Dialogue and Collaboration for the New Geopolitics: With some thoughts for Ethics and Religious Education

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> *Jesus said, "To what shall I compare this generation? It is like children who sit in marketplaces and call to one another, 'We played the flute for you, but you did not dance, we sang a dirge but you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they said, 'He is possessed by a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking and they said, 'Look, he is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'" (Matthew 11:16-19)*

The world as we know is changing fast. We can lament on the loss of innocence, ideal, and vision that characterized the 1960s, 70, and 80s. People used to be helpful, polite, respectful and more or less reasonable. Now, the so-called 'developed and developing' parts of the world seem to have become more pragmatic, utilitarian, relativistic, pluralistic, egoistic, sensational, irrational, and simply rude. In short, the world is in an unbearable mess. No reliable norms for us to count on for each other. At the same time, globalization has significantly shortened the distances between cultures, ideologies, and religious faiths.

In 2013, President Xi Jinping of the Chinese Government announced a daring policy 'The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road', also known in its shortened form "The Belt and Road" or "One Belt One Road" (一帶一路), which will certainly create uncountable opportunities for collaboration between China and the other nations along the Belt and Road. But at the same time, these new collaborations will have to face no small challenges of cultural, ideological, legal, political, and even religious conflicts. How can we prepare our future generations to avail these promising opportunities but also expected conflicts or even destructive acts?

Are we afraid of diversity and conflicts? Do we rather have everyone agreeing with us? Must harmony be built on uniformity under one standard, one narrative? Yet our world has become more individualistic, relativistic or pluralistic. It would be unwise or really unrealistic to expect a universal narrative ruling over all. If we take a step backward, we should ask ourselves why we are thinking in this way. We can easily blame on "generational gap" when we see unruly young people whose thinking and behaviors are simply incredulous. But can we really blame it on the differences in age if the incredulous acts and ideas are coming from leaders in the international, social, and even moral and religious domains? What is operating in the background of our mind is our entrenched "modern" mindset while our surrounding cultures are moving into the postmodern context. This postmodern understanding of realities, dialogue, and collaboration are the foci of my exploration in this paper.

Hallmarks of Postmodernity or Postmodernism

According to the definition provided by B. Duignan [2], postmodernism is "*a late 20th-century movement characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power.*" Postmodernism characterized by skepticism and distrust toward overarching ideologies, universal values, objective reality, imposing authority, unchangeable truth, and rationality beyond and across contexts.

For the postmodernists, reality is just a conceptual construct that is specific to the language and subjective perception of the individuals concerned. Similarly, reason and logic are also specific constructs of the established intellectual traditions, not universal. For example, the so-called 'common sense' of a cultural tradition or gender group is better not imposed on another cultural tradition or gender group. What is common sense to Chinese or men may not be common sense to Turks or women, and vice versa. And for language, words are to be interpreted in relation to other words, contrasting or matching them. Words are never sufficient for providing meaning on their own. The meaning of peace in the Christian tradition is different from the understanding of peace in a political accord, in art, or in a marriage, etc. Hence, it is possible to have a multitude of meanings for the same word.

Postmodernism is a historical development that many of us have yet to appreciate. Many of us may need to reconcile our modern mind with the postmodern. Some of the famous postmodern philosophers include Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Richard Rorty, and Jean Baudrillard. It would be, however, a distraction to introduce these philosophers here.

But postmodernism is probably not a novelty to the Chinese intellects. A number of scholars such as Professor Yang Huilin (楊慧林) have been working with the postmodern themes. Fredric Jameson(詹明信), a famous critical theorist was teaching theories of postmodernism in the Peking University and Shenzhen University since mid-1985. His two gifted students are *"Zhang Yiwu and Zhang Xudong* (張旭東) *who later become scholars in analyzing postmodernity in China."*[3] Zhang Yiwu (張頤武) and Wang Ning (王寧) later claimed that China has entered into a 'new post-era', free from the Western historicity and metanarrative. This new era has the Chinese postmodernism taking on a unique Chinese characteristic while linking itself to the global postmodernity at the same time. It is said that Deng Xiaoping's "socialism with Chinese characteristics" and "democracy with Chinese characteristics" are examples of postmodern creativity,[4] which is not bound by existing overarching concepts, such as democracy used in the Western discourse. Deng took the names of these two concepts originated in the Western world, i.e., socialism and democracy, and cast them in the Chinese socio-political context of his time.

Postmodern Knowledge And Morality

As mentioned earlier, knowledge in postmodernity cannot stand independently on its own. It must be contextualized and constructed knowledge open for interpretation, e.g., socialism is to be understood and interpreted in the particular historical socio-economic-political context of China. Postmodern epistemology and morality are constructed within the context that one is in; they are therefore ‘relativistic’ or ‘pluralistic’ in relation to the other concepts, contexts or circumstances. For example, individuals or groups operating in different cultural contexts can interpret the concept of rights differently. What ‘the right of a person’ means for the Europeans, the Arab world, and the Chinese in PRC are different and, hence, pluralistic.

Furthermore, the underpinning values, ideologies, presuppositions, and frames of reference of any given knowledge are ‘deconstructed,’ i.e., questioned and analyzed with the understanding of the specific contexts and functions that these are assumed for. For example, the concept of fairness is laden with values and presuppositions of a given culture. Fairness is appreciated rather differently in a capitalistic system than a socialist system. It is therefore understandable that people may have different expectations for fair remuneration relative to these two systems. Any assumed relationship of a subject to another is to be questioned and analyzed by postmodern critical theorists.

Relativism vs. Pluralism

But one might ask if there is fundamental difference between relativism and pluralism, or they can be treated similarly, which might have been the case in casual usage. It is indeed important to make a distinction between relativism and pluralism, especially for the case of dialogue.

Narrative in relativism changes according to the changing context in relation to its object. It cannot hold a steady stance for a meaningful discussion, especially when a decision is to be made over a period of time. Relative stance is readily affected by the changing context. For example, what is agreed is fair can be changed instantly when the condition in which the agreement was made is changed or disappears. When fairness is solely based on self-interest validated by a given condition, that perceived fairness would no longer be ‘interesting’ to the same individual when the condition is changed. What is the point of reaching fairness when it is so relative and transient? One could say that the others were being fair to him/her in a specific circumstance. But would the others need to cater for that person constantly in his/her changing contexts to be fair?

Pluralism accepts multiple narratives in relation to the same object and each narrative can be different by degrees or essentially incomparable or incommensurable from the other. Pluralism opposes to the assumption of an overarching or meta-narrative providing essential meaning or values to the object, e.g., a dominant understanding of ‘fairness’ or ‘goodness’ from the one in power.

What is possible is that different narratives can contribute to the fullness of the picture, even though they might or might not interpret the meaning or value of the same object by another narrative in the same manner. For example, if an agreement is to be upheld by all parties concerned, these parties must share the same platform to articulate what each of them think is fair, or not, while a common agreement of fairness is fostered. So one can say that postmodern pluralism provides a democratic discourse.

Hard Pluralism vs. Soft Pluralism [5]

Going further into the world of pluralism, one may encounter two camps, i.e., hard (exclusive) pluralism and soft (inclusive) pluralism. Those in the hard pluralism camp would hold that narratives are absolutely incommensurable or incomparable since every narrative in its entirety is complete, independent and unique. No narrative has the right to interpret or complement another narrative. For example, the faith narrative and the socio-political narrative are totally incomparable in the mind of some Christians and non-Christians alike. In their mind, religion and politics cannot or should not be mixed.

Those operating from the soft pluralism camp would allow different narratives to be less incomparable and somewhat inclusive with the others. It is possible that the contexts that give rise to the respective narratives could be sharing something in common such as interests, likes and dislikes, values, and understanding through the process of deconstruction and reconstruction by re-framing. For example, faith narrative and socio-political narrative can share similar, though not identical, values such as equality, freedom, and harmony but they are, undoubtedly, two separate entities.

Story

An old monk asks a young monk, "you will suffer death if you are to take a step forward or take a step backward, what will you do then?

Without any hesitation, the young monk replied, "I will take a step sideway."

Consider a different perspective if you are facing challenges from both sides, maybe then you will understand what it means to have a third path besides the given paths.

Soft Pluralism And Constructive Dialogue [6]

While hard pluralism would make the questing for a common ground practically impossible between narratives, soft pluralism allows the possibility of a meaningful dialogue in search for a common ground/narrative and common interests while preserving the uniqueness of the different narratives. This dialogue is made between parties of equal status or treated as equals. True dialogue requires the involved parties be open, listen intently, and willing to make necessary changes.

In the process of identifying common ground and interests, constructive dialogue can help create new conditions and objects that can better respond to the common interests and needs. This process will be realized through creative collaboration among the parties in dialogue. For example, two or more independent entities can, for their mutual needs and interests, come to define the essential conditions of their own needs and interests (deconstruct) such as autonomy but connection, identify intersections among the essential conditions of the parties involved (reconstruct), and together creating new objects or conditions in order to have their intersect needs and interests fulfilled. Their other needs and interests are not required to enter into this constructive dialogue.

Creative Collaboration

Like dialogue, collaboration is best achieved among entities when their leadership is exercised in an egalitarian manner with that of the others. Creativity is best experienced when there exist no *a priori* restrictions except for the goal commonly set by the collaborating entities. Even that, the goal can be reviewed and refined throughout the process as agreed by the engaging entities. The review and refinement are carried out in respect to the context that gives rise to the need and interest, which might have modified or changed throughout the process.

An Example Of Collaboration Among Well-Meaning But At Odd Entities

Entities at odd with each other are like narratives that perceive themselves as essentially incomparable or even a threat to the other. Yet these entities could be holding needs and interests that are similar or even inter-dependent of each other for their own fulfillment. They can also be holding benevolent interests for the same object, e.g., peace for the people, but not acknowledging that of the others. Yet through dialogue, the deconstruction and reconstruction process of their understandings, they would be able to see that their benevolent interests are not at odd with each other essentially. What would only stop them are their incomparable stances. What would help them, however, are their creativity and allowance for the new common conditions or new objects that can better serve their common needs and interests.

An example of dialogue and creative collaboration are the Oslo Accords (I and II) between the government of Israel (Judaism) and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) (Islam): the Oslo I Accord, signed in Washington, D.C., in 1993 and the Oslo II Accord, signed in Taba in 1995.

A critical architect behind these agreements was the former President of Israel, Shimon Peres, supposedly hawkish general who was condemned by the Hamas for being responsible for the massacre of the United Nations-run Palestinian Refugees Camp at southern Lebanon in 1996. President Peres himself was an ardent opponent against compromising with the Arab states who also supported the establishment of Jewish settlement in the West Bank and Gaza district. But his stance started to change when the then Egyptian President Anwar Sadat made his historic visit to Israel in 1977. It was reported that Peres had felt the sincere intention of the Arab world to negotiate from Sadat's visit. An intention, which he believed, his people also shared. The visit of President Sadat eventually helped to craft the first ever peace treaty between Israel and Egypt in 1979 after the Camp David Accords in 1978.

This first ever peace treaty between Israel and an Arab state laid the ground for Israel to consider an agreement with their neighbor, the Palestinians. These two sworn enemies facilitated by Norway, while ushered by their own desire for a peaceful future, worked out a 5-year transition plan to a permanent peaceful settlement. Shimon Peres was an important engineer behind these accords. The Oslo II Accord even acknowledged the eventual establishment of the Palestinian sovereignty and the complete withdrawal of Israel from the West Bank. These two Accords have left the respective religions aside. They are not about which religion is to replace which. The focus was on peace for the people of Israel and Palestine.

But the Oslo Accords were thrown into limbo when someone from the far right camp of Israel assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Individuals' of this camp rigidly adhered to their extreme narrative and it was their fear that their vested interests would be seriously undermined with the two Accords. They did not want to engage in further dialogue with the Palestinians. Their rejection further alienated and reinforced the position of the Palestinian Hamas group, which did not recognize the existence of the Israel State. We can ask if the far right camp of Israel was ever included in the original negotiation or the subsequent negotiation.

With the increase of Israel's settlements on the West Bank and the independence of Palestine declared in 2013, the Oslo Accords have been rendered virtually irrelevant. Shimon Peres passed away on 28th September 2016 with his dream for his people yet to be realized. But is this the end of the peace narrative between these two people? Is it the creative collaboration that failed disastrously or a dialogical process that requires more inclusiveness, further deconstruction and reconstruction processes from all the parties at stake?

If the processes can be handled with goodwill and patience from all identifiable parties at stake, the common narrative can be reconstructed and re-confirmed. Yet the so-called 'common' narrative need not be identical to all parties due to their unique cultural, political, religious, social and historical contexts, as long as the kernel of the reconstructed common narrative is acceptable to all. This would, in fact, leave room for plurality and incomparability presented by the respective narratives. Respecting the kernel but letting it evolve for the best interest of all parties may be more desirable than pushing for a uniform understanding and solo way of proceeding in the long run. This may, however, require ongoing dialogues to achieve deeper understanding of the common narrative and decide on possible adjustments throughout its implementation.

Possible Implications For The Sino-Vatican Dialogue?

Can this not be applied to the Sino-Vatican dialogue between two states, and between two faiths (Communist faith and Catholic faith)? The policies of the Chinese government and the Vatican appear to be at odd with each other shortly after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). But the negotiation process between the Vatican and PRC for possible normalization did not start until 1987.[7] Waves of optimism and pessimism mark the entire process until recently, when under the common efforts of Pope Francis, President Xi and their respective teams, some common understanding has been reached as reported and both parties have mutually conveyed friendly signals. Presumably it is for their mutually agreed core interests that the dialogue can continue between PRC and the Vatican.

Assuming, and only assuming, that the mutually agreed core interests after the respective processes of deconstruction of the narratives of PRC and the Vatican, and the reconstruction of the agreed narrative and core interests are: a) the healthy and constructive development of PRC through full participation of the Catholic Church in its land and, b) free exercise of the mission of 'proclaiming the good news' of the universal Catholic Church in PRC, which aims at the betterment of the quality of moral and spiritual life of the Chinese Catholics and people. These assumed core interests could become the foundation of creative collaboration between PRC and the Vatican after a respectful and patient dialogical process. These two core interests if agreed by PRC and the Vatican could mutually improve the life of the people in PRC, and by that enhances the development of the country.

If such a respectful and equal-partner type of dialogue is missing but substituted with entrenched confrontational and incomparable narratives, there will most likely not be any mutually agreed narrative or creative collaboration. This has, in fact, been happening recurrently in the past decades of Sino-Vatican negotiations. Each side seemed to have adopted an incomparable narrative that the other side must accept certain a priori tenets of their own narrative before any meaningful dialogue could be carried out. The outcomes were obviously non-constructive or even destructive. Fears appear to be the root of this mode of confrontation, either-or mentality. From fears comes distrust, from distrust comes contempt, and from contempt comes exclusion.

Assuming that the creation of some 'understanding' is in the process, it is necessary that all the parties at stakes will have sufficient representation throughout the preparatory dialogical and collaboration processes, if the understanding is to be feasible and sustainable. They should be able to represent their interests and concern equally from the same platform, or through on-going consultations by the representing parties.

For example, the Catholic Church represents the Faithful of the so-called Open Church and Underground Church. The PRC represents the Government and the Patriotic Association. It is important that all stakeholder groups are well included lest the resentment of the ignored party could sabotage the overall process.

It should, however, be acceptable that whatever understanding these two entities might construct could be interpreted differently in their own contexts, as long as the mutually agreed core interests are being satisfactorily addressed. For example, freedom to appoint bishops can be interpreted somewhat differently by PRC and the Vatican, while adhering to the agreed principle of appointment. The same logic can be applied to freedom of exercising religious faith. The core interest is acceptable religious freedom but the measures used to legalize or exercise such freedom are decided by each entity upon a collaborative dialogical process.

There must be goodwill and trust from these entities before the dialogical process can be fruitful. When and if the concordat is secured, neither party will interpret the understanding for the other party, but respect their interpretation of the understanding for their own contexts. This will help preserve their pluralistic realities and own uniqueness. The Communist government is likely to continue governing China with its atheistic maxim, while the Catholic Church in China can spread the good news of Jesus Christ among their Catholics or even the Chinese people.

Finally, one can assume that new conflicts will invariably arise from the mutual agreement during its execution. As long as a dialogical relationship is maintained and stayed alive between PRC and the Vatican, creative narratives and objects can be fostered for further fulfillment of their mutually agreed interests. Dialogical process does not end between or among engaging entities since the contexts of the entities are likely to change after a while.

Implications For Ethics And Religious Education

This paper has explored the advantages of postmodern understanding of epistemology, contextual narratives, their incomparability, plurality, dialogical process, and creative collaboration. Examples of the two Oslo Accords between Israel and Palestine, and the Sino-Vatican dialogue were used to demonstrate how they benefited or can benefit from the postmodern dialogical approach and collaboration.

But if one is attentive to the analyses of the cases, one can see that the postmodern approach has not been totally true to its tenets. The existence and participation of basic values e.g., respect, trust, prudence, faith, hope and goodwill, are operating in the background. These basic values are like yearning in the human heart, regardless culture, age, gender, socio-economic strata, faith persuasion, or political affiliation, etc. Globalization is like a catalyzing platform for the human hearts meet and yearn for connection, trust, respect, hope, goodwill and unity in diversity. Without these basic values, dialogue and collaboration could hardly take place. Hence, it is a mixture of modernism, postmodernism and what comes after postmodernism in a coming-together-globalized reality that is available to the engaging parties to be used fruitfully to fulfill their common interests and needs.

What are, therefore, needed for the ethics and religious education in the new world order characterized by postmodernity and the new geopolitics from the Belt and Road: a) basic values shared by humanity; b) understanding of major world religions and religious sects, and their corresponding cultures; c) understanding of the postmodern approach to constructive dialogue and creative collaboration; d) looking into one’s pertinent experiences; e) empathic and in-depth reflective skills; f) designing action plans; g) desirable method of evaluation in order to feed into the next learning cycle.

Points a to c were already covered in the above. Regarding ‘experience’, it is important for learning to be grounded in one’s pertinent experiences. For example, how one has experienced one’s own ethical dilemmas or faith experience of oneself or another person can help one to better appreciate the knowledge that one would need for the task.

‘Empathic skills’ is important to have so that one can reach deeper intellectual and affective understanding of the other parties through perspective taking. And ‘in-depth reflective skills’ can help one to arrive at critical and independent understanding as opposed to superficial and unprocessed standard understanding.

It is too common that individuals and groups stop at understanding without taking corresponding actions. Having learned from the steps above, especially through empathy and in-depth reflection, one could start making intelligent 'action plans' for the required task. These action plans could be further research, acquiring more relevant experiences, or approach for a creative solution through a constructive dialogical process.

However, no action plan is likely perfectible or sustainable without appropriate 'evaluation'. Without evaluation, one literally stops learning after action. Yet it is exactly through evaluative learning that one can become a better learner in the next task and next learning cycle. A simple but effective evaluation process would consist of three main components: a) what can one be 'grateful' for throughout the process, which nurtures positive motivation in order to go further; b) what can one learn from the process, any insights; and c) where and what could one do better.

It is often said that human beings are poor learners because we do not learn from mistakes. Despite it, through appropriate ethical and religious education, we hope our future generations and ourselves can become effective lifelong learners, ethical moral agents, and informed persons of faith, contributing meaningfully in a postmodern and globalized world order. May the kind of frustration experienced by Jesus can be addressed constructively with sincere dialogues and creative collaborations among different parties in our days and beyond.

THE END

ENDNOTES

[1] Author is a Jesuit priest from Hong Kong.

[2] Duignan, B. (2014) (Ed.). *Postmodernism*. Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/topic/postmodernism-philosophy

[3] Lim, J. (2013). *Postmodernism and Its Effects on China. ChinaSource, September20, 2013.* http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/postmodernism-and-its-effects-on-china

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] https://thinkingreed.wordpress.com/2010/12/01/from-inclusivism-to-soft-pluralism/

[6] https://www2.clarku.edu/difficultdialogues/learn/index.cfm

[7] Leung, B. & Wang, M. J. J. (2016). *Sino-Vatican Negotiations: problems in sovereign right and national security*. Journal of Contemporary China, 25, 467-482.
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