

## **What we believe in matters.**

A paper prepared by David Cadman  
for Friends School Saffron Walden,

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This evening, I would like to cover three things:

- Firstly, I would like say something about the path upon which we find ourselves.
- Secondly, I would like to say something about an alternative and preferred pathway.
- And finally, I would like to say something about how we might find our way there.

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### Part I

According to the good and the wise Buddha, “our life is the creation of our mind”, with our thoughts we make the world.

And if this is true, then: what we believe in matters. And it matters because, whatever it is, it will shape our lives. We will become that which we believe in, for what we look for is nearly always what we find.

If then, we wish to understand who we are – how it is that we have come to be as we are, and where is it that we might be going – we have, it seems to me, to look at that which we hold to be true. When all else is stripped away, what is it that defines who we are; and, most importantly, what is it that governs our way of being?

There are, perhaps, two visions of the world that have come to shape our lives at the beginning of the twenty-first century – and both are essentially materialistic. The first is the vision of what is commonly called ‘mechanistic science’ and the second is the vision of what is commonly called ‘the economics of the market place’. Oddly enough, although both of these visions are now somewhat outmoded, their influence persists, and it persists in describing a world made up of separate parts.

Whether we are describing a physical system or a market place – or indeed anything else – we have been encouraged to believe that the way in which it works is something like a clock, whose workings can best be understood by dismantling it and studying its parts – whether they be cogs and wheels, atoms and molecules, buyers and sellers, or whatever else. Most importantly, both of these powerful but now outmoded visions – mechanistic science and the economics of the market place – suppose that those things that are real, and of real value, are only those that can be measured or priced. By contrast, they imply that those things that are not readily measured or priced are in some sense unreal and/or of no value.

Thus, according to these visions (or as I would call them illusions), ‘the real world’ is confined to that which is tangible, concrete and fixed. Furthermore, it is not only confined to those things that can be measured, but also, and most especially, to those things that can be possessed and consumed. And the real dilemma is that this way of seeing the world – useful and productive in its own way but nevertheless limited in its relevance – has come to be taken as having universal application. It is applied not simply to some kinds of science and to some kinds of market transaction but to all that we do. It has come to define and limit our experience. It is everywhere and governs all. It has brought us to where we are, and if we would rather be somewhere else we had best find a new vision!

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Part II – are there, then, alternative pathways?

Fortunately, there are. And one possibility is described by that set of visions, often called the perennial philosophy, that has found a voice in all of the great spiritual traditions – whether they be Islam or Christianity or Judaism or Hinduism or Buddhism.

By contrast to the now outmoded reality of atomistic science and economics, this set of visions offers us a different reality, one that we must call a Divine Reality – characterised most especially by being concerned not with parts but with wholes, not with separateness but with relationship.

These visions tell us that to be whole – indeed, to be real – we have to be at one with that which is both within and yet beyond us. We cannot separate ourselves entirely from all that is. Rather we have to practise to become at one with another – and this means not only all of mankind but

also all beings, all fauna and flora, the mountains and the oceans, the clouds and the winds and the rains.

And if, perhaps in some mysterious way that we cannot explain, we are able to see ourselves as an expression of that which is Divine, then reverence for others now present and yet to come must cause us to temper our own desires with those qualities that are the teaching of all the great spiritual traditions – generosity, patience, simplicity, humility, harmlessness, compassion and so on.

In any event, it seems to me that it is beyond doubt that the vision that we choose to guide us will direct our path. If we choose to accept the teachings of convention – materialism and consumerism – we will continue to promote their own fantasy, promising ever-increasing consumption for all, and thereby reinforcing the environmental and social catastrophes that have already begun to take place – not least flood, famine, pestilence, violence and the resultant economic and political migration – ever waiting for the technological and political ‘fix’ that will redeem all. There is, of course, a formidable risk in taking this path but, rather worryingly, it would seem that it is the path that Western governments are set to follow.

Nevertheless, despite this rather gloomy prognosis, it seems to me that, provided that we turn to it with resolve and without delay, the second pathway, the path of reverence and sufficiency, which is the path offered by the perennial philosophy, does at least provide us with the possibility of a more sustainable way.

Frankly, it has to. For it is likely that although this doctrine of sufficiency and simplicity is today often portrayed as no more than a comfortable alternative for those that already have enough, it will, in our children’s or our grandchildren’s time, become not an alternative but a necessity for survival. For, in a quite practical sense, it is beyond doubt that although our global trade professes the contrary, this planet cannot support for all the level of consumption presently enjoyed by the few. For example, we are told that if the people of China were to reach the same level of consumption as those of us in the West (and why should they not want to?), it would absorb in any one year the entire world fish catch, the entire U.S. grain harvest and well in excess of the entire world oil production.<sup>1</sup> And yet such an aspiration not only exists but is being actively promoted both within China and amongst those countries who seek to trade with her – that means us.

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<sup>1</sup> Lester R. Brown, *Eco-Economy*, W.W.Norton & Company, New York and London, 2001.

It seems clear, therefore, that in time – and not too distant a time – we must take a different path. We must challenge the conventional definition of reality, before it is too late abandoning our unbounded materialism and consumption and returning once more to the teachings and practice of the great spiritual traditions – the “Divine Reality” of the perennial philosophy.

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Part III – so how might we get there?

So far, we have been talking about a philosophy, the perennial philosophy. But, on reflection, perhaps we might use another word, not philosophy but wisdom, that which is called the *sophia eternis*, the ‘eternal wisdom’. For whereas I think that, for us, philosophy now speaks perhaps of the head, wisdom carries with it the promptings of the heart. And I am reminded that the first paragraph of our Quaker *Advices and Queries* urges us to:

Take heed, Dear Friends, to the promptings of love and truth  
in your hearts.

As it happens, ‘philosophy’ does, of course, mean the ‘love of wisdom’. And I have no doubt that it is, Sophia, the goddess of wisdom, who leads us along this pathway of Love, the understanding that Love is, which is to say that Love is of the essence of being? And I feel that if we wish to find the Truth we need to follow this path, for Love is both the pathway and that to which the path will lead us. It is the Quest and the Grail.

Indeed, as Christ taught us, in the end, Love is the ground of reality, the still point of being; and that, this being so, we need profoundly to change our perspective, our way of being – to move away from an ethos of separation, conflict and competition towards one of wholeness, co-operation and compassion.

And let us not underestimate the power of Love, for when the heart has Love within it, it has an invisible communication with God and a heart filled with Love can influence its own environment in a way that is felt but not known.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, consider this quotation from one of the earliest Quakers, William Penn, who, speaking in 1693 but with words that are as relevant today as they were then, said this:

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to the monk Arsenios of the monastery of Vatopaidi, Mount Athos for this insight.

A good cannot sanctify evil means; nor must we ever do evil, that good may come of it... We are too ready to retaliate, rather than forgive, or gain by love and information. And yet we could hurt no man that we believe loves us. Let us then try what Love will do: for if men did once see we love them, we should soon find they would not harm us. Force may subdue, but Love gains: and he that forgives first, wins the laurel.<sup>3</sup>

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Let me end, then, by telling you a short Buddhist story. There once was a King who failed to live by compassion and to give to the poor. Poverty arose. Poverty led to theft, theft to violence and so on and so on until at the lowest point, at the depth of degradation, when all seemed lost, a Fool, (or so he seemed to others), had the insight and courage to persuade the King to turn away from this seemingly unstoppable tragedy and, once more, proclaim the ancient wisdom of generosity, simplicity and compassion. As he fed the poor, there was less theft; as there was less theft, there was less violence; and so on and so on until, at last, the well-being of all was restored.

Will there now, I wonder, be those ‘foolish’ men and women (or so they will seem to others) that have the insight and courage to prick the bubble of our illusion and turn us away from such a calamity? We must pray that this is so and in finding a new path “Let us try what Love will do”.

David Cadman, 2004

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<sup>3</sup> William Penn, *Some fruits of solitude*, 1693, maxims 537, 540, 543-546. Quoted in *Quaker Faith and Practice* 24.03.