

## Certainty vs. Knowledge -- The Challenge to Western Civilization

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Since the advent of the 18th century enlightenment, there has been an increasing awareness in Western society that knowledge and certainty were not synonymous. Indeed, modern science has demonstrated that factual understanding is based on statements of probability, not assertions of absolutes. It has been this orientation that allowed Western society to promulgate the vast material enhancements of the industrial revolution. It has brought us into a post-industrial era that has as its focus the rapid and ongoing exchange of ideas and information. This exchange generates material outputs that far transcend previous human endeavor.

Many social scientists and other observers of the modern scene state that human adaptation to the changes brought about by the underutilization in modern society has not been evidenced by a substantial portion of the world population. There is a resistance to a departure from all that is tradition-bound in the face of a world governed by the uncertainty of probable reality. This transition places an awesome burden upon individuals whose egos may lack the strength to withstand such stress. People in this modern era have turned to ideologies that provide prescriptions of certainty and dogmas that predict the eventuality of history. In so doing, they have allowed the tyranny of conflict to dominate most of the 20th century.

It is staggering to reflect that two thirds of the world population until recently were guided by Marxist - oriented governments that had gained popularity by assuring certain resolution to a class-based dialectic meant to redress the purported inequities fostered by the industrial revolution. Subscription to the certainties of Marxism, Fascism, Jingoism, and, more recently, Islamic fundamentalism have consumed and disposed of the resources of the 20th century, threatened us with nuclear war and, in substance, rejected the tenets of Western civilization. This assault on Western civilization is ironic inasmuch as the values and ideals of Western society provide the very openness that allows those disposed to its destruction to be indulged in a realm of freedom.

Those valuing the principles of Western society do not wish to restrict freedom. But they must be vigilant to sweep away the deceptions, distortions and convoluted logic, which, under the guise of free speech, social redress, equality, egalitarianism or cultural diversity destroys *elementary justice, meritocracy and personal freedom*--all key values that sustain the openness and freedom inherent to the ethos of Western civilization.

People throughout the world should acknowledge and value the pervasive benefits fostered by Western civilization; for it is only within the framework of the Western experience that there was a dynamic interaction of ideas that move the human mind from the doctrines of certainty to the challenges of knowledge. It is upon this base of knowledge born of science that millions are fed, lives are saved, health is maintained, goods are produced and distributed for mass consumption and man is given the opportunity to manage his own fate as an ultimate chooser, thus giving meaning to the "image and likeness" attribution cited in Genesis.

No other cultural tradition generated such an exalted role for man or gave him such awesome responsibility. Nor can any other cultural tradition claim the ethical constructs to produce the openness and humility that allows value to be attributed to the individual while assigning value to society. This same openness also obligates individuals to society and society to individuals in an unending, ever-changing interaction that is guarded by empirical knowledge and pragmatic application. Certainty is guided by immutable doctrines

and leaves no flexibility in a changing environment is contrary to this notion. Certainty finds no home in the Western tradition's ethos. Instead, it is annunciated in doctrines that declare all cultures equal—even those demeaning personal and social activity to debased levels found in societies on their way to stagnation and death.

Superimposed on this pragmatic adaptation, Western society has evolved some values that have an unchanging character and in some respect challenge one another. It is for citizens to maintain a just balance between the conflict of values. We value property, we value person, we value the individual, we value society, we value freedom, we value restraint, we value equality, we value meritocracy. All that we value are not mutually exclusive; they bear conflict one with another. The ethos of Western society prescribes a balance in all these because in Western society, from the most fundamental element of our Judeo Christian tradition, we are guided by principles of justice.

Other cultural orientations have a sense of justice, unlike Western traditions that do not allow internal diversity or place as much stock in the individual. This value of the individual is the bedrock of the civil rights movement, the emancipation of women and acknowledgment of the value of cultural diversity. It is ironic that those espousing human rights now characterize and reject Western civilization as a source of human oppression. They try to place it in parity with closed cultural systems. These alternatives that reject Western civilization guarantee security in moribund orientations that are oppressive and non-generative since they are founded in a realm of certainty that brings no challenge to man and does not meet the natural change operative in the universe.

Facing the realities of existence requires a certain measure of courage. Orientations that provide certainty guarantee resolution or solution—if one surrenders to doctrine, people become absolved from the obligation to choose, to be responsible, to take charge of their own lives as best they can. In the Western tradition, though some profess to doctrines of certainty, there are alternative orientations that allow a person to be responsible for themselves and for others and society in general without the guarantees provided doctrines that assure that he or she is necessarily right.

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