

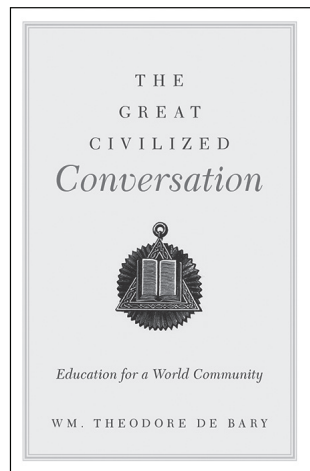
## The Great Civilized Conversation *Education for a World Community*

BY WM. THEODORE DE BARY

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Reviewed by Paul B. Watt



For over half a century, Wm. Theodore de Bary has worked as an educator engaged in the debate about the content and style of university education in the decades after the war, and as a researcher focusing on East Asian intellectual and religious traditions. At Columbia University, where he earned both his undergraduate and graduate degrees, he developed the University's Oriental Humanities and Oriental Civilization courses, which came to parallel Columbia's already well-established Contemporary Civilizations core courses, which focused on the West. In order

to reach a wider audience, he collaborated with colleagues at Columbia over the years to translate and introduce the classics of India, China, Japan, and Korea and to provide guidelines for the teaching of these influential works. As a researcher, he ranged widely over the Confucian and Neo-Confucian traditions of China, Korea, and Japan. Including both the anthologies of Asian classics that he edited or coedited and his own more specialized research, de Bary has published more than thirty volumes in his long and distinguished career. Behind all of these activities has been his belief not only in the inherent value of the Asian traditions he sought to make widely known, but also his belief in the necessity of an educational vision that included both Western and Asian classics, an education, as he calls it in this volume, "for a world community."

*The Great Civilized Conversation* brings together pieces that de Bary has written over the last five decades, organized under three headings: Education and the Core Curriculum, Liberal Learning in Confucianism, and Tributes and Memories. For anyone who has thought seriously about curricular reform, not only at the university level but at lower levels as well, the opening section of the volume is of particular interest. Although de Bary is aware of the debates that have swirled around the limitations and biases of core curricula, he remains committed to the value of the core as he conceives of it. It should, of course, include Asian classics, especially those emerging from the civilizations of Islam, India, China, and Japan. And, while recognizing that time and space in any curriculum is not unlimited, he believes that the addition of the Asian classics should not be at the expense of study of the West, which necessarily means that hard decisions must be made. In approaching the classics included in any core curriculum, de Bary suggests giving priority to certain core concerns. The terms "liberal education" and "liberal learning" appear numerous times in the volume. Early on, he offers a preliminary definition: "Liberal education consists of any study that liberates man for a better life" (12), and later

in the volume, he elaborates on these terms in greater detail. "Civility" and "humanity" are other central concerns that, he suggests, would help students prepare for the great civilized conversation. Although he naturally appreciates the value of the study of foreign languages and of study abroad, attention should first be given, he asserts, to having students engage the classics in a direct and personal way through translations.

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In the second section of the volume, "Liberal Learning in Confucianism," de Bary illustrates how this kind of engagement might take place in the particular case of the Confucian classics. In "Human Renewal and the Repossession of the Way," he introduces the reader to Confucian scholars who lived in dark times yet remained dedicated to Confucian values. There is in the Confucian tradition:

*a certain ideal of the heroic individual as the reactivator of traditional values and as the agent of social reform and human renewal. Associated with this prophetic role was a view of the mind as morally and socially conscious and with a keen sense of responsibility for the consequences of one's actions and of the need this implies for the sensitization of the individual conscience . . . (108).*

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De Bary sees the values embodied in such an individual as recognizable in the West, as well. In “Zhu Xi and Liberal Education,” he considers key emphases in the thought of this Neo-Confucian scholar/teacher and their relationship to the theme of liberal education. Among other ideas that he considers here, de Bary introduces Zhu Xi’s reflections on Confucius’ advice regarding “subduing the self and returning to decorum” as a goal of self-cultivation. Zhu Xi stated, “If one can ‘subdue himself,’ his mind will be broad and his heart generous, and his body will become big and be at ease. Looking up he will have no occasion for shame before Heaven, and below he will have no occasion to blush before men.” Associating this stance with the value of self-discipline in the West, de Bary observes that “self-discipline has certainly been understood as ‘liberal’ in the classic sense of bringing self-mastery, that is, of liberating one’s powers in the very act of developing and directing them” (115). In later chapters in this part of the volume, de Bary explores other themes in the Confucian tradition—individualism, education, quietism and activism, human rights—that illustrate the ways in which the tradition can be seen as an enriching partner in conversations with the West.

The third section of the volume, “Tributes and Memories,” contrasts with the earlier two in being more personal. Here, de Bary reflects, for example, on his indebtedness to the scholarly work of Qian Mu (1895-1990), the famous Chinese historian and philosopher. He remembers Qian Mu as asserting that “China’s true liberation would not be achieved in the manner of the Cultural Revolution, by trying to root out all vestiges of the past and destroy them, but only by coming to terms with Chinese culture, whatever its virtues and deficiencies, and seeing the future of this great people authentically rooted there” (330). By including remarks that de Bary made at a memorial service for Ryūsaku Tsunoda (1877-1964) in 1964, he once again pays respects to a man, who as curator of Columbia’s Japanese collection and former lecturer in the Department of Chinese and Japanese, contributed immeasurably to the development of East Asian studies at Columbia:

*This unpretentious, undogmatic teacher had no special message, claimed no special authority, demanded no obedience to his person. Like Confucius, he forgot himself in his wholehearted devotion to his study. There was never a class or lecture that he did not spend hours in preparation for. There was never a student in whom he did not take a personal interest, though he could be severe as well as sympathetic (347).*

In the final chapter, he takes up the Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915-1968), who de Bary met during his student years at Columbia when Merton was a part-time English instructor and graduate student. Merton had broad religious interests that led him to the study of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Daoism, but he wrote little about Confucianism, which he did not judge to be one of the “higher religions.” Although Merton read with appreciation the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, de Bary hints that Merton’s estimation of the tradition would have been different had he been exposed to the religious and philosophical depth of Neo-Confucianism.

In the preface to this volume, de Bary states that he hopes that the essays included in it are representative “of my academic work as a whole.” The final section in particular indicates that it is more than that, as readers can get a sense of de Bary as a person and as a scholar. The person one encounters here is very much like the Neo-Confucian scholars he studied so devotedly for decades, a person dedicated to moral and personal cultivation, study of the classics, education, and leadership. However one may evaluate the views he expresses in this volume, readers can look to it as a dependable guide to his scholarship and his life. ■

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