

Transformative Learning & the Tao of History: Spirituality in the Postindustrial Revolution | Part 2

By Brian Milani,

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Rational Consciousness, Money and Ego

The most important tool of ego-development and civilization's project of external control has been rational-analytical thought. It is, of course, also one of the great positive contributions civilization has made to humankind's development, being the source of both abstract reason and the more empirical (and sometimes anti-intellectual) mentality behind science and technology.

Rational consciousness mirrors the civilizational process in that it works by de-contextualizing (Dekerckhove, 1995). It takes things apart, and puts them back together again in an abstracted form to achieve meaning. This whole process takes time—in contrast to intuition, which happens all at once, in an instant—and so there is a natural connection between time (and therefore history) and rational thinking (Watts, 1967). In civilization, consciousness of history grows in tandem with rational consciousness. In the West, the historical consciousness of Judaism combined with the rational consciousness of Greece to create the dynamo of Christianity. Because Christianity's spiritual focus was *social* (its focus on *love*; as opposed to, e.g. Buddhism, whose focus was psychological, through *gnosis*), once it lost its inner content, it was only a matter of time before its rational/historical perspective produced secular materialism. This was, of course, a gradual and uneven process, at least until the explosion caused by the printing press—which effectively mass-produced rational literacy.

Space does not permit full discussion of materialism as an aspect of civilization. But it would be useful to mention the role of money—which is basically *abstract matter*—whose evolution parallels the evolution of [ego-consciousness](#).

It is interesting to note that the origins of writing (which, particularly in the form of the phonetic alphabet, was an expression of the gradual segmentation of consciousness) seem to have been connected to the origins of money—that is, as a way of recording debts, accounts, inventories. Like rational thought, money de-contextualizes. It represents abstract value, particularly the value of one's past labours. It is money's abstractness and impersonalism that has been both its strength and weakness. It allows exchanges to take place at a distance in time and space, overcoming the limitations of direct barter and of village reciprocity. But when this abstracted value becomes a thing-in-itself, it can be dangerous and used against people. It can also come to symbolize and represent many other things, emotions and desires—the topic of a whole genre of literature from Marx and Freud to [N.O. Brown](#) and [Jacob Needleman](#).

The impersonality of money has always been distrusted, and for many centuries most societies kept monetary transactions at the margins of society—for example, for use in external trade. Money was considered to have a disintegrating effect on community. It is important to recognize that all markets are not driven by the profit-motive (or the desire for monetary gain); markets can simply be places for exchange of goods and services, where money is just a means of exchange. Eventually, however, when money-driven markets penetrated everyday life in mercantile Europe, this prepared the ground for industrial capitalism—which would power an unprecedented unleashing of egoism on the planet, and the almost complete dominance today of materialism, individualism, rationalism and historical-secular consciousness. It makes sense to think that a transformation of consciousness and identity today would also be reflected in a radical transformation of money—and a recontextualization of value—which I explore practically in [Designing the Green Economy](#).



Industrialism and Cog-Individuality

Industrial capitalism is the culmination of the civilizational process. It is the final unleashing of egoism: through materialism, individualism, rationalism and historical-secular consciousness. These egoistic forces had always to be somewhat constrained by the state or by organized religion in order to keep society from destroying itself with its own aggressive impulses. This changed substantially once the means of production became forms of capital, and a process of open-ended economic growth could commence. The commodification of everyday life has opened up new realms for ego expression.

It must be stressed that, while civilization may be a stage of evolutionary differentiation and of individuation, it is not itself capable of completing that process. It can only set the stage, because its forms of individuality are dependent ones—inextricably based on cog-labour, on crippling and discriminatory forms of gender-dependence, and a superficial materialistic view of reality.

Capitalism and [bourgeois democracy](#) supposedly made all people equal. We shouldn't underestimate the step forward this was for working people, who previously were, except for brief moments, passive spectators to, or pawns in, the drama provided by the upper classes.

The new importance of production in industrialism gave a new dignity to labour, while giving workers a fulcrum of power. These gains were, of course, more formal than actual. As Marx said, they gave capitalists and workers equal freedom to sleep under bridges. Nevertheless workers must have taken the theory seriously, since they fought for and gained the right to vote.

Such political gains were double-edged, however, since social power in industrialism shifted to the economy, and every effort was taken by the industrial ruling classes to insulate economic power from political power. Workers' new rights in politics were offset somewhat by greater intrusions in their capacity to control their work hours and conditions of production. Workers had to organize at the point of production, through unions, and even union power could be undercut by the introduction of new technologies designed as much to de-skill and disempower workers as to increase production.

Because workers had to spend the overwhelming portion of their time in cog-labour, they were forced to delegate their political power to the organized left—which attempted to represent worker interests (more or less). In early capitalism, the organized left—in the form of labour, socialist, social democratic, or populist parties—served as the “head on the working class body”, providing political subjectivity for people who served as objects and cogs in the production machine. Fundamental alternatives could only surface when the industrialization of culture could give workers the cultural and the organizational capacity to govern their own affairs, and begin producing *directly* for a growing quality of life. These potentials did not arrive in the industrialized countries until roughly the Great Depression. And it was not until the sixties that substantial mass movements geared to redefining wealth and going beyond cog-individuality took hold.

Individuality and Gender Dependence

It cannot be overemphasized how inextricably related sexual forms of domination are to class domination and also to internal/psychological ego forms. I described in my book how industrial capitalism (and later, state socialism) were founded first and foremost on a Divided Economy—a split between paid and unpaid labour, and between formal and informal economies, which was the basis for industrialism's sexual division of labour and capitalist forms of patriarchy. Bourgeois law, with a little prodding by social movements, formally made working people real persons and individuals. But the true individual in early industrial society has been the **family**, made up of two half-persons. The woman, denied access (or equal access, as in the case today) to the cash economy has been dependent on the man for material



income. The man, with his robot-like character-structure molded for “work and war” in the public realm, has been dependent on the woman for both material and emotional nurturing.

The feminist movement challenged that dependence in the late sixties, opting for full personhood for women. Even though mainstream feminism only pushed for equal access to the alienated male-formal economy, this still represented a substantial threat to a crucial form of ego-dependence. At the same time, radical feminism, a smaller but influential political culture, gave voice to an autonomous women’s vision that was far more human-centred and developmental. It is no accident that the human potential movement exploded shortly afterwards from a marginal subculture in the sixties to a mass movement in the mid-seventies. Men found that their “internal halves” had departed to find their own wholeness, and men were now forced to find their own internal balance.

The industrial Divided Economy relegated women to work involved with what Marxists call the “reproduction of labour power” and I have called “people-production”. Even where women did work in the paid sector, they were identified with—and undermined by—their work in the home. In classical industrialism, geared to thing-production, this was limbo at best and hell most of the time. Women’s work, like nature’s services, were invisible and unrecognized. Today it is precisely the realm of people-production that is the key to real postindustrial development. Authentic postindustrialism depends upon a renaissance of *yin*-capacities and social skills, precisely those qualities dumped on women by patriarchy. In key areas of postindustrial development, like urban design and planning, and health & healing, feminist perspectives seem most in touch with development potentials and imperatives.

Wisdom Traditions: Holistic Individuality in Civilization

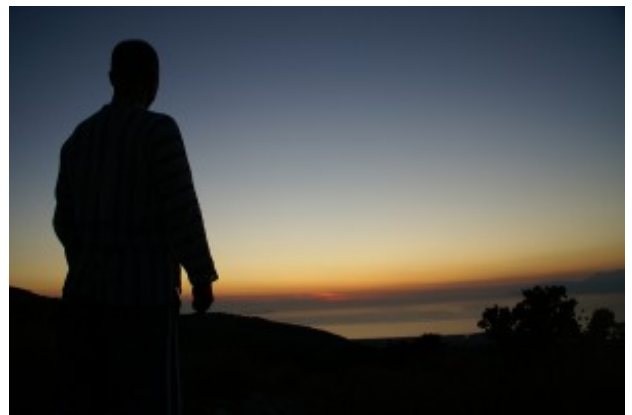
As mentioned earlier, individuation in civilization took a holistic form as well as an egoistic form. The holistic variety was expressed through inner mystical traditions geared to self-actualization and the *direct experience* of higher levels of reality. These traditions built on the experience of primitive [Shamanism](#), but the newer mystical disciplines made self-actualization a legitimate (individual) end in itself.

Individual self-actualization could not be for everyone. The inertia of the past—and collective-religious-mimetic consciousness—was still very strong. Most people also did not have the time to undertake the disciplines involved, and perhaps most importantly, the dominant forms of ego-consciousness militated against this kind of self-development.

That said, the inner wisdom traditions stood in an ambiguous relationship to civilization and its official religions. On one hand, individual self-actualization could be a threat to civilization’s external mindset and materialistic projects. On the other hand, the wisdom traditions represented vital sources of culture and creativity. Dynamic civilizations and living religions needed, for their very survival, to tap those sources. All the Great Religions have had mystical inner cores upon which the more indirect practices of rite and ritual have been based. Civilized religions, as I will elaborate later, are concerned with more than spirituality, but no religion will last long once it has lost or purged its inner dimension.

The wisdom traditions must also be seen as not simply one strain of individuation in civilization, but the vanguard or leading-edge of human consciousness development. Jaspers popularized the notion of “[axial](#)” periods in history: massive sea-changes in consciousness that affected many parts of the world at approximately the same time. The first axial revolution detonated new forms of individual/universal consciousness in India, China, Greece, Palestine, Persia, etc. beginning in the sixth century BC. They were partly an outcome of evolving material conditions, international trade and intercultural exchange, as well as reactions to the extreme brutality and materialism of the earlier patriarchal religions. But they also coincided with the appearance of certain individuals—like Buddha and Christ—who experienced directly deeper levels of reality and human potential. Such pioneering individuals were connected to all the main axial religions and philosophies: in the first wave, there were also the Hebrew prophets, Lao-Tse, [Pythagoras](#), [Zoroaster](#), Muhammad, etc.; and in the second axial revolution (11th to 13th century AD), people like [Hildegard of Bingen](#), [Jelaluddin Rumi](#), [Francis Assisi](#), etc.

It is interesting to note that these spiritual revolutions—most of which suffered repression at the hands of the



status quo—served to inject a yin-feminine spirituality into rigid or decadent civilizations. They contributed universal perspectives to supplant semi-tribal identities, and, anticipating modern democracies, insisted on the dignity of every individual human soul. In most cases, they also injected new forms of creativity that affected many areas of civilized culture: science, architecture, etc.

Rarely, however, could this spiritual energy remain pure. Because of the very nature of civilization, particularly in the West, many of the most important contributions of the inner traditions and axial revolutions would be channeled into forms of ego development. New direct individual relationships to God, unmediated by priests, were turned into possessive individualism. Deeper knowledge of the workings of the Divine in nature became means of “putting nature on the rack” and extracting more. Holistic energies were systematically transmuted into new forms of ego relationship, driving the civilizational process.

On the individual level, many of the inner traditions maintained their integrity, sometimes quite isolated from mainstream culture. But today—in the form of Sufism, Zen, yoga, [contemplative Christianity](#), etc.—they embody a creative spring that can hopefully be tapped for the benefit of everyone.

Spirituality and the Dual Role of Religion

It is common to hear people distinguish between spirituality and religion. Especially today, this makes common sense, if one defines spirituality as concern with individual self-actualization and direct experience of deeper levels of reality. But there has always been another form of spirituality—religion—which is a **collective** or indirect means of symbolic attunement to higher levels through rite, ritual and belief. Primitive society was, of course, the most collectively-oriented human society. And as Eliade wrote, primitive humankind was, par excellence, *religious* humankind, as the myth of eternal recurrence (described earlier in this essay) helped people stay ritually in tune with the cosmos and their duties within it. Even the individual ecstatic explorations of the shaman were geared toward charting a way forward for the tribe or band.



Civilized religion was still collectively-oriented, but it was not so pure. It had a dual role: one-half spiritual, one-half social. In the **spiritual** domain, civilized religion remained a form of collective attunement for those who could not directly experience deeper reality. As discussed above, this was the overwhelming majority of people. In this role, religion needed the mystical traditions to act as their respective “inner cores”, and the process of holistic individuation sprung from the mystical experience. But for people who could not directly experience the “worlds within worlds” and ultimate Oneness, religion provided symbols and archetypes that resonated deeply in their spirits, approximating the mystical experience while acting as a form of bonding based on higher values.

In the **social** domain, religion had a crucial role as society’s Great Integrator, for better and worse. It was entrusted with the job of justifying, or even sanctifying, terrible forms of exploitation and oppression: class rule, patriarchy, racial supremacy, etc. Political and civic values alone could not do this because almost everyone (until the Enlightenment) was excluded from the realm of politics. Politics was largely the realm of military power. Society’s primary social values had to be expressed in religion.

Religion also had to protect civilization from its own aggressive impulses. For example, love in Christianity and compassion in Buddhism served as countervailing forces not only to the individual ego but also to collective ego. Religion, therefore, expressed the inevitably contradictory values of societies structured by domination and yet seeking some kind of transcendent meaning and social harmony.

It cannot be overestimated how important it is to distinguish both between individual-mystical spirituality and religion, and also between the dual roles of religion. People concerned with social change and people concerned with spirituality are constantly misunderstanding each other because they are relating to different sides of religion. In a world that today depends on both individual and social transformation, it is imperative that we get things clear.

[Read Part 3 on 6/01/2011](#)

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