

## Cosmopolitan Morality: Are We Ready for the Burdens of World

### Citizenship?

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UCCN - January 18, 2004



To what and to whom are we loyal?

Is the circle that contains those to whom we feel we owe a debt of loyalty a vast circle or a small circle? These questions have a direct bearing on the theme of my remarks today – cosmopolitan morality and ethics. I hasten to add that my use of the word morality and ethics together is not an error of redundancy. Those two words have meanings that differ in important ways. We will get to that shortly.

The word ‘cosmopolitan’ easily rolls off the tongue and the pages of popular literature and slick advertisements for vacations in far away places. It often seems to convey no more than casual enjoyment of foods, places and customs different than our own. The word ‘cosmopolitan’ also has an uneasy and troubled past. It has been used pejoratively to describe rootless vagabonds, cultural dilettantes and utopians. In his *Mein Kampf* Adolf Hitler labeled the Jews *en masse* as, among other things, Esperantists because one among them, a young Jew named Ludovic Zamenhof, attempted to create a synthetic language, Esperanto, that would link the world across cultural lines, as Zamenhof considered linguistic differences the cause of cultural and therefore human distance and misunderstanding. Such Jewish Esperantists were labeled both by Hitler and, later, by Stalin as culturally destructive and racially polluting - ‘cosmopolitans.’ Such ideas were not to be tolerated in a Volkish, hyper-nativist Germany or Mother Russia. Well, as it turns out, while Nazism is dead, Zamenhof’s language and vision still live.

As well, cosmopolitan is a word with dignified philosophical roots. The word derives from the Greek [Cosmopolitai, meaning literally ‘citizen of the cosmos’ or, as it is most often translated, ‘citizen of the world.’ During a time of extreme Greek and Roman cultural pride and vanity, the ancient Stoics, such as Seneca, Epictetus and the Emperor Marcus Aurelius entertained a metaphysics (a slick world which simply means a view about the nature of reality) that challenged the hard headed and often heard hearted politics of the day, while the Stoics themselves remained imperfect exemplars of their own doctrine. This metaphysics was akin to Emerson’s, and held that all human beings, in all places, in virtue of the fact that they all participate in a single rationality or logos which ordered the universe, were by that participation citizens of a larger order, a larger community, with duties toward one another that competed and often transcended the political citizenship of the particular cities, empires or nations of which they were members. The ancient Stoic view continues to be criticized today, but there are many serious moral and political philosophers living today who think that a morality that views far flung and distant persons as fellow citizens, whether or not money interests or mutual cultural affinities bind them, is the morality of the future and will be the morality that will most likely save us from a final war. This is argued particularly in view of a rapidly, even if often destructively, globalizing and interconnected world.

Nativism, traditionalism and cultural chauvinism are all directly challenged by modern day cosmopolitans. Yet, contrary to the thinking of many conservatives and even some who are not so conservative, cosmopolitan thought does not require the abandoning of home and established custom. Home and the familiar are requirements of human psychological health, and let us make no mistake about it. No. Rather, it requires that home and custom be removed from the exclusive center of our moral and political reflections, imaginations and lives. Unlike multi-

culturalism which in a pluralist society demands making room for other cultures in a spirit of inclusion and tolerance, cosmopolitans demand something more - - they demand that we question the often destructive character of our own commitments, the smallness of our own circle of loyalty, the self-certainty of our theology and political points of view, the often abysmal lack of historical sense and knowledge which violate our moral obligations to be intelligent, our terrible tendency to proffer as final truth our narrow points of view. Yes, this can be psychologically and emotionally burdensome. After all, we like our Homes - need our Homes, whether geographical, philosophical or religious. We like the familiar. We prefer certainty that our comfortable way of life is the best way, and is safe from the upheavals and perils of change and doubt. But a morality that is too comfortable with itself, and an ethics that supports it, are not what the world needs at this moment.

Of course, such a view is indeed un-conservative, if we take conservative to mean a clinging to the known and using the past as the principle measure of our futures. This is the challenge of a vision of cosmopolitan morality. It is certainly not the common language of Esperantists that is required, but what St. Paul and Siddhartha called in pursuit of their new visions of self and society *a transformation of the mind, or the making over of our minds to care less for comfort than the creation of a more just and more loving world in which cultural humility, political meliorism and the high human virtues of sympathy and empathy for fellow human beings replace the solace of the familiar and the known.*

Make no mistake, as moralities go this is a tough prescription, but the requirements of justice are never easy. And far from being dreamy-eyed desiderata, the organs and organelles of a true cosmopolitan world in which the concept citizen seems less like poetry and more defensible are now in view. They represent a new point on our species journey along a long and often bloody moral road as it were, a metaphor I will return to shortly. What are they? NGOs or non-governmental organizations, whose voices are more loudly heard than ever before; multinational and super-national organizations like the UN; a world court for states, and the other admittedly flawed Bretton Woods institutions; and a new international criminal court that can reach through the sovereignty of the states which ratified and brought about its existence (with the unfortunate exception of such 'enlightened' states as China, Iraq, Israel and the US). The protests in Seattle in 1999 and in other places since against the WTO and at G-8 summits display a cosmopolitan consciousness concerning far flung peoples that continues to stun many pundits and other observers. What is most noteworthy is that behind these entities and institutions, are people, economically comfortable people, with a dawning sense of the interconnections between themselves and their sisters and brothers on the other side of the world. People who were given much and see, for that, the need to do much. People who see more than their parochial interests and bellies as important. People whose political imaginations allow them to rethink the very idea of political community. They are alive and well, many of them are UUs, and their numbers are growing.

So cosmopolitanism is neither the dreamy idea of ancient philosophers, nor the lurid program as construed by Nazis and Stalinists, but rather is an ethical and political program that may fulfill the bare bones love ethics of Jesus, and the principles of the writers of the Pirkei Avot, and the prayers of Ghandi, and fulfills the aspirations of all people who ground civil rights upon human rights - and who, like our own Thomas Paine, concern themselves not with the rights of Jews or Christians or Canadians or Palestinians, but of the Rights of Man, or of all human beings everywhere.

Yet, we are all nativists in part. As St. Paul knew in his own person, the transformation of minds, be they our own or those of a whole nation, take time. We seem hard wired to categorize, to rate, to compare unfavorably, to critique and to prefer our own, and modern psychological literature bears this out. (It is interesting that in the psychological literature political nativism and psychological hard wiring (also called nativism) are somewhat related ideas.) Yet what does this hard wiring do? Dead Iraqis or Filipinos or Rwandans do not draw our attention as do dead Spaniards and Americans. Starving dark faces still do not register as do starving light faces, as though their starvation is deserved, as though the darkness is so wholly other, a barrier to true and sustained sympathy and thus to true and sustained saving action. A terrorist blast in Saudi Arabia or Indonesia or Palestine or Turkey does not trip the wire of our anger so readily as do similar murderous acts at home or against those whose voices we most

often hear. When we read our newspapers we do not often enough as well look through the eyes of the victims we read about in the stories, people who are exactly like us in all their important aspirations – we do not look through the eyes that see their lives gush out from bullet wounds or fade away from starvation and disease, and see the world recede into permanent darkness long before that darkness should come. We see only statistics or *reportage* with which we can live, and perhaps blithely pass by. The newspaper sits under a pile of bills, a coffee mug, to be tossed and forgotten. It is true that we cannot let ourselves be overwhelmed by the world's tragedies. But it is also tragically true that these people are seen, after all, as existing outside of our circle of loyal concern and for that reason are more easily dismissed. Our hard wiring, our nativism, provides solace for a morality of indifference. A cosmopolitan ethics, a tough, serious and even disconcerting ethics, would have us turn our world weariness into action rather than into callous apathy, a callousness and apathy that says, to invoke the lyrics of Bruce Hornsby, "That's just the way it is/ Some things will never change."

And we need not look far for our own callousness. At home, the lashing of Matthew Shepard to a fence to die in the cold after a vicious assault registers a mild sigh of shock, but his otherness as a gay man placed him too distant from us to care much, and you won't find Matthew's name invoked as a sign of the disgraceful smallness of our circle of loyalty at Liberty Baptist College, or at the Union League Club, or in the pages of the Weekly Standard, where of course there are no homosexuals and never have been, or so the fiction goes. We focus on Elizabeth Smart instead, and our hearts burst with anxiety, as they should, for a little girl no less unknown to us. Ah, but we have no pejoratives for a little blond girl who is kidnapped, but the words fag and pansy rush into the synapses of our sympathies and render those sympathies numbed and our voice of outrage muted, and render us unable to care, lest we be suspected of complicity with - - THEM, the OTHER, those people who by their very presence are destroying our country and the fabric of our very lives. Those Gays, Those Mexicans, Those Blacks, Those Not Mes, Over There, in Hempstead maybe, on the Other side of the tracks. Our hard wiring provides some answer for this callousness, but the obligation of a true and mature morality, based upon an ethics that wrestles us into the corner of caring when we think to behave cruelly, or in our failure to behave at all to be nonetheless cruel, requires more than the easy excuse that we seem wired a certain way. **Ethics is an attempt to rewire, or it is nothing!**

Natural law arguments in morality, often and most vigorously put forth by traditionist religious organizations, have often shrouded treachery and villainy in such arguments. Indeed, such arguments are but cozy justifications for cruelty, wrapped in a false veneer of philosophical or theological Truth. A mature morality in and for a globalized world requires that we pay close attention to our habits of mind, to our comfortable and settled beliefs and to this hard wiring which we use to justify soaring heights of cruelty and violence against our fellow human beings. Too many theologians and philosophers are too concerned with the quest for Certainty when they should be more concerned with Love. Certainty in religion and philosophy is a fiction, always up for grabs – love is never up for grabs, and it is required in our religion and in our politics just the same, and required above any overwrought concern for some supposed metaphysical or political truth. While our politics and actions should not be driven by mere sentiment (policies and programs, fashioned with even the best of intentions, often have both winners and losers), they should not be devoid of sentiment either, should not be devoid of love which will help reduce the numbers of losers to the minimum achievable.

So perhaps what I mean by cosmopolitanism is beginning to take shape. It is historicist and it takes our human nature, our hard wiring, and our history as a species into account, fully. It understands our conservative and nativist natures and our cultural inertia. But it notes, as well, that all of the protestations of what is conservatives have always thought impossible for us to do (freeing slaves, suffrage for women, fair pay, a social safety net) fall by the boards upon the determination of newer generations under new circumstances. It notices that though our wiring may be hard, rewiring is not so difficult when we put our minds to it.

As mentioned, I will use the metaphor of the road to shed more light on it. Let us say, then, that the road of moral progress is a curious, long and hard one. And by moral I mean nothing more, but nothing less, than the aggregate of the behaviors we display toward our fellow human beings after our considered communal deliberation, or

sometimes lack thereof. And what is morality but those habits and practices sanctioned and perpetuated by the community? The Nazi's had a morality just as did the Arabians or ancient Athenians or Babylonians. But, as may be clear by now, a morality is not enough.

The moral road. Walk with me along its path. It meanders through high places in the sun and cities on hills – and low damp, grounds full of thick and slimy weeds littered by human skulls. Since the time of the Enlightenment in Europe we have celebrated the rights of man, what the philosopher Immanuel Kant has called the dignity of the individual, what Rousseau referred to as the individual's completion in nature. Our political philosophies and moral sensibility, which stem in large part from Enlightenment thinking, freed a certain swath of the species from the fetters of superstition and tradition, which has created a conception of democratic principles and practices that even in their imperfection outstrip anything that the ancient world ever knew. Even the most conservative among us today would be deemed a leftist-progressive and egalitarian by the standards of ancient Athens, which limited the enjoyment of full citizenship to males, and whose philosophers sanctioned slavery as the natural state for other human beings not fortunate enough to have been born in the right place at the right time, or whose own cities had the misfortune of being vanquished. There were no Geneva Conventions in the ancient world, such that tender mercies could be visited upon the conquered. Or as the ancient historian Herodotus tells us, when the ancient Persians threatened ancient Miletus they said: "Tell them, when they are vanquished in fight, they shall be enslaved; their boys shall be made eunuchs, and their maidens transported . . . while their country shall be delivered into the hands of foreigners." This was the accepted fate of the conquered, and the conquerors lacked remorse since this was the fate ordained by the gods, which was certain. The modern ideals of political liberalism, as fashioned between the times of Macchiaveli and Jefferson, of the rights of man, of proliferating democratic practices would have to wait for thousands of years to be even thought possibilities, and then it would take bloody revolutions to give the ideals flesh.

The moral road. Travel it with me in your mind's eye. In America, just a few short years ago, women did not have the right to vote, descendants of Africans did not have the right to maintain households with their own families, and the highest court of the land placed the legal brand of property across their faces in Dred Scott, where Justice Roger B. Taney wrote – ignorant of the Songhai empire, of ancient Ghana and Mali, of Timbuktu and Great Zimbabwe and Egypt – that "the unhappy black race had always been excluded from civilized governments and the family of nations, and doomed to slavery." Said he, "Negroes were beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect."

The moral road. When Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton agitated for suffrage, they labored on that rocky road. In her own town of Rochester Susan B. Anthony and fellow suffragists registered for the election of 1871 and actually attempt to vote, with some succeeding. Anthony was arrested and ordered to pay a fine of \$100 whereafter she told the court that she would never pay such an unjust penalty. An unjust penalty? Unjust by whose lights, by whose morality? Surely in our eyes today, but not in the eyes of the less than sympathetic males who viewed women as incompetent for political engagement and decision. They viewed women as 'hard wired' that way, you see, although fine as the servants of men. A view that still persists as one moves around the globe to find ritual clitorectomies and burkas, where women are viewed as sexual property and providers of services.

The moral road. The great spiritual leader and martyr for justice, Martin King (who we celebrate this weekend) eloquently and poetically restated the words of Theodore Parker when he famously said<sup>1</sup> "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Parker himself said something different. He said "Look at the facts

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<sup>1</sup>Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice. Things refuse to be mismanaged long.

of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice. Things refuse to be mismanaged long.” Although I love both men, I find this view Panglossian. I would replace King’s and Parker’s metaphor of a moral arc with the more historicist metaphor of the moral road. What I observe is that the slave, the gay man or woman, the political prisoner, the victim of genocide and many others -- experience no certain moral progress, but rather an arc that, if there be one, has crashed down upon their heads. The moral road, fashioned as it is by human hands, will take you to slavery, to jingoism and hypernationalism, to terrorism, to a belief in God-ordained tracts of earth that sanction the removals of peoples, to Nazi eugenics, to child labor and sweatshops, to corporate greed, to apathy toward natural resources, to misogyny and homophobia and lunatic xenophobia - - to Hiroshima and, if we would remain comfortable in our own moral sensibilities, to Hiroshimas to come. Parker and King were either spinning comforting thoughts, or just plain wrong. There is no pre-existing moral bent that will assure that, eventually, things will work out. Things may in fact not work out. Things don’t refuse to be mismanaged long, as Parker would have it, since things neither refuse nor accept. Only we do. There is no cosmic guaranty that a love ethic will one day soon govern the hearts of those who comprise the human race, unless we forge it with the sweat of our brows.

The moral road. What do we learn by looking backwards with a bold historical eye, as we both traverse and build the moral road of our species. We find, and still do find, various excuses for the horrible things we do. Too many take too much comfort in their traditions and culture (whether religious cultures or cultures of the market). They become the perfect alibi for our crimes. In Iran and Palestine the police look the other way when family members kill a daughter or sister for losing her virginity, because, as tradition has it, virginity, as an idea, is part of God’s design rather than a cultural construction that can be jettisoned. In China during Mao, the artists and intellectuals were killed or jailed to further Chinese collectivist interests and the denial of free expression was trampled to nearly to death.

So the road has brought us here. I would prescribe for the future of our species then a cosmopolitan morality, because I look backward, at that places the road has taken us, and see the alternatives. A cosmopolitan morality that pays proper and all due respect to the eros of home and the familiar, yet respects the basic rights of people as people, not merely as citizens of states or as members of tribes or cultures, and places those rights above all provincial claims on their lives and freedoms. This is not a relativistic position, but one that is vigorous about its own point of view, and ready to press its own case, and press it hard. A close historical study tells us and tells us plainly that cultures and political boundaries are but human constructions, here one day and gone the next. They are constructions not to be worshiped, not to bow before as sacred, but to be placed in the service of human freedom. If they are not that, they bear the seeds of destruction. Although they should be respected and maintained where they are not barbaric and cruel, they should be supported by the peoples giving them life and shape. But where they violate the rights of persons to live full and peaceful lives **by their own lights**, we should not hesitate to criticize them and call for their reform, or where persuasion is possible to persuade those who are its apologists.

While in many ways the moral road our species has forged leads to our present civilization here between these shores, there is still much more to be done even here. We switch now from talk of morals to talk of ethics, to what it is we *ought* to do to bring about a new morality. For a cosmopolitan morality will not come about without asking the questions “What ought to be done?” and most importantly, “What ought to be done to transform our own minds?”

Have you heard the news that there are no races in the world? This is the pronouncement of modern genetics. One of the most divisive concepts in the history of man, and hardly anyone in the streets knows that race is a concept that can be abandoned, that has no scientific validity. It can be abandoned if people are willing to transform their minds and train themselves and their children to stop seeing race when they see different shapes and different colors. How do you see me today? How do I see you? And what of my neighbor’s religion or sexual identity. Are we ready, really ready, to take up the words of Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, when he said that a

person's private commitments "neither pick his pocket, nor break his bones" -- are none of his concern? Are we willing to give up our rabid political commitments and take the view that they represent our considered opinion rather than an unalterable view, perhaps ordained by God, who is the head of our party? It is 2004, and too many Jews and Catholics and Muslims have not gotten the word from the seminaries that the genealogy of today's religions is traceable to precursors established within history itself, are in fact historical expressions of the yearning for meaning, rather than truth generating institutions with direct pipelines to the divine. They cling to their metaphysical certainties and cannot conceive of viewing their disparate theologies as what they are -- odysseys and experiments in God-Thought, forms of Strong Poetry offering no literal answers but providing the important intellectual and emotional space to ponder and consider our place in a universe we still don't understand, and perhaps never will.

In closing, let me only say that the ethical work that must be done must be done on our own minds. We must become more loving, more open to difference, and far more willing to change when compelling reasons present themselves. We must, as the last reading tells us, be ready to live with doubt, which creates humility and the dose of uncertainty that we need to consider the views of others. We must be willing to see justice as a larger loyalty, an ever widening circle into which we draw more and more of the human family. We must make the welfare of humanity our business, the welfare of all citizens of our commonweal as well as of the globe -- gay, straight, dark, light, believer, skeptic, viewing them all *sub specie aeternitatus*, from the point of view of eternity, as souls sharing time with us in this reality, mostly lost, mostly frightened and confused, finding their way on a little dot in the vast, cold, inexplicable void of space. **My Friends, we have each other, or we have nothing. So I ask you the question with which I began my remarks: To whom or what are you loyal?**

**Thank you.**