"Our Attitude toward Modern Western Civilization"
By Hu Shi

At present the most unfounded and more harmful distortion is to ridicule Western civilization as materialistic and worship Eastern civilization as spiritual. ... The modern civilization of the West, built on the foundation of the search for human happiness, not only has definitely increased material enjoyment to no small degree, but can also satisfy the spiritual needs of mankind. ... In religion and ethics, it has overthrown the religion of superstitions and established rational belief, has destroyed divine power and established a humanistic religion, has discarded the unknowable Heaven or paradise and directed its efforts to building a paradise among men and Heaven on earth. ...

...
civilization of a lazy and nonprogressive people. It is a truly materialistic civilization. Such a civilization can only obstruct but cannot satisfy the spiritual demands of mankind.

Questions:

1. How does Hu Shi overturn the usual stereotypes in discussing East and West?
2. If you were a Chinese person arguing against Hu around 1918, what points might you make to refute his characterization of the West?
3. What can you conclude about Hu’s values from these comments?
4. As you read Hu’s comments, what do you think he may possibly believe are among the causes of China’s weakness in the world?

Longer Selection


“Our Attitude toward Modern Western Civilization”

By Hu Shi

At present the most unfounded and more harmful distortion is to ridicule Western civilization as materialistic and worship Eastern civilization as spiritual. ... The modern civilization of the West, built on the foundation of the search for human happiness, not only has definitely increased material enjoyment to no small degree, but can also satisfy the spiritual needs of mankind. In philosophy it has applied highly refined methods to the search for truth and to investigation into the vast secrets of nature. In religion and ethics, it has overthrown the religion of superstitions and established a rational belief, has destroyed divine power and established a humanistic religion, has discarded the unknowable Heaven or paradise and directed its efforts to building a paradise among men and Heaven on earth. It has cast aside the arbitrarily asserted transcendence of the individual soul, has utilized to the highest degree the power of man’s new imagination and new intellect to promote a new religion and new ethics that are fully socialized, and has endeavored to work for the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people.

The most outstanding characteristic of Eastern civilization is to know contentment, whereas that of Western civilization is not to know contentment.

Contented Easterners are satisfied with their simple life and therefore do not seek to increase their material enjoyment. They are satisfied with ignorance and “not understanding
and not knowing”¹ and therefore have devoted no attention to the discovery of truth and the invention of techniques and machinery. They are satisfied with their present lot and environment and therefore do not want to conquer nature but merely [to] be at home with nature and at peace with their lot. They do not want to change systems, but rather to mind their own business. They do not want a revolution, but rather to remain obedient subjects.

The civilization under which people are restricted and controlled by a material environment from which they cannot escape, and under which they cannot utilize human thought and intellectual power to change environment and improve conditions, is the civilization of a lazy and nonprogressive people. It is truly a materialistic civilization. Such civilization can only obstruct but cannot satisfy the spiritual demands of mankind.

---

¹ Book of Odes, Da ya, Wen wang 7.