

ON THE PRINCIPLES OF PROMOTION OF BUDDHIST ECONOMICS

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ABSTRACT

In the West, Hobbes' ideas enhanced mistaken tendencies which later encouraged, according to Schumacher, the dangerous ideas of 'belief in economy'. Certain aspects of world economy are getting into a more and more critical state, in spite of the efforts of several western scientists all over the centuries. Buddhist economics – the latest development of a chain of researches with a long history – is well suited for the job, but the spread of its ideas may be hindered by the differences of value orders. This paper outlines some of them and recommends some points of possible solution for consideration.

INTRODUCTION

It is commonplace that the economy of any country is driven by two main factors: the discoveries of natural sciences translated into practical life and the daily work and co-operation of millions, laws and customs of which are explored by social sciences. Unlike those of natural sciences, the results of the social sciences may not be applicable everywhere. Fred Hoyle [1] is right at saying: *“Our environment is chiefly conditioned by the things we believe. Morocco and California are bits of the Earth in very similar latitudes, both on the west coasts of continents with similar climates, and probably with rather similar natural resources. Yet their present development is wholly different, not so much because of different people even, but because of the different thoughts that exist in the minds of their inhabitants... The most important factor in our environment is the state of our minds.”*

This simple fact highlights that the amount of environmental damage and loss – coming mainly from the West-born mass consumption (and its slave, mass production) – can only be prevented if ① we find new ones to replace some of the old ones and ② popularize them for wide audiences members of which would otherwise be ready to keep the wheels of unwise consumption and mass production turning.

The first condition was met for the West as early as in the 1970s, when a German-British economist, Ernst F. Schumacher and his colleagues outlined and published their view on the positive role that some Buddhist ideas might play in that respect [2]. Indeed, a number of case studies and hypotheses indicate that mankind could ease the problem by following Buddha's teachings.

The second condition is a lot more difficult to meet; in a writing of hers Ruth Benedict [3] explains why: *“Custom has not been commonly regarded as a subject of any great moment. The inner workings of our brains we feel to be uniquely worthy of investigation... As a matter of fact, it is the other way round... The life history of the individual is first and foremost an accommodation to the patterns and standards traditionally handed down in his community. From the moment of his birth the customs into which he is born shape his experience and behavior... By the time he is grown and able to take part in activities [of his culture]... its habits are his habits, its beliefs his beliefs, its impossibilities his impossibilities... [Alas] in the study of man himself the major social sciences [of the West] have substituted the study of one local variation, that of Western civilization.”* Individuals may believe that decisions are left for them to make, but, in fact, they are under the subtle yet irresistible influence of the patterns and standards – ‘tangible’ forms of their scale of values – traditionally handed down in their community. That is why most social scientists of the West view the world through the screen of their type of conditioning. (I see

no reason to trust that their colleagues in the East do otherwise.) The late Anthony de Mello of India, a famous Christian preacher, has seen slim chances of most people getting rid of the conditioned characters of their minds. “*Jesus proclaimed the good news yet he was rejected. Not because it was good, but because it was new. We hate the new. ... We do not want new things, particularly when ... they involve change.*” ([4] pp. 18.) Bringing change is dangerous. Lao-tse was careful to leave before others read Tao Teh King. The Buddha walked hundreds of miles to meet those five people who were but one step away from opening their eyes. Jesus repeatedly spoke to mixed audiences, members of which later condemned him to death. Mohamed talked of unusual values and was almost put on the sword.

EXAMPLES OF RELIGION-BASED SCALES OF VALUES: 1) NUMBERS

Schumacher quoted Stuart and Keynes in his opus [2]. While the former had depicted political economy as a fragment of a social science, the latter removed – a hundred years later – its moral base by suggesting that welfare could only be achieved by making ourselves believe that good is evil and evil is good, for evil, contrary to good, is useful. That came as an announcement of a new fait, the ‘belief in economics’, which abolished moral outside self interest (cf. [2] pp. 22; 40-44.). So, in the West, a great majority formally maintained Christianity while in fact they turned to this ‘new religion’.

This choice has proven wrong in the meantime. However, a mere give up of the ‘belief in economics’ seems not enough. The reason is that economy-related decisions are influenced by values born of world concepts (derived from religious teachings), and not every point of the world concept of modern Christianity may be a good springboard to curing the problems created by Keynes’ followers. That is why the revival of the traditional Christian values has so far remained ineffective on the field of economics. Buddhism is likely to be better suited for that. And that is where the rub is. It is of human nature, as we have seen, that few people can get rid of the conditioned characters of their minds, and any try to change the modern values of the West by the introduction of some Buddhist ideas on the field of economy may be interpreted as an attempt against the West’s prevailing concept of the world itself.

I am convinced that – in order to dispel the false interpretations – the members of the Buddhist Economic Platform should fathom the differences coming from the eastern and the western world view.

There is difference between the eastern and western understanding of the value of numbers (Hungarian Academician Péter Popper labels them [5] as ‘inductive’ and ‘deductive’). The Almighty of the West is outside the world that He himself created—He is a ‘one’ and man is another ‘one’; the Bible declares them to be covenant-respecting partners. Induction – in their opinion – means: the world is built up of particles, small units, each of which has its own independent and individual existence (Figure 1a). That concept results in the assumption that the more units one has the closer to Completeness (salvation) he will be. That must be the reason why westerners are easy to accept that they are a race apart, not integrated into nature, and any damage to nature is supposed to leave mankind untouched. In that approach it is explicit that man thinks of nature as an outside power to fight with. This atomized world view is not without consequences on the field of social sciences. Most western sociologists believe that communities are made up of independent individuals who have the right to choose and leave any community, and if they stay in a one, their No 1 right is to follow their individual interest. Individuals – so to say – should frequently change their leaders to guard freedom.

The traditional world view of the East (and that of Plato [6]) dispels such kind of an induction. For example: the terms ‘Brahman’, ‘Emptiness’ and ‘Tao’ refer to something which homes the world. Popper says that, in the understanding of

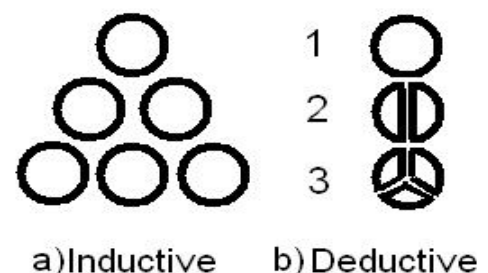


Figure 1: Inductive and deductive concepts of value of numbers

the East, ONE means: Brahman; TWO means: Brahman – Atman; THREE means manifestation of Atman (cf. [5] pp. 248.). The more the phenomena there are, the less they refer to Completeness (see Figure 1b). The more we have in numbers the less we have in value. That concept suggests that Earth, just like Heaven, should be under the rule of a supreme autocratic leader; leaders, in general, should be selected from among noblemen.

It must be noted that the wave-like nature of the Universe is referred to in some sacred books of ancient times (cf.: BIBLE Gen 1.3; Brihadāranyaka-Upanisad 1.4.1; the shrieking of Garuda-bird of Ancient Egypt etc.) as well as the modern science of particle physics. All of them seem to be in support of deduction. For example: one of quantum physics basic theses is that the smallest of all sub-atomic particles are the ‘wave-like’ quarks; according to our present state of knowledge there are six quarks and six anti-quarks —see also ‘strings’ in theoretical physics. Hence we may assume: science suggests that the world is built up of waves and their ‘mirror waves’. Such Completeness-preserving pairs exist but not manifest; they remain unperceived. In Figure 2b nothing manifests as the waves in Figure 2a make a pair. In Figure 2c there manifests a wave because its pair is missing. The more Completeness is built down – that is: the more pairs of mirror waves get disunited – the more manifestations there will be. The more we can see the less unity there must be.

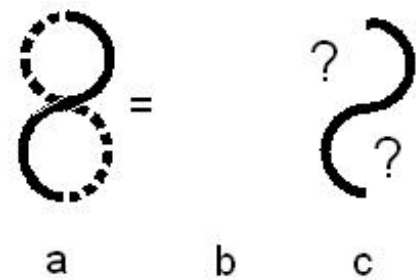


Figure 2: Wave and mirror-wave: They exist, yet manifest not; perception of a wave refers to their having got disunited

Can we say that the more of manifestations the larger the unbalance of Completeness will be? Is it that the larger a monoculture is the larger the disequilibrium of nature there will be? Can it be that the more cars and airplanes we have the more the environment shall be damaged? Can it be that the more we grow in terms of population the more we shall upset the balance of nature? Can it be that the members of the Club of Rome gave – one generation ago – the right slogans of Zero Population Growth and Zero Economic Growth? Can it be that Schumacher was right at giving his book the title: *Small is Beautiful*?

In that respect mainline economists seem to apply double standards. On the one hand they teach the theory of marginal benefit (evidence of which is reflected so well in the high price of diamonds—thanks to their artificially low supply). On the other hand they apply that theory to but profits and not to the value of environmental conditions. Schumacher is right to say that wisdom in economy entails ability to survive and not ability to maintain, because unlimited exploitation not only depletes and impoverishes natural resources but leads to wars as well. Mainline economists hold it nonsense that some sort of economic growth may well be unhealthy, destructive and disrupting. Such a lopsided view – so Schumacher is convinced (cf. [2] pp. 12; 31; 48, 115; 119.) – comes from the economists’ ignorance of metaphysics—that is: the traditional, not the modern world view and order of values.

EXAMPLES OF RELIGION-BASED SCALES OF VALUES: 2) THE DEGREE OF TRUTH

Another example of the difference between western and eastern world view is the degree of truth certain statements are credited to carry. By and large, so I believe, the opening words of *The Tao Teh King* [7] sum up the essence of what is generally accepted in the East. “*The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name.*” These words of the Chinese sage, Lao-ce, imply that one may get enlightened by walking the final section of his path without any help from others. It is not as if one shall get advices no more. It is rather that one shall no more be seeking for 100 percent true advices; he shall keep it in mind that no advice can be more than a reflection of somebody else’s experience, and it is left for the one himself to

‘feel’ the true and untrue proportions of that advice. Even contradicting statements may carry some of the otherwise unutterable truth. Therefore, the degree of truth of any such statement must be somewhere between 0.1 to 0.9. Consequently: diversity is undeniable.

That concept is not much commented on the West, where the devotees of Judaism, Christianity and Islam believe that the words in their sacred books have come directly from God, whose words must have 100 percent (1.0) degree of truth. Hence, the probability of any other religious message is 0.0. Consequently: any diversity is fabricated by the Devil and so equals to heresy.

That concept fueled westerners’ openness to the use of binary digits 1 or 0 and lead to starting computerization. Another consequence of the ‘one and only one true way of religion’ is the ‘one and only one true way of concept of economic rules’. An emblematic figure of the mid 20th century, W. W. Rostow, based a book [8] on a concept that arranged all the economies of the world in one and only one line of development, stages of which he thought to be: ‘traditional society’—‘preconditions of take off’— ‘the take off’—‘the drive to maturity’—‘the age of high mass-consumption’—‘beyond consumption’ (cf. [8] pp. 4.-92.). One third of a century later this argument must have impressed Zbigniew Brzezinski. In his essay [9] he gave “*a guiding concept to create economically successful democracies on the ruins of the [mainly Central-European] communist systems*”. Brzezinski felt it sure that the transformation in ex-socialist countries the world over should follow one and only one path, three phases of which he enumerated and characterized. While stressing the primacy of political reform as the basis for effective economic reform, he omitted to analyze the way of China, where an impressive and almost unprecedented period of economic development was already under way with no previous signs of political reforms.

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Needless to say, the mentioned different views of the world (as well as several others) result in different understandings of the connections between economic decision making and the dangerous consequences of mass production. Let us now see some examples of the counteractions.

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCHES PRIOR TO THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF BUDDHIST ECONOMIES

Some scholars of the West – especially those who had thoroughly studied the state of affairs in several non Western countries – got aware of the setbacks. Rostow’s semi-contemporary Max Weber pointed out that reduced prices had preceded and not resulted from capitalism (cf. [10] pp. 250.). That German sociologist put, in almost every one of his works, emphasis on the religion-based scales of values. As early as in 1905 he published his most famous opus [11] with his theories on, for example, the “denominations and social classes”; the “religious aspects of earthly [economic] asceticism”; the “economical aspects of the ethics of religions”.

Since then a hundred years have passed, yet the fundamentals of Weber’s theories seem to be as solid as ever. For some reasons, however, most social scientists of the two succeeding generations forgot all about the direction Weber had pointed out so well. The subject remained in focus, but the role of religions was lost from sight. In 1966, for example, an American scientist, Edward T. Hall, published a book on cultural conditioning. [12] In that he compared many examples such as, for example, ‘systems of getting-about in cities and with non-white Americans’; ‘mono/polychromic concepts of time; context / [open] coded messages’; ‘privacy in offices and crowds’; ‘oral messages and personal distances’; ‘the boundaries of ego’; ‘western and eastern interpretations of loneliness and solitude’ etc (cf. [12] pp. 101; 167; 186; 205; 213; 231; 245). Hall highlighted the importance of cultural conditioning on the field of economic co-operation by observing quite a number of things except the role religions.

The book two decades later Geert Hofstede of the Netherlands wrote [13] was more comparable to Hall's work than to that of Weber's. Hofstede underestimated (cf. [13] pp. 16) the influence of religions and made all sorts of effort to work out scales of values 'independent' (!) from the influence of religions. Yet, his opus turned out to be an asset to many scholars of the field, as it was based on the results of the field research the Dutch culture-anthropologist had continued before. Ever since he processed the more than 116 thousand questionnaires he had been sent back, his data collection has been an important source to those who set out to study the inter-cultural dimensions of economic behavior. Another important aspect of Hofstede's concept is the warning that "*individualist societies not only practice individualism but also consider it superior to other forms of mental software... Economics has remained an individualist science and most of its leading contributors have come from strongly individualistic countries like the UK and the USA. However, because of the individualist assumptions on which they are based, economic theories as developed in the West are unlikely to apply in societies in which not individual interest, but group interest prevail*" ([13] pp.: 71.-72.). Admittedly, Hofstede's early works on the field of intercultural communication played a prelude to a widening spectrum of researches—the ones conducted by Nancy J. Adler [14] and F. Tropaars & C. Hampden-Turner [15] and Richard D. Lewis [16] and the co-authors of the GLOBE-Project [17] and others.

Brzezinski's other contemporary, Samuel Huntington gave examples that some economies in the Far East were walking a way different from that of the (Far) West. He pointed out [18] that the Japanese economy disobeyed the laws that western specialists had declared to be of universal force. On the Land of the Rising Sun inflation and unemployment seemed to have relations unusual in the West. Unlike most countries on the West, Japan managed to maintain a foreign trade surplus as well as a high level of exchange rate of her currency for a prolonged period of time. The remarkably low level of Japanese import was well outside of what would be considered normal in the West. Western specialists have insufficient knowledge about the inner drives of Far Eastern economies, which are definitely not of western-type (cf.: [18] pp.: 378.-379.). Huntington gives a number of evidence of the nature of his not (strongly) West-conditioned mind. He says that, generally speaking, religion is the most important factor to determine the life of a civilization. He refers to the view of ancient Athenians, who would identify great civilizations with great religions and find that the firm platform of every one of the civilizations was religion. Four out of Weber's five world religions are closely related to civilizations. Fifth of them is Buddhism, which – besides its dominancy in several Asian countries – has some special international significance. The Harvard professor expressed his doubts about the hopes that civilizations would get amalgamated by the non stop conquest of West-inspired globalization (cf. [18] pp. 51; 61.-62; 80.).

Towards the end of the 20th century two Australian career diplomats – Reg Little and Warren Reed – seemed to have followed a direction somewhat parallel with what Weber and Huntington had chosen. In their book they postulated that "*civilizations are built around the myths and sages which inspire the souls of men and women. More often than not the myths are built around the figures of sages, or spiritual leaders—Buddha, Laozi, Confucius, Socrates, Jesus Christ, Mohammed, to name a few*" ([19] pp. XV). The authors were consequent in focusing on the spiritual heritages. They reviewed East Asia's history from the Confucian myths through the spread of Buddhism and the appearance of Christians until the Confucian revival of modern times. At every one of these steps they assumed that ideas from sages have been creating the framework of events and have played a decisive role in the recent series of East Asian economic ascent. That is: economic success was due to the (assumed) fact that peoples of those countries have been following Confucian rules in co-operations and economic decisions. That view still seems justified for a number of reasons—four years later, for example, the American Joel Magnuson and John Hall arrived to the same conclusion in their relevant essay. [20]

THE GEOGRAPHICAL DOMAINS OF RELIGION-BASED VALUE ORDERS

So it was a comparatively simple step in the early years of the 21st century to arrange Hofstede’s data in groups according to the more than likely concept of religion-based value orders being the main factors to influence economic decisions. In Table 1 of the book I published in 2006, [21] I used data from the works of Hofstede [13] and Adler [14] and Tropenaars & Hampden-Turner[15] to form the following twelve criteria: 1) Power distance is self-evident and acceptable; 2) I approve of hierarchy; 3) Bosses are generally able to help subordinates to solve problems; 4) I would give private help to the boss; 5) I say ›we‹ not ›I‹; 6) One should be respected for his noble family; 7) Masculine vs. feminine; 8) Not divorced out of every 1.000 marriages; 9) ‘Companies should provide employees with housing; 10) I rank myself amongst non-individualists; 11) My time-horizon is (usually) long; 12) My will is not so strong as Fate’s. The data of every one of these criteria were broken into columns of four large geographical domains of religion-based value orders (Figure 3.): Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism and Shinto formed the ‘Traditional’ category; countries with dominant Islam heritage formed the category of ‘Muslim’; Greek Orthodox, Slav Orthodox and mainly Roman Catholic countries formed the category of ‘Orthodox & R. Cath’; while North-European and Anglo-Saxon countries formed the category of ‘Protestant’.

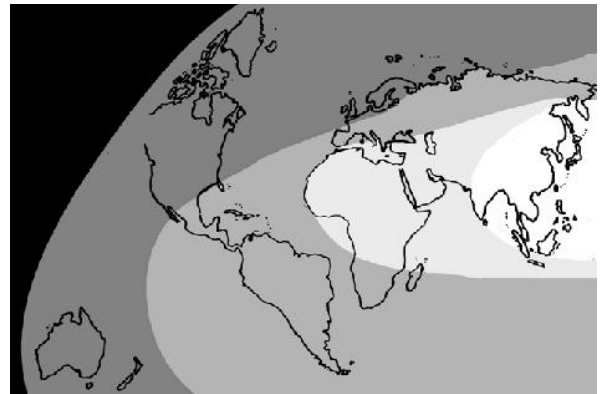


Figure 3: The Geographical Domains of Religion-based Value Orders

Pressed for space I should say here no more than that the graphs of every one of the mentioned criteria (almost) fit in one or the other of two particular types (shown by Figure 4 and 5). The general message we may distil is that – in terms of value-orders – differences between the ‘Traditional’ region and the Orthodox and Roman Catholic countries are almost half the size of the differences between the protestant (dominated) sector and the countries of Christianity’s other denominations.

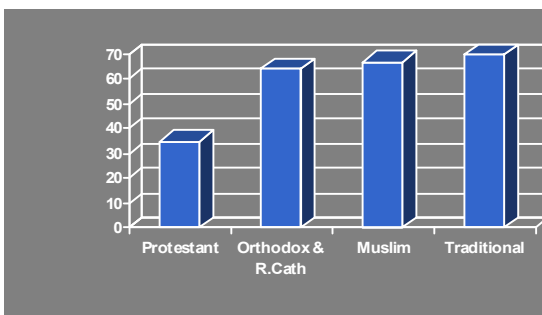


Figure 4: The distribution of answers to: “Power distance is self-evident, acceptable”.

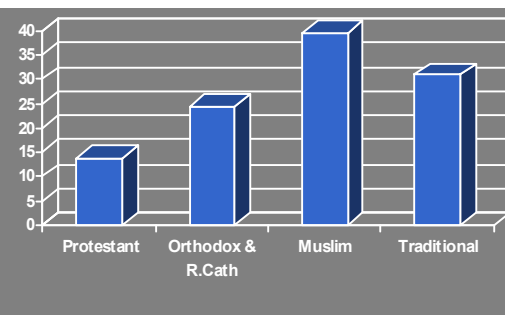


Figure 5: The distribution of answers to: “One should be respected for his noble family.”

That assumption can be proven by the data Colin Ash quoted from Layard (Figure 6 and 7) at the 1st Conference of the Buddhist Economics Research Platform in August 23, 2007. [22] Such strong

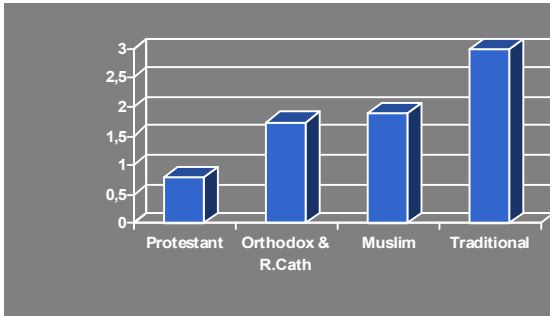


Figure 6: Gain in happiness by extra \$100 in countries under \$10.000 / head / year

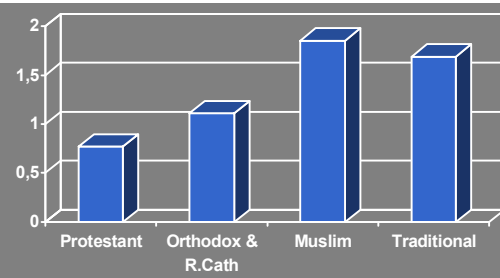


Figure 7: Gain in happiness by extra \$100 in countries above 60% of happiness

resemblances may hardly happen by chance, so the most likely conclusion is perhaps that the highest gains in happiness by extra \$100 show in the traditional (mainly Buddhist) countries. In other words: in the transformation of every \$100 extra income into happiness the traditional (Buddhist) order of values is the most effective and that of Keynes' heirs is the less effective.

SUMMARY

What can be seen – through a westerner's eye – of the European economic state of affairs in the light of Buddhist economics? Apicai Puntasen is right to say that the misinterpretation of happiness (or wellness) was first introduced to the public in the 17th century by Thomas Hobbes. [23] In the industrialized countries of the West, Hobbes' ideas enhanced mistaken tendencies which became obvious a hundred years ago and encouraged – according to Schumacher – Keynes to announce dangerous ideas of 'belief in economy'. Keynes' heirs (mainstream economists and the like) frequently push certain aspects of world economy into a more and more critical state, in spite of the effort of several western scientists all over the centuries. Malthus is not often cited and said to be out of date. The heritage of the Club of Rome has been forgotten. Any talk of Schumacher's brilliant ideas has been left without notice etc. The main points open minded western scientists made in the last third of the 20th century are still actual.

There may be two main reasons why the impacts of Keynesian heritage are difficult to overcome. One is that European style communism has been totally discredited together with its anti-individualism. The other is that – in spite of efforts taken in that direction [24] – the revival of the traditional Christian values has so far remained ineffective on the field of economics. It is so, probably, because not every point of the world concept of modern Christianity may be a good springboard to curing the problems.

Buddhism, a well of traditional values most accepted in the West, is better suited for the job, especially because – as Linda E. Nowakowski highlighted [25] – *“reverse salients create the opportunity for multiple simultaneous inventions... radical change usually comes from outside inventors ...”* Laszlo Zsolnai suggests us [26] to explore Buddhist economics as a major alternative to Western economic mindset. Apichai Puntasen is right to say also [23] that Buddha-Dharma – or the teaching of Buddha – provides a proper theoretical background from which a number of positive efforts and results have started already. Nevertheless – as few people can get rid of the conditioned characters of their minds – any try to change the modern values of the West by the introduction of some Buddhist ideas on the field of economy may be interpreted as an attempt against the West's prevailing concept of the world itself. The inductive and deductive understanding of the value of numbers and the degree of truth any philosophical statement may be credited are just examples of the differences between the western and eastern order of values. Such differences do influence economic decision-making. So, at the first look, the idea of co-habitation of the western and eastern economic decision-making raises doubts.

CAUTIONARY CONCLUSIONS

It remains to be seen whether the above summary and its supportive ideas are of universal validity. If so, then – by cautionary conclusions – the points we may recommend for consideration are the following:

Principles for the promotion of Buddhist economics should be chosen according to which geographical domain of religion-based value orders (Figure 3) have been targeted. (The actual circumstances of one or another country may be looked over for further refinements only.) That is most decisive. For example: according to some near-past researches [28], the value orders of most Hungarians – ancestors of whom moved from Central Asia to Central Europe eleven hundred years ago – have come less than half way the distance between that of the East and that of the West (cf. [28] pp. 111.-112.).

The Buddhist Economic Platform should offer practical alternatives to peoples the world over. Though difficult, it is perhaps not as difficult a task as getting those alternatives deep down into the recipients' order of values. Whatever much one understands of the potential benefits, the unconscious power of his conditioned mind may reject them all. Fears of Buddhism being an evangelizing religion should be dispelled in order to cure the Keynesian damage. Western public audiences should be helped to realize that the ideas of Buddhist economics are not born of an alien intrusion into the West's mental comfort. The value order of Buddhist economics has been recognized both in the West and the East. Buddhist economics is but the latest development of a chain of researches with a long history. More should be said of the common points of Christianity and Buddhism. The resemblance (or rather: the common parts of the teachings of the Buddha and those of Jesus Christ) should be propagated. And, first and most of all, it should be highlighted that a better understanding (of the difference between the value orders) requires neither Christians nor Buddhists to give up their present religion.

The theory of marginal benefit should be – if possible – developed so that it could help economists to realize that the cheaper a product is the more setbacks it is likely to cause through the devastating consequences of its mass consumption (and/or its mass production).

With regard to individualism being popular in some (post) industrial countries, more case studies and theoretical papers should be advocated to help people realize that the western principle of 'one may do anything provided it is not prohibited by law' has more and more setbacks because energy-consumption, environment-protection and the up-warming of global climate are getting too complicated issues to be well protected merely by law.

In countries where initiatives are not unwelcome, there should be started experimental courses on metaphysics, under which umbrella the economic aspects of religious teachings could be unfolded. I suspect that many western scientists cannot go deep in the meanings of Buddha's teachings. I also suspect that many Buddhist scholars in Asia may not be familiar with some hidden aspects of the Bible. Thus social scientists on either side must find it difficult to realize what their colleagues on the other side may misunderstand. At universities there should be encouraged discussions on Hofstede's words: "*The export of ideas to people in other countries without regard for values context in which these ideas were developed – and the import of such ideas by gullible believers in those other countries – is not only limited to politics, but can also be observed in the domains of education and, in particular, management and organization. The economic success of the USA in the decades before and after the Second World War has made people in other countries believe that US ideas about management must be superior and therefore should be copied. They forget to ask about the kind of society in which these ideas were developed and applied—if they were really applied as the books claimed. Since the late 1960s the same has happened with Japanese ideas*" ([13] pp.: 41.-42.).

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