

**Document 6:** Keynote 3 (13<sup>th</sup> February) by Ambassador K.P. Fabian : *Can There Be Progress Without Spirituality?*



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***Taking Diversions and U-Turns: Conversations and Dialogues on Sustainable Futures and Spirituality***, Loyola College, Chennai; 11 – 13 February 2015/  
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It is indeed a pleasure and privilege to be sharing a few thoughts with fellow human beings engaged in creating a better morrow for humanity.

Thank you, Fr. Lazarus, for your gracious invitation and the flawless hospitality, making me feel at home in the famous Loyola College.

To understand history, one needs to know not only what did happen, but also what might have happened. The famous French thinker and mathematician, Blaise Pascal, in his book , *Pensees*, published in 1699, says:

“If Cleopatra’s nose had been shorter, the whole face of the earth would have changed.”

The shape of the nose, it was believed, shows strength of character. Further, a nose too short might have made the face look less lovely. If Cleopatra had less character and less good looks, Julius Ceasar and Marc Antony might not have fallen in love with her and thus the course of history of antiquity might have been different.

In Rome I have seen the place where Cleopatra’s apartment once stood. She was there as a friend of Julius Ceasar. Pascal’s was a thought experiment in what if.

Another thought experiment:

June 28, 1914 Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie were shot dead in Sarajevo. The chain of cause and effect led to the great war, the first world war of 1914-1918, the centenary of which was commemorated, not celebrated, last year.

Suppose Austria, Hungary, Serbia, Russia, France, and Great Britain had conducted an unconference where they spoke as frankly and freely as we speak, moderated brilliantly by Manish and Nat, do you think the war that killed millions could have been averted? May be, we do not know.

I am so glad to be taking part in my first unconference since I joined diplomatic service in 1964 as I address an audience, a good part of it, born post-1964.

To go back to the war of 1914-1918 and other wars, war starts in the minds of men as the preamble to the constitution of UNESCO says.

But, if men in conflict speak to each other and hold an Unconference, perhaps there is a chance to avoid war.

Are the governments resorting to Unconference?

No.

Are they talking to each other with respect?

Let us look at the conflict in Ukraine that has consumed more than 5000 human beings so far. There has been more than one conference in Minsk, Belarusse. Perhaps, an unconference might have helped better to arrive at a cease-fire and to build lasting peace and reconciliation. Ukrainians cannot go on fighting and killing each other, with or without arms from Russia and us. This madness has to end.

We live in an age, it has been said, where we know more and more of the less and less and less and less of the more and more.

Is it a correct statement? Can we know more and more of the less and less if we know less and less of the more and more? Let us reflect.

Unless we know the whole can we understand properly the parts? Answer is clear.

Another observation on our times:

We are starved of sensible conversation.

Take India-Pakistan talks at foreign secretary level. Is it a dialogue or two monologues?

Even before the conference starts, each side tells the media what it is going to tell the other.

Are Russia and us talking to each other over Ukraine? Recently president Obama, in Paris to attend G8 summit, refused to meet and talk to his Russian

counterpart. He even refused to share dinner with president Putin. Eventually, the host, president Hollande, had two dinners the same evening.

Secretary of State John Kerry always tells the media that he talked tough to his Russian counterpart over Ukraine. This is ridiculous.

We who live on lifeboat earth, that can capsize any moment, have to talk to each other and respect each other. Otherwise, the boat will capsize and we all will drown.

### **Our Title: Can there be Progress without Spirituality?**

Generally accepted definitions are possible in physical sciences and in mathematics, but not in the social sciences where human beings study what they do to each other and to the rest of the universe, how they look at each other, how they respond to each other as they provoke each other, and so on. To my mind it is difficult to find a universally accepted definition of spirituality or of progress.

Nor do I intend to carry out an analysis of each word in the title, but a few remarks are in order:

#### 1) What is Progress?

How old is the idea of progress? In ancient Greece, Plato did believe in the possibility of progress. His disciple, Aristotle, was less certain of the possibility of progress. Christianity believed in the paradise, the original sin, and the fall of Adam and Eve. The past was perfect and sinless.

It was in the Europe of enlightenment that the idea of progress took a firm shape in the belief of the infinite perfectibility of the human condition.

In many civilizations there was a belief, there is a belief, that there was a golden age in the dim distant past and that the human condition has deteriorated since that golden age.

#### **What is Progress?**

One man's meat can be poison to another.

For Hitler the holocaust was progress as he thought he got closer to the 'final solution' of exterminating the Jews, of completing the operation genocide, a word that was coined post- holocaust.

Instead of defining progress, let us look at some requirements to be fulfilled if we are to recognize progress.

To my mind, if poverty is eliminated, if there is social justice, if there is liberty, if there is equality before law, if human beings can live with dignity, if plurality is accepted, if minorities feel safe and equal before law, that is progress.

**Question:**

Can we say that progress across the centuries has been uniform or that there is more progress in the 21st century than say in the 16th century in all parts of the world? Has progress progressed linearly across the centuries?

This is a difficult question.

To my mind the progress of progress has been uneven with occasional setbacks.

Germany in 1920s under the Weimar republic was more progressive than under Hitler.

Just to give one example.

Another thought on progress:

We live in an age of quantification, dear to economists.

Was glad to listen yesterday to the keynote address on the human economy by Yves Bertholet. It was in France, if my memory is right, that they spoke of *sciences economiques*, the economic sciences.

Hence it was so good to listen to our distinguished speaker from France move ahead of economic sciences and restore the missing balance.

UN/World Bank speaks of poverty level pegged at \$1.25 a day. There is general consensus among economists on this matter. If the percentage of human beings living on \$1.25 a day comes down, UN, World Bank and others, the whole establishment, will say that there is progress.

I beg to differ.

For me that is a mechanical approach.

Progress should be measured not only by the distance we have covered, but also by the distance you could have covered if we had the will and determination. To go back to Cleopatra, we should always bear in mind what could have been done given good will and determination.

When it comes to reduction of poverty and human suffering the establishment tends to be rather relaxed and insensitive.

The \$ 1.25 a day reminds me of the 19th century England where the capitalists concluded that the workers should be paid wages just enough to help them keep body and soul together so that they can work; there was no question of empowering them to live in dignity.

Any progress in the attitude of the establishment in the 21st century as compared to England in the 19th? None whatsoever.

Now coming to the meaning of spirituality.

We have had considerable discussion. There was a proposal that we should attempt a definition of spirituality.

It can be argued that it is important to have generally accepted definitions so that we all agree on the meaning of words we use. Confucius was once asked what his first act would be if he is given political power. He replied that he would tell people of the importance of using names correctly. He has a point, incorrect naming does cause confusion. However, I doubt whether it is possible to arrive at a generally accepted definition of spirituality.

I am looking at Capra's words in front of me on the wall: *Ecology and spirituality are fundamentally connected because deep ecological awareness, ultimately, is spiritual awareness.*

Does spirituality mean reverence for the life-supporting environment where life was born?

Is that all that spirituality implies?

**Question:**

Why should we revere the environment?

The answer might be that if we damage the environment or the ecology, one day life itself might be endangered.

If that is the answer then the reverence for eco-system is an act of prudence and calculation. I do not see any spirituality there.

Suppose we could have damaged eco-system without endangering human life, would it have been right to harm the ecosystem?

After all science and technology might make it possible to produce more with less damage to ecology.

Reflection shows that there is much more than prudential consideration to support reverence for the eco-system.

There is something common to all human beings, that is humanity.

What does it mean?

Biologically, it means that human beings constitute a species. We should look beyond biology.

I would go one step one further from biology and assert in the fatherhood of god whose children we are.

This is not something which can be proved as a theorem in geometry can be proved.

Nor can science disprove our assertion about the fatherhood of god whose children we are.

Let us reflect further. Are the human beings the crown of creation, entitled to exploit the rest of creation? Not at all. The whole of creation has to be respected. If the human being represents as he claims the frontline of evolution, all the more reason that he takes good care of those behind and the environment that gave birth to life.

### **Yesterday, a question was raised:**

Is it correct to say that human reason is the only instrument available to humans as they seek to understand the world they find themselves in?

To my mind, the answer is no, if a rational answer is to be given.

Reason should be reasonable enough to understand its own obvious limitations.

There are severe limitations to human reason.

Francis bacon in his *Novum Organum* has explained the impediments to correct thinking.

In Book I of the New Organon (Aphorisms 39-68), Bacon introduces his famous doctrine of the "idols." these are characteristic errors, natural tendencies, or defects that beset the mind and prevent it from achieving a full and accurate understanding of nature. Bacon points out that recognizing and counteracting the idols is as important to the study of nature as the recognition and refutation of bad arguments is to logic. Incidentally, he uses the word "idol" – from the Greek eidolon ("image" or "phantom") – not in the sense of a false god or heathen deity but rather in the sense employed in Epicurean physics. Thus a Baconian idol is a potential deception or source of misunderstanding, especially one that clouds or confuses our knowledge of external reality.

Bacon identifies four different classes of idol. Each arises from a different source, and each presents its own special hazards and difficulties.

#### **1. The Idols of the Tribe.**

These are the natural weaknesses and tendencies common to human nature. Because they are innate, they cannot be completely eliminated, but only recognized and compensated for. Some of Bacon's examples are:

Our senses – which are inherently dull and easily deceivable. (which is why Bacon prescribes instruments and strict investigative methods to correct them.)

Our tendency to discern (or even impose) more order in phenomena than is actually there. As Bacon points out, we are apt to find similitude where there is actually singularity, regularity where there is actually randomness, etc.

Our tendency towards “wishful thinking.” according to Bacon, we have a natural inclination to accept, believe, and even prove what we would prefer to be true.

Our tendency to rush to conclusions and make premature judgments (instead of gradually and painstakingly accumulating evidence).

## **2. The Idols of the Cave**

Unlike the idols of the tribe, which are common to all human beings, those of the cave vary from individual to individual. They arise, that is to say, not from nature but from culture and thus reflect the peculiar distortions, prejudices, and beliefs that we are all subject to owing to our different family backgrounds, childhood experiences, education, training, gender, religion, social class, etc. Examples include:

Special allegiance to a particular discipline or theory.

High esteem for a few select authorities.

A “*cookie-cutter*” mentality – that is, a tendency to reduce or confine phenomena within the terms of our own narrow training or discipline.

## **3. The Idols of the Market Place**

These are hindrances to clear thinking that arise, Bacon says, from the “intercourse and association of men with each other.” the main culprit here is language, though not just common speech, but also (and perhaps particularly) the special discourses, vocabularies, and jargons of various academic communities and disciplines. He points out that “the idols imposed by words on the understanding are of two kinds”: “they are either names of things that do not exist” (e.g. the crystalline spheres of Aristotelian cosmology) or faulty, vague, or misleading names for things that do exist (according to Bacon, abstract qualities and value terms – e.g. “moist,” “useful,” etc. – can be a particular source of confusion).

## **4. The Idols of the Theatre.**

Like the idols of the cave, those of the theatre are culturally acquired rather than innate. And although the metaphor of a theatre suggests an artificial imitation of truth, as in drama or fiction, Bacon makes it clear that these idols derive mainly

from grand schemes or systems of philosophy – and especially from three particular types of philosophy:

Sophistical philosophy – that is, philosophical systems based only on a few casually observed instances (or on no experimental evidence at all) and thus constructed mainly out of abstract argument and speculation. Bacon cites scholasticism as a conspicuous example.

Empirical philosophy – that is, a philosophical system ultimately based on a single key insight (or on a very narrow base of research), which is then erected into a model or paradigm to explain phenomena of all kinds. Bacon cites the example of William Gilbert, whose experiments with the lodestone persuaded him that magnetism operated as the hidden force behind virtually all earthly phenomena.

Superstitious philosophy – this is Bacon's phrase for any system of thought that mixes theology and philosophy. He cites Pythagoras and Plato as guilty of this practice, but also points his finger at pious contemporary efforts, similar to those of creationists today, to found systems of natural philosophy on Genesis or the Book of Job.

Incidentally, Bacon was the father of the idea of progress in modern times.

He meant technological progress, steady, cumulative, with historical advance in applied scientific knowledge.

We know better now that technology can be used for good or for evil purposes as technology in itself is value-neutral.

It is possible to exaggerate what technology can do.

For example, when some people argue that corruption can be eliminated by the application of it, they are making the mistake that Bacon made.

He had the excuse that he lived at the beginning of the scientific revolution but those who believe that technology per se can save us have no such excuse.

### **To Pause for a Moment: Our Tentative Conclusions are:**

Progress is not necessarily linear, there can be reverses, there have been reverses

Technology alone cannot deliver progress, in fact mindless application of technology to work the gas chambers as Hitler did in the Holocaust or the making of nuclear weapons can not only fail to deliver progress but can even put an end to the human race.

As far as the meaning of spirituality is concerned we have to examine it further.



For me spirituality is the assertion that a human being is more than the sum total of the material elements, matter or forces.

I do not believe that a robot can love, hate, or be wise.

I know that the eminent scientist Stephen Hawking has recently stated that the artificial intelligence might harm the human race, meaning that it can be a veritable Frankenstein's monster.

To me the best or the most sophisticated robot can be more intelligent than a human being in playing chess or making a mathematical calculation, but it can never be a Mother Teresa or Francis of Assisi

Information, knowledge, and wisdom form an ascending order.

As Eliot put it,

Where is the life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

**For progress we need all the three:  
*information, knowledge, and wisdom.***

For me wisdom is an essential part of spirituality.

But there is more to spirituality than wisdom.

Spirituality implies that there is a spiritual realm transcending the sensible, material realm.

Physics tells us that the universe came into being with a big bang.

It also tells us that if the initial inflation starting from the point of singularity had been faster than it was, no stars and galaxies would have been formed and we would not have been sitting here having this unconference.

The only explanation one can think of is that there is a spirit that determined the rate of expansion correctly so that stars and galaxies could be formed.

To believe that the rate of expansion happened to be correct or to say that there have been zillions of big bangs and just by chance in the case of our universe it happened to be correct is patently absurd.

To sum up spirituality means that we human beings are children of god, the rate of expansion was determined in a manner to make it possible for human beings to emerge.

I believe in the Darwinian theory of evolution as a theory that explains how it happened.

But it cannot explain why it happened.

Spirituality also implies that each human being is an end in herself as Immanuel Kant put it.

Of course, he used the masculine pronoun as that was fashionable then.

There cannot be progress unless those who take decisions accept the following propositions:

Human being is a spiritual being.

The Jesuit mystic Teilhard de Chardin observed:

*" We are not human beings having spiritual experience but spiritual beings having human experience."*

Einstein said, " a human being is part of the whole we call the universe, a part limited in time and space .He experiences himself in his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest....A kind of special illusion of his consciousness. "

The Vietnamese Buddhist monk and philosopher Thich Nhat Hanh said "enjoy a good cup of tea". To enjoy a good cup of tea one should feel the warmth of the cup, the aroma of the tea, taste the sweetness, see the craftsmanship on the cup and appreciate the delicacy. Do we have time to enjoy the life, nature's glory, the child's smile, the tenderness of love and answer the expectations of your parents or chase the crooked shadow and be a money making-machine?

If one believes as Hitler did in the essential superiority of the German Aryans and the worthlessness of the rest , there cannot be progress in the sense we understand the term.

Please do not be under the impression that now days there are no decision - makers who think that their countries are superior to the rest of the world

In India some people speak of aeroplanes made in the past millennia before the Wright brothers.

Please do not think that we, homo sapiens, have become better in our behaviour.

Let me give a recent example

Despite the 1948 convention on genocide, UN, under pressure from US, perpetrated a genocide in Iraq in the garb of economic sanctions starting from 1991 till 2003.

Once Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was asked:

“Madame Secretary, 500,000 Iraqi children have died owing to sanctions. Do you think that it is a price worth paying for getting rid of WMD?”

She said, “Yes.”

The sad truth is that secretary Albright did not recognize that children in Iraq had the same right to life as the children in US. She forgot the Declaration of Independence that said:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

States or governments sign treaties about genocide and torture and later with impunity commit the atrocities they pledged to ban.

### **Question.**

### **Is there progress in regard to genocide?**

A word about *Economics* and *Chresmatic*s.

Aristotle in his *Nichomachean Ethics* made a useful distinction between *Economics* and *Chresmatic*s.

Economic activity benefits the individual and *Chresmatic*s the society. *Chresmatic* activity benefits only the individual and might harm the society. For example, if an individual steals and is clever enough to escape justice, he alone benefits and the society suffers. That is a *Chresmatic* activity. If a maid works in your house and produces dinner it is an economic activity, she benefits from the wages you pay her and you benefit from the dinner she made.

In the real world, there are many activities that are more *Chresmatic* than economic. For example, the trade in paper barrels of crude or in derivatives. I once had an exchange on this with the celebrated economist Bhaghavati, he refused to accept the distinction. He refused to acknowledge the difference between economics and *chresmatic*s.

Here we have an example of the idol of the market place and of the theatre place worshipped by eminent economists.

Briefly, as far as the west is concerned:

Renaissance and enlightenment were good in part, like the curate's egg.

But there was a profound mistake made about the nature of human nature.

Economists seem to believe that there is only a *Homo Economicus*. They forget that there is a *Homo Politicus* and many more homos.

It is only when we recognize the spiritual dimension of the human being that we shall have a holistic understanding of what in our arrogance we call Homo Sapiens Sapiens.

If we call ourselves Homo Sapiens Sapiens, we have to merit that title; so far we have failed to merit the title.

But, I see before me a group of human beings dedicated to transforming the world in the right direction, who believe that the gap between what is and what should be can be reduced.

Wish you godspeed!

Thank you, once again, Fr.Lazarus for gifting me this splendid opportunity to meet a group of human beings , indeed the salt of the earth.

*Get Off the Highway*  
**TAKE DIVERSIONS AND U-TURNS**

