Re-Learning to be Human in Global Times:
Challenges and Opportunities from
the Perspectives of Contemporary
Philosophy and Religion

Edited by
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The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy
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Foreword

HERTA NAGL-DOCEKAL

It is my pleasure to offer a very warm welcome to you all on behalf of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, which is one of the sponsors of this symposium. Founded in the year 1847, the Academy of Sciences is Austria’s most important extra-mural research institution. As a learned society, it has 770 members from all spheres of the humanities as well as the natural sciences. Additionally, its 28 research institutes are the workplaces of 1,450 scholars.

It is worth noting that there exists a special relation between the Academy and philosophy: The first draft for an Austrian Academy was submitted to the emperor by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz during his last and longest stay in Vienna in the years 1712-14. (During this stay Leibniz also wrote his study on the Principles of Nature and Grace and the final parts of the Monadology.) In commemoration of this historical background, the Academy organizes the annual Leibniz Lectures.

One of the core concerns of the Academy is to promote the employment of innovative research in the public debate on pressing issues of contemporary society. The topic of our symposium clearly meets this objective. The Presidium of the Austrian Academy wishes us all fruitful discussions and much success.
Preface

KURT APPEL

The Research Platform “Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society” is based at the University of Vienna under the direction of Kurt Appel (speaker) and Sieglinde Rosenberger (vice speaker). It is an interdisciplinary research community including seven faculties: Faculty of Catholic Theology, of Protestant Theology, of the Social Sciences, of Laws, of Philosophical and Cultural Studies, of Philosophy and Education, and of Historical and Cultural Studies.

The program focuses on the role of religion in the transformational processes in contemporary societies and its impact on social, political, and cultural spheres. Besides the questions concerning mechanisms of “inclusion and exclusion” and the “transgression of borders” that are both closely related to the issue of “religion and migration,” the research platform is also concerned with monotheistic religion’s universal ethical and noetic claims, condensed and expressed in conceptions of God in the context of a multicultural society. The platform considers the hermeneutics of religious texts in so far as hermeneutics is of importance to the self-understanding of religions and functions as a catalyst for conflicts and societal transformation processes. In addition, the juridical aspects of religious and religion-related transformation processes, as well as the paradigmatic changes in constructions of social meaning and value systems, are subjects of analysis.

The future focus will be the question concerning the relation of “Religion and Boundaries” – geographically, politically, legally and symbolically. We will seek to understand how religions on the one hand contribute to the construction of boundaries and on the other hand to their subversive undermining. Under this perspective the research platform dedicates its work especially to four main thematic areas (“clusters”):

1. Contemporary religious movements in Austria in the context of migration and modernity;
2. Aesthetical and normative transformations of religious texts;
3. Religious education in secular societies;
Introduction

BRIGITTE BUCHHAMMER

The essays published in this book are the proceedings of the symposium held in Vienna, April 7-8, 2017 entitled *Learning to be Human for Global Times: Challenges and Opportunities from the Perspective of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*. This book is part of a series, published by the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, Washington, D.C.

The idea for this conference was born in 2016 in Washington, at the Catholic University of America, when I took part in the fall-seminar of the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy with the title: *Re-Learning to be Human for Global Times: Structure and Role of Compassion*. Dr. Hu Yeping, Executive Director of the Council, encouraged me to organize a symposium with a similar theme in Austria.

What is the idea of this project? The topic of the symposium refers to the XXIV World Congress of Philosophy to be held in Beijing, China: August 13-20, 2018. The familiar theme of the conference will be “Learning to be Human.” The philosophers and theologians from five countries address current global issues such as the phenomena of increasing loss of solidarity and violent conflicts, the societal impact of recent research in the sciences (such as neuro-science and techno-science) and the dynamic changes in the socio-economic sphere. In view of these fundamental challenges, the symposium explored new philosophical approaches to the human being and its self-understanding. The scope of topics includes suggestions to re-define the relationship between human beings and extra-human nature, as well as theories focusing on the situation of religion in the context of modernity.

These eighteen papers demonstrate the broad spectrum of approaches to the question: “What does it mean to be human under current conditions?” through different traditions of philosophy and theological perspectives.

The *Council for Research in Values and Philosophy*, Washington D.C., was founded by Professor George Francis McLean (1929-2016), who is unfortunately no longer with us. He was a scholar and teacher, but most importantly he worked to democratize philosophy – promoting the research of philosophers coming from many different cultural traditions, and publishing the academic work of teams of scholars from countries and regions around the globe. (...) He has helped to bring together professors from many countries and regions in order to create opportunities for dialogue, communication, and cooperation, and to assist in building teams which, through their scholarly work, contribute to addressing the vital questions of the day.” (Hu Yeping, “George Francis McLean: A Philosopher in the Service of Humanity,” in *To the Mountain: Essays in Honour of Professor George F. McLean*, edited by William Sweet and Hu Yeping [Taipei, Taiwan: Fu Jen Catholic University Press, 2004]).

In 1983 Professor McLean founded *The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy*. “The objective of the council is to break through ideologies in order to engage deep human concerns, to bridge traditions and cultures, and to seek new horizons for social transformation. It aims to mobilize research teams to study the nature, interpretation, and development of cultures; to bring their work to bear on the challenges of contemporary change; to publish and distribute the results of these efforts; and to organize both extended seminars for deeper exploration of these issues and regional conferences for the coordination of this work.”

As Dr. Hu points out when she characterizes Father McLean: “Kant says that to love is to do good; love also involves an openness to and a respect for others that requires a willingness to listen to them and to hear them on their own terms. (...) Philosophy as an intellectual discipline helps us to look at reality from a critical distance, to provide a rational analysis, and
to express what we see in conceptual terms. But love for others requires us to read between the lines – to see the shift of human awareness from the vertical to the horizontal, from object to subject, from the material to the spiritual, and from the quantitative to the qualitative. This shift provides an opportunity for all people and all cultures to pursue self-realization, self-consciousness and self-perfection actively. If Kant is right in saying that to love is to do good, then McLean has shown a love that complements his intellectual commitments to help philosophers throughout the world to engage in their own philosophical work. (…) McLean has strong philosophical views. Characteristically, however, he lets others speak first – and this reflects the influence of various traditions and cultures on his own work. (…) Someone once asked McLean what his motives were for travelling to places where philosophy was considered by many in the West to be less developed, and where the social and intellectual situation was difficult. McLean’s response was that philosophy is not a ‘top down’ activity; it is not something to be done in isolation or by a single individual. It comes from the grassroots, from people’s everyday lives, and from the culture in which they live. Each person has its own way of living and searching for the meaning of life. Yet it also needs a window to let in new light and new air, and to let its unique character be seen by those outside. In the Republic, Plato gives us the allegory of the cave. Only those who climb out of the cave – painstakingly, passionately, and consistently – will come to see the light, the truth, and the Absolute. Philosophy, then, is the exercise of freedom.”

I would like to quote the following paragraphs to describe the concept for the Council’s project “Re-Learning to be Human for Global Times.” The following quotation comprises the last written words of Professor McLean, who described the project after consultation with Charles Taylor and Jose Casanova at his residence near Boston in December 2015.

“Humankind is changing paradigms at an unprecedented speed and depth: in science and technology, in the socio-economic and political sphere, in the self-understanding of cultures and societies, in the transformation of major religious entities and the creation of new cultures and modes of being. And yet, we need to ask: What are the constancies or consistencies in human self-understanding needed in order to further the global process of becoming human? Moreover, the human race still faces enormous challenges when it comes to solving problems such as the creation of conditions required to affirm the dignity of all members of the human family, particularly in regard to such phenomena as needless hunger and chronic unemployment, violence and terrorism, injustice and exclusion, abuse of children and abandonment of the elderly, illiteracy and ideological manipulation, destruction of human values and of the natural environment in which we are destined to live.

Hence the need to ask: what role should be played by ethics and morality in the advancement of political and economic processes, in science and technology? How to reconfigure the humanizing mission of education and the processes of communication and/or diffusion of knowledge? In what sense must the great religions of the world advance their own self-understanding, their identity and their mission? How to understand the role and the mission of family and school in the process of renewing humanity and so create the conditions of possibility for a future, that can be said to be more truly human and, by the same token, even more divine than before?

This philosophical work will try to further the kind of human self-understanding that is capable of bridging the multiple contributions of East and West, of North and South, of religion and science, of art and technology, of freedom and law, of self-interest and mutual cooperation.”

This is just a brief summary of the concept behind our conference and its title. When I returned from Washington to Vienna last year I consulted Herta Nagl-Docekal, who supported this project from the very first moment and has made a great effort with energy,
commitment and enthusiasm. Without her generous support and effort, the staging of this symposium would not have been possible. I am very grateful to Herta Nagl-Docekal.

As always, financial considerations were a major challenge for organizing this kind of endeavor. However, immediately and instantly Kurt Appel from the research-platform “Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society” was more than willing to help. I would sincerely like to thank Kurt Appel and the platform so much for their great generosity. Furthermore, I am also indebted to the Austrian Academy of Sciences for their generous support.

I would also express my gratitude to the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, Washington D.C. for making the publication of this volume possible.