rights of being treated as those who belong to the own group. Cannibalism can be recognized as a phenomenon that characterizes this exclusion of foreigners from being human beings most drastically and clearly. Basically, pre-axial archaic cultures restrict humanity and humanism, and thereby respective moral behaviors and social relations, to members of the own group or people only. Foreigners cannot expect good treatment but must be prepared of being exploited, of being enslaved, or of being assassinated. Accordingly, pre-axial cultures are extremely ethnocentric (Müller 2010; Rüsen 2010/3, pp. 283-284, 2020/1, p. 129, 2012, pp. 71-72). “Morality is not universal but split into ethical principles of treating one’s own people ... on the one side and the exploitation and subjugation of the others. Slavery and cannibalism are eloquent examples.” (Rüsen 2012, p. 72)

The second step of humankind’s social development was furnished by the axial age (500 B. C. to 500 A. D.). Humankind developed higher forms of consciousness and subjectivity, of religion and religiousness, and of morals and politics. The evolution of world religions tremendously manifests this new stage of social development. God is no longer perceived as the master and ruler of the own people but is the God of every human being, or of every people in the world. Every human being can become a child or a follower of the new God devised during the axial times. Every human being now has a direct contact to God, and not anymore mediated by his people or tribe. However, this development reveals some restraints. The new God of humankind was seen as the only one to exist. As many axial cultures created new Gods, as they all demanded exclusive rights for their Gods, each denying the existence of the new Gods of any other, even axial, cultures. Allah, or the Christian God, or Buddha offered their religion to the whole world, thus surmounting ethnic borders. However, they demanded world dominance, each denying the rights of the competing world religions.

Rüsen sees in this phenomenon the limits of the development of humanism during the axial times. Though the axial period surmounts ethnic limits, universalizes the idea of humanity, and extends the belongingness to human race to all peoples of the whole world, seeing every human being from whichever people he or she comes as a true human being, it still suffers from some ethnocentric shortcomings. The ancient tendency to recognize the own religion or philosophy – and thereby the own culture – as the only one which is capable to make this step of evolution, that is, to create this new kind of religion and humanism, reveals the limits of reason and humanism during this period of time. The own religion or the own civilization has the proper understanding of universalism and humanity, while the others are prone to deficiencies and errors of various kinds. “They refer to each other (if at all) in a negative way. One’s own way of universalism is thought to

be the real, the true one; others are either a deviation or simply wrong. In a very radical form this is the case in the monotheistic concepts of religious belief. One almighty and all-encompassing God excludes every other divine being; only one's own belief is true; the other's belief is not only perceived as different (as in polytheism) but as wrong. And it is rather easy to devalue the humanity of others because of their differing beliefs." (Rüsen 2012, p. 74)

Ethnocentrism is thus shortened but not vanished. Limited perspectives, intellectual narrow-mindedness, and cultural stubbornness have diminished during the axial period but did not perish completely. In fact, humanism climbed some steps of the ladder but remained stuck at some point. Ethnocentrism and restrained abilities in perspective-taking are evident in the features of the world religions, as clarified above, and they characterize the whole framework of mind of the ancient world, not being a phenomenon solely bound to religion. Of course, the Chinese Empire understood itself as the center of the world, assuming of having no counterpart anywhere else. Likewise, the Roman Emperor had a similar understanding of governing the whole civilized world. They all understood their culture, their way of life, their customs, their traditions, and their morals as the only right way, denying the legitimacy of other ways of religion, philosophy, customs, and morals.

This perseverance of this kind of restricted ethnocentrism did not cause tremendous damages as these civilizations were geographically distant from each other. China, Japan, India, Persia, and the Roman Empire did not encounter frequent and close contacts to each other. Though there was communication between them, it was restricted on a very low scale comparatively. Therefore, this kind of ethnocentrism did not arouse a great bulk of problems and conflicts. Peoples weren't forced to elaborate their stage of mind and humanism above that more or less weak point described. They could afford themselves, so to speak, their ethnocentrism due to the divided geographical spaces that separated different nations from each other (Rüsen 2012, pp. 57, 75, 2010/3, p. 287, 2013/1, p. 14).

Interestingly, this kind of ethnocentrism has prevailed by today not decisively diminished or impaired by the second stage of humanism, that took root in Europe during the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe. Even this second stage of humanism wasn't capable to surmount this kind of ethnocentrism. It is the main cause to the present-day clash of civilizations, that is, to the many problems between cultures in the globalized world. "Even today on the level of everyday life it is still the dominant form of intercultural relationship, even in intellectual discourse. But it has no future, since globalization means that different life forms and their cultural regulations come closer and closer together, and they may even merge. On the level of sense generation it is a question of common survival whether this exclusiveness can be overcome and even changed into its opposite." (Rüsen 2012, p. 75) In fact, the next stage of humanism, that of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, must be able to fully erase that kind of ethnocentrism, while otherwise the conflicts in the globalized world cannot be solved. Globalization implies overthrow of geographical hindrances and requires therefore the diminution of any kind of ethnocentrism, a luxury, modern people cannot afford anymore. Rüsen wants to devise these elements of humanism that are appropriate to the solution of these problems in international relations and communication (Rüsen 2012, p. 75).

As just mentioned, a second axial time originated in Europe during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Rüsen (2010, pp. 274-275) regards this as a further stage of social and intellectual evolution, that is, as a stage of development that advanced beyond the stage the first axial age had attained. Accordingly, the second axial time yielded a new stage of humanism that

surmounted the characteristics of the first axial age in terms of progress and advancement. The second axial time promoted the development of humanism despite the phenomenon concerning the perseverance of ethnocentrism just mentioned.

Rüsen identifies or defines the whole modern era as the second axial age, that is, the second axial age did not stop at any time during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century but did not end during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The second axial age prevails and continues by now. While it was originally a phenomenon limited to Europe only, it has spread above Europe's borders later on.

It consists of several elements not existing before in history. The human being is thenceforward considered as a purpose by its own, characterized by a kind of dignity that forbids it to be used as a means for other purposes. It was Immanuel Kant who defined this high principle or tenet in his moral philosophy. Accordingly, Rüsen (2020/1, pp. 43, 68, 75, 2010/3, pp. 276-277) estimates the formulation of civil and liberty rights as the core of the new stage of humanism. The human being's dignity must be protected against encroachments of all kinds, especially against the power and violence of the state. The human being is free, and his chosen way of life deserves it to be protected. This core idea of the new humanism is not confined to the ideological sphere but was continuously materialized in the real political life of the Western nations. Constitutional state and rule of law have largely institutionalized this preservation and protection of the liberty rights devised to care for the dignity of the individual.

There are some more central points characterizing the new kind of humanism, connected to the features already mentioned. The idea of equality is crucial, especially meaning that all individuals have the same rights in society, politics, and law. Furthermore, the second axial age respectively the modern humanism denies any reliance on religion, that is, it construes its foundation on a mere secular perspective. Religious foundations tend to endanger the protection of human life as resort to divine commands have so often legitimized the annihilation of human life, as previous history has frequently documented. Therefore, the secular formulation of the modern humanism has helped to increase humanistic values respectively the protection of human lives (Rüsen 2020/1, pp. 70-72).

Rüsen sees these developments concerning the understanding of the human being as a "humanization of the human being", a phenomenon carrying the whole evolution of the second axial time respectively the second stage of humanism. This process mainly consists of six dimensions, 1) secularization, 2) universalization, 3) naturalization, 4) idealization, 5) historization, and 6) individualization.

The first aspect – secularization – is defined by the exclusion of religion in understanding human beings, their social life, and their history. The new social sciences and humanities, originating in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, understand human life as shaped by historical causes, by natural powers, and by empirical-causal determinants. Divine elements are not anymore applied to earmark the understanding of the human being's role on Earth, his history, and to formulate his rights and morals. The second aspect – universalization – covers the discovery that every culture on the planet has its right to live and to exist, that all races and humans have the same rights and duties, and that women and men represent the same amount of dignity and worth. The third aspect – naturalization – expresses the new understanding that both human body

and human mind are free from spiritual and magical influences, and that they are created by natural elements. While the body is recognized as made by physical elements, the mind is discerned as shaped by drives, emotions, and mental powers – all belonging to the material and worldly sphere. The fourth aspect – idealization – earmarks the faculty of the human being to upgrade his or her's existence by education and arts on the one side and refinement of morals and mental powers on the other side. His new destiny is to surmount the animal reign by some kind of self-divinization through own cultural efforts and educational exertions. The great artist or musician, author or scientist is the protagonist of this strife for self-improvement. The fifth aspect – historization – relates to the discovery that humankind has gone through different stages of development and has transformed its way of life accordingly. It is now recognized that there does not exist only one type of society and only type of human being as it was seen in the Middle Ages. The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries determined that humans in different times and various epochs lived in different mental worlds with divergent morals, politics, and religions. Sharper than ever before protagonists of the second axial age grasped the historical nature of the human being and of society. It was discerned that though humans vary according to their respective place in time and space, they all agree in exactly this historical aspect. Scientists developed an understanding that all humans are equal because of their dependence from specific times and places, that is because they diverge from each other due to circumstances they have not chosen. The sixth aspect – individualization – means the understanding of the freedom of the individual. Human beings are not anymore understood as bondsmen of their social class, social rank, church, or social group, but as individuals that are independent from their society, at least in a certain way. Individuals have not to obey to prefabricated ideologies or precepts, customs and manners, but are free to select, free to develop their own philosophy or opinion, and free to find their own way of life (Rüsen 2010/3, pp. 290-303).

On the whole, the Western humanism or the second axial time, as it developed through the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, is characterized by the following central concepts:

- A universal concept of humankind in empirical and normative perspective is developed
- The recognition of the central relevance of the human being for the interpretation of his or her's world
- The recognition of human dignity as principle of orientation regarding cultural praxis
- The recognition of the equality of all human beings due to their personal and social dignity
- Recognition of responsibility of the human being in his or her's treatment of cultural difference
- Recognition of coherence of individual and social responsibility
- Humanism as viewpoint of legitimation and of criticism of religious regulation of leading a human life (Religions are not permitted to justify the inhuman treatment of human beings)
- Recognition that education is essential in forming mind and personality (Rüsen 2020/1, pp. 22-23)

These single features are interconnected to each other and form a common structure carrying the Western humanism.

### 3. From Western humanism to intercultural humanism

The Western humanism was the basis of the second axial time. However, the Western humanism is not sufficient to

secure the humankind's future in a globalized world. It suffers from several shortcomings that must be erased. Therefore, a new stage of humanism must be elaborated that is furnished by capacities to conciliate the competing world civilizations and to develop superior standards and values that enable different cultures to find common and peaceful solutions. It is the intercultural humanism that must fulfill the goal to enable different civilizations to life in a common world. The new intercultural humanism must be developed, that is it is not already present and manifest in world society. However, it is possible to define it already now and first traces of its future existence are already recognizable. It must fully evolve because humankind has no possibility to solve its conflicts otherwise in a globalized world. Simply the constraints of life in a globalized world make it necessary for the intercultural humanism to emerge and to prevail. On the whole, the development from Western humanism to intercultural humanism must be seen as advancement of the second axial time. That implies that the emergence of intercultural humanism will not cause a third axial time to come. The unfolding of the intercultural humanism falls into the era of the second axial age and completes it.

Rüsen (2020/1, pp. 95-101) identifies the shortcomings of the present-day Western or modern humanism by the following features. These five features reveal or guarantee the end of the Western or modern humanism and the necessity to supersede it by the intercultural humanism. These five elements shaping the Western humanism are 1) the ignorance of the fact that human beings can always tend to barbarism and inhumanity, 2) the illusionary, wrong and pink interpretation of the ancient world and the ancient humanism, 3) the still given ethnocentrism of the Western world and the modern humanism, 4) the insufficient concept of reason, and 5) the odd relationship with nature.

Ad 1) The Western humanism has fully believed that the modern world has erased cruelty and violence, and has refined the human nature, and has transformed human beings to become more benevolent and amiable persons than in all history before. The Western humanism ignored that all humans are always capable to barbarism. The Western humanism was credulous and illusionary as it could not grasp that phenomena such as Auschwitz could always appear. The intercultural humanism must therefore accept that inhumanity belongs to the universals of the human existence. It must address and take account of that phenomenon instead of ignoring and suppressing it. Ad 2) The Western humanism has not only held an illusionary image of the human nature, as it ignored the inhumanity incorporated into human nature, it also had a fictitious understanding of the ancient world of the Greeks and the Romans. These peoples were believed of being some kind of superhumans living a life in pure forms of beauty, perfection, wisdom, virtue, honesty, heroism, serenity, and decency. They were seen in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as models that must be followed. It will be necessary to rectify this wrong description of history to ground modern humanism on new pillars. Ad 3) Though the Western humanism climbed some steps of the ladder concerning the overthrow of ethnocentrism, it retained too many elements of ethnocentric thought. Western humanism resorted too much to European history and ignored too much the relevance and the achievements of other civilizations. Ad 4) The Western humanism has not developed a sufficient concept of the human mind and reason. On the one hand it has tended to assume that all humans on earth, from whichever culture and time, have the same mental capacities that are known and describable by Western scientists. However, it is unclear whether these scientists were ever successful in documenting the mental abilities of humans from divergent civilizations and whether they were prone to ascribe their own prejudices to other people, thus delivering an ethnocentric picture of their mind. On the other hand, Western scientists provided they were on the top of intellectual advancement, while people



of different cultures were viewed as backward or less advanced. Ad 5) The Western relation to nature is defined by gaining dominance and by exploitation of its resources. The humanism was then defined by the exclusion of nature from appropriate and moral standards of behavior, a tendency that has no future (Rüsen 2020/1, pp. 95-101).

Therefore, the intercultural humanism must rely on a full understanding of the possible inhumanity of humans (1), on the inevitable enforcement of civil and human rights in the frame of constitutional state and rule of law right across the entire world despite its late and initially solely European origin (2), a better understanding of the trajectories of world history as a path between divergence and uniformity. Though there have been many divergent world civilizations with having an unique character each, there is a universal history leading into a common future that must be created by communication, discourse and exchange (3), the concepts of reason must address and incorporate the understandings of different civilizations beyond the limits of former Western philosophy (4), and nature must play a part much beyond the limited conceptions the Western world had devised, wherein nature was only a means for delivering materials to exploit (Rüsen 2020/1, pp. 101-104).

The intercultural humanism will evolve as result of international discussions and endeavors (Rüsen 2010/3, pp. 277-278). It will not emerge when contributions and worldviews of single world civilizations are being excluded or overlooked. Every single world civilization must be able to share into these discussions and to approve of the common understandings and solutions. Nonetheless, the starting point for the development of the new intercultural humanism should be the modern respectively Western humanism. While the first axial age originated and manifested independently in different Eurasian civilizations, the second axial time came into being initially only in the Western world. Especially during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western or modern humanism disseminated right across the whole world. The modern humanism continuously conquered the minds of people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, too (Rüsen 2013/1, p. 12). It is almost omnipresent today, on world-wide scale, even when one considers that main parts of it – especially human rights, liberty rights, and rule of law – are by no means materialized and supported everywhere. In any case this modern humanism due to its mere or less omnipresence builds the foundation from which the intercultural humanism can emerge. As representatives of most nations of the world know the modern humanism and have engrained it, they all have the required background to participate at the discussions to develop the new intercultural humanism.

Nonetheless, the intellectuals of the world should not and will not rely only on Western traditions when developing the new intercultural humanism. It should be a task to find humanistic traditions in traditional Asia, Africa, and elsewhere that can be used in the discussions. The terms social responsibility and collective solidarity from traditional Africa, or concepts of Vedanta Buddhism from India, and concepts such as harmony and respect from Chinese Confucianism can instill in the new ideology of intercultural humanism (Rüsen 2020/1, pp. 22-31).

The reliance both on Western humanism and on traditional forms of humanism, made in the Global South, is necessary to have a common foundation to rebuke widespread forms of relativism, having an influence in international debates. Humanistic values that will find support everywhere in the world are definable and are not an illusion only. The idea of relativism that common ideas, values, and morals are not developable because of unbridgeable cultural differences in understanding and worldview must be encountered by the formulation of intercultural humanism. The claim for universality



of his ideas was already part of the Western respectively modern humanism, though it was not completed due to the burden of some parts of ethnocentrism not completely overthrown then. The new intercultural humanism will supersede these elements and will therefore enlarge and foster the former claims of universalism. The intercultural humanism overturns the forms of relativism and is accompanied by the hope that it can help to transform the globe from a place of conflicts to a place where a common life is possible (Rüsen 2020/1, pp. 15, 34, 2012, p. 63).

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