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Albert Schweizer's Reverence for Life
June 28 – July 1, 2013

Albert Schweitzer's Reverence for Life – An Inspiration for the 21st Century
Luxembourg, June 28 – July 1, 2013. Summarized by Paul Ropp

This workshop was designed to explore Albert Schweitzer's philosophy of reverence for life and its relevance for the 21st century. The first presenter was Predrag Cicovacki, Professor of Philosophy at the College of the Holy Cross. His topic was "**Schweitzer and Gandhi; Reverence for Life, Nonviolence, and Spirituality.**" Predrag began by making some basic comparisons between Schweitzer and Gandhi. The two shared a belief in nonviolence, a love of animals, great charisma on a personal level, a deep respect for Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, and a deep appreciation of religion while holding a number of unorthodox beliefs transcending any one religion. They both engaged in profound and important work in Africa while remaining largely detached from and indifferent to African culture.

Predrag noted two kinds of violence promotion: brute violence (Maya) which covers such acts as war, murder, rape, physical assault; and instrumental violence which Gandhi saw as more sinister and more dangerous. Instrumental violence includes lies and deceptions, structural violence (built into social and economic structures of inequality) and the adoption of evil means to achieve "good" ends. Gandhi argued that ends and means are inseparable while recognizing that much of our politics and economics are based precisely on the idea that ends justify

means. Using ends to justify means in Gandhi's view also violates human equality. And instrumental violence also includes indifference to the suffering of others, humans and animals alike. For both Gandhi and Schweitzer, indifference to the suffering of others was the most dangerous form of violence because the most prevalent, and the surest guarantee of the continuation of violence in perpetuity.

Predrag proceeded to note John Locke's profound impact on American culture. Locke argued that a unitary person is created from his or her sense of memory and his or her sense of being an atomic individual with property. Locke saw a person's body as their property. A man's wife was his property as a slave-owners slave was his property. Consequently, in the United States property rights have been placed above human rights. Both Schweitzer and Gandhi attacked this instrumental conception of reality. Eric Fromm in his book, *To Have or To Be*, challenges this possessive and selfish view of humanity. And like Fromm, Gandhi and Schweitzer both promoted the ideal of selflessness.

The golden rule has both positive and negative versions. Do unto others as you would have them do to you, or do not do unto others what you would not have them do to you. Gandhi and Schweitzer gave the golden rule another twist: love your neighbor because he **is** yourself. Schweitzer settled on reference for life as his fundamental philosophy on the assumption that we are all, all living beings, fundamentally one. This idea is also to some degree implicit in the Hindu greeting, "Namaste," means "I greet the divine within you."

(Predrag, or Jan-Helge, interjected at this point that Gandhi had the Buddhist idea, the oneness of all beings, before he read the Buddha.)

For Schweitzer, articulating the correct moral principle is not by itself enough. Instead one needs three things: 1) moral judgment; 2) an understanding of the context and the priorities any context demands to see how a moral principle is to be applied; and 3) an advanced level of moral development and maturity to be able to apply a moral principle with flexibility and sensitivity to the complexities of any situation. So for any action we must ask, What is the action? What is the consequence? And what is the motive? For both Gandhi and Schweitzer it is equally important **how** we carry out any action. It is important **how** we treat every person and every animal.

In the discussion, Jan-Helge commented that Schweitzer today is still read in theological schools, but not in departments of philosophy. He is seen as totally naïve in philosophy. He refused to specialize narrowly while the field of philosophy has moved increasingly towards narrow specialization. As philosophy split into two camps, Analytical and Continental, Schweitzer fit into neither of these camps. Some discussion ensued about how to communicate the profundity of Schweitzer's moral message to the contemporary world. We need to find a way to communicate this message emotionally, to the heart. There is apparently a recent feature film entitled simply *Schweitzer*, with versions in both English and German, but no distributor in North America has been willing to buy the distribution rights to this film. The

topic of how to communicate Schweitzer's message to a broader public would continue as a theme through all the workshop presentations and discussions.

Jan-Helge Solbakk, from UNESCO and the University of Oslo, Norway, spoke next on the topic, **"Reverence and Religion without God: Albert Schweitzer and Ronald Dworkin."** Jan-Helge began by noting that his own dissertation was on Albert Schweitzer's early theology. He suggested that we can't understand Schweitzer's ethics apart from his theology. He also noted that Schweitzer's correspondence with his wife shows that many of his mature concepts were present in his early views. Schweitzer began his career as a pastor and he remained one his entire life. Jan-Helge noted that the atheist and recently-deceased philosopher, Ronald Dworkin, recently published an essay in the *New York Review of Books* excerpted from a forthcoming posthumous publication by Dworkin, *Religion without God*. Jan-Helge was surprised and pleased to discover a number of interesting parallels between the views of the atheist philosopher Dworkin and the devout pastor Schweitzer.

Jan-Helge began by noting that Albert Einstein once said there are two ways of viewing life, first that nothing is a miracle and secondly that everything is a miracle. Einstein further noted that to be religious is to know that what is impenetrable to us exists. Dworkin in his forthcoming book argues that atheists also have religious attitudes and the capacity for transcendence. Atheists also feel an inescapable responsibility to live an ethical and compassionate life. Atheists have a sense of awe for the natural beauty of the universe. William James once noted that there are things in the universe and in our lives that "throw the last stone." (This reminds me of Paul Tillich's definition of religion as, our "ultimate concern.") For theists what "throws the last stone" is God. For atheists what "throws the last stone" is the importance of living morally and meaningfully. Dworkin also admits that all knowledge is in some sense faith-based. Einstein, Dawkins approvingly suggests, believed that the beauty and sublimity of the universe lies beyond nature and can't be grasped only by an understanding of the most fundamental physical laws. Einstein believed that some transcendental and objective value permeates the universe.

Asking what then should we count as a religious attitude, Dawkins suggests: 1) Human life has objective meaning and importance and we have a deep moral responsibility to ourselves and to others. And 2) the universe is itself sublime. Dawkins sees two requirements of the religious life: first, to affirm that life has intrinsic meaning, and secondly, that nature has intrinsic beauty. In this sense, atheists experience awe and a sense of mystery and thrill in living and observing life as much as any religious person. William James spoke of religion in this way: "the enchantment is the discovery of transcendental value in what seems otherwise transient or dead." In the Jamesian sense both Dworkin and Schweitzer insist that the only way to experience the transcendent is to engage fully with the world.

In 1903 when Schweitzer was 28 years old, he wrote to his fiancée, "If tomorrow I concluded there is no God and no immortality or that morality was the invention of society, it wouldn't affect me at all." And in 1905, on the eve of his publication of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, he wrote, "I want to live, to act as a disciple of Jesus. That is the only thing in which I believe."

The core message of Schweitzer's book, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, is that Jesus was profoundly mistaken in his eschatology. Jesus provoked his own crucifixion because he thought he was bringing on the end of history. Thus Schweitzer argued that although Jesus was profoundly wrong in his eschatology, he nevertheless demonstrated to us through his supreme self-sacrifice how we should live. Not surprisingly, when Schweitzer applied to go to Africa as a missionary in 1905, the mission board refused his application because of his unorthodox views. In 1913 Schweitzer wrote, "Christian theology is faced with two extreme possibilities: the non-historical Jesus or the all-too-historical Jesus. The church has to find its way through and beyond these two options." And in one of his most heretical observations, Schweitzer wrote in 1905 to his fiancée, "When Jesus died, didn't he say 'My God my God why hast Thou forsaken me?' Was he not then dying as an atheist? Who has the courage to think this idea unto its end?" And he followed this with the observation that atheism would also be a religion, "the most beautiful and difficult of religions." Predrag observed at this point that Schweitzer embraces Jesus and his ethics but not the Christ of the church. For Schweitzer the ethics of Jesus are absolute **despite** his mistaken eschatology.

In 1923 Schweitzer wrote that his ethics of reverence for life does not make a complete worldview. He accepts that "the Cathedral has to remain unfinished." Schweitzer also rejects any ontological explanation of the world. As he saw it we don't need an ontology as a fundament for an ethics. He concluded that the only way of finding meaning in life is in what he called ethical mysticism. For Schweitzer (in contrast to the Gospel of John) in the beginning was the Act, not the Word.

Thus, Jan-Helge concluded, both Schweitzer and Dworkin are open to the idea of an atheist religion with an emphasis on awe, enchantment and reverence, and a shared insistence that moral values must be the core of religious faith.

He also drew several contrasts, finally, between Dworkin and Schweitzer. Dworkin emphasized the harmony and beauty of nature. Schweitzer by contrast saw in nature the horror of the destruction of life against life. Dworkin embraces what Jan-Helge calls "gnoseological mysticism" while Schweitzer practices "ethical mysticism." And finally Dworkin's views may be called anthropocentric, while Schweitzer's views are more biocentric.

The next presenter was Chris Doude van Troostwijk, from the Academies of Utrecht and Amsterdam in the Netherlands, and the Académie de Catholique de Luxembourg in Luxembourg. Chris spoke on "**Albert Schweitzer's Splendid Isolation: Some Ideas for Reflection on the Future of the Ethics of Life.**" Chris began by the sober reflection that Albert Schweitzer today is largely ignored in both the academic worlds and in normal life. He has been forgotten by most people. Why he wonders if someone like Martin Buber still known but not Albert Schweitzer. Is it possible, he asked, that one reason for this is that Schweitzer's followers and the scholars who study him have simply made him into a boring saint?

Chris took his title, "splendid isolation," from the phrase used to describe Britain's position vis-à-vis Europe, but he noted that even in isolation, Britain still has a good deal of influence in

Europe. Chris proposes to divide his presentation into three parts, as if describing a medical condition: 1st, description; 2nd, diagnosis; and 3rd, treatment.

He suggests, to begin, that perhaps Schweitzer is a victim of the “tragedy of noncommunication,” or the “tragedy of the charismatic personality” whose appeal is snuffed out by the suffocating adoration of his followers. He noted that the Indian mystic Krishnamurthi abolished his organization saying, “I don’t want to be your *guru*. I want you to think for yourself.” (Jan-Helge interjected at this point that Schweitzer’s friends and admirers frequently knew little about his philosophy.) It is true that Schweitzer, insofar as he is known today, is admired for his personal life and for his personal self-sacrifice, while his ethics and his philosophy are largely forgotten. Chris concludes from this situation that we need a more critical attitude towards Schweitzer precisely **in order** to honor his legacy.

When charismatic personalities when a large following and leave the stage, their followers frequently put them on a pedestal or fight among themselves to be their successors, and thus the legacy of the great leader is often short-lived. In this regard, we should be less followers and more scholars, less admirers and more interpreters of Schweitzer. We need a new tonality in our approach to Albert Schweitzer.

Regarding the diagnosis of the problem, Chris argued that, as with a medical problem, the problem of Schweitzer’s future lies in his past. The representation of Schweitzer’s past comes from scholars like us on the one hand, and from Schweitzer’s self presentation in his own lifetime. Schweitzer was his own best marketer. We should deconstruct his work in this regard. Figures like Schweitzer often suffer from museum affectation or mummification after they pass from the scene. The result is an endless repetition of clichés and the problem of hagiography in which Schweitzer becomes a Protestant Saint. Saints are not interesting by definition. We need a more human Schweitzer.

Schweitzer wrote his autobiography (*Out of My Life and Thought*) halfway through his life. His autobiography is actually a novel, rewriting his life in light of a conversion experience in the style of *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. Everything in his life is shown to lead to a successful conclusion at the age of 48. In effect, he closed himself into an image he could not escape. His autobiography is a novel with a propagandistic purpose. A second aspect of the problem is that his philosophy is not reflexive. He preaches through philosophy, presenting his results, but he doesn’t show how he gets them. He does not develop reflexive reasoning. He does not give us insight into any struggle with or through reason itself. (Jan Helge interjected at this point that he wrote his books almost as if writing he were a musical composer. He wrote philosophy without exposing how he reached his conclusions. He is more simply an author than a philosopher or theologian.

In his diagnosis section, Chris coined the term for Schweitzer, “universal singularism.” Schweitzer’s most famous statement was “My life is my argument.” But a life is not an argument. He made a categorical mistake. My life is singular. Argument is universal or has

potential universality. This opens the door to relativism. He loses his universality. Everybody has a life. He's an intuitive philosopher who reaches his conclusions by intuition.

A second problem, Chris argues, is what he calls the "minimal spiritualism" of Schweitzer. Schweitzer rejects Jesus worldview but accepts his piety. He rejects Jesus is worldview but accepts his will. He argues for a trends historical spiritual connection. Because of this, Chris suggests, we need to recontextualize Schweitzer in the spirit of his times. There followed some discussion of modern philosophy that I didn't understand very well in all candor. Schweitzer doesn't feel the need to explicate his evidential is. He assumes all beings have the will to live but this fundamental assumption is not problematized at times. Schweitzer's worldview does not give us access to his actions. His critique of Kant applies to himself. He projects his will to live on all other beings, but this is only speculative. He experiences the will to live and from observations he assumes all others share this will to live. He accepts this but doesn't develop a rational argument to support it. Because the Vitalism of Bergson and others permeated his philosophical world, he didn't need to explain the concept of will.

For a prescription or cure for these problems, Chris suggests we need a strategy of re-inscription of Albert Schweitzer's life and thought. We need to re-inscribe Schweitzer in the historical context of his time. We need to avoid the myths of Schweitzer as a genius. We need to de-mythologize Schweitzer. What was the African view of Schweitzer? We might profitably compare Schweitzer with Heidegger as they were not opposites in all ways but were parallel in some ways. Schweitzer was an existentialist in some ways. For Jean-Paul Sartre, suicide is a serious option. For Schweitzer it is not an option, but these 2 thinkers make comparable claims. We need to discuss Schweitzer in light of Sartre. And we need to re-inscribe Schweitzer and read him as a musician, read him as an artist. A 3rd way to re-inscribe him would be to compare him with Hans Jonas (a new left philosopher of the 1960s). And we could compare Schweitzer with Erich Fromm and with the contemporary philosopher of animal rights, Martha Nussbaum. Chris proposed in conclusion that we need an International Institute for Cultural Ethics, to sponsor research on Schweitzer, reflections on Schweitzer, and education in the form of handbooks, curricular materials, and internships. And this Institute should also work on the creation of networks of people with common interests and common values and to reach out to opinion makers to publicize the philosophy and the values of Schweitzer.

In the discussion during and after Chris's presentation, it was agreed that Schweitzer the human being is much more interesting than Schweitzer the Saint. It was further agreed that numerous comparisons could profitably be made between Schweitzer and many other historical and contemporary thinkers.

The fourth presenter at the workshop was Jenny Litzelmann, Director of the Maison Albert Schweitzer in France. Jenny's topic was "**Reverence for Life: Theoretical and Practical Considerations.**" To begin her presentation Jenny said she would be considering the application of "reverence for life" to our contemporary world, partly by reflecting on the experience of the 3000 annual visitors to the Schweitzer Museum in Alsace. She noted that

these visitors include people of all ages, from all walks of life, and from many nationalities. She divided her presentation into 4 parts.

1. Her first point, made very briefly, is that Schweitzer's message may actually be damaged by the admiration in which he is held. For many people, Schweitzer was so good, and so saintly, that he could hardly qualify as a role model for us to try to follow. To combat this tendency, she argues, we need to place reverence for life in the context of our current world today. We should emphasize that you don't have to have 3 PhD's to follow Schweitzer in honoring reverence for life.
2. Secondly, she noted distinct differences between the French and the German reception of Schweitzer and his life and work. The French tends to emphasize that he was a colonialist, a paternalist, and even a bit racist in his attitude toward black Africans. And too many French and American visitors, he is seen as a dangerous man for his stand against atomic weaponry and atomic testing. His hospital was criticized then and since as dirty and backward, and he was criticized for not being more aggressive in adopting the latest in modern medical technology. German visitors by contrast, tend to be much more admiring in their attitudes, seeing Schweitzer is a great moral figure, akin to Jesus himself.

Young visitors to the museum are quick to understand Schweitzer's importance, and they particularly appreciate the use of photos and interactive exhibits in conveying the essence of his life and work. They, as most people, focus on his life and medical work in Africa and tend to ignore his work in philosophy, theology, and music. They are touched and inspired to walk through the home where Schweitzer lived. They are particularly fascinated by his spending so much of his life in humble service. Our key question should be not so much how to explain Schweitzer, but rather how to apply his life experience and his teachings to our own lives. When we realize that he was a human being, and not a saint, we can more realistically ask ourselves how to continue, and to improve on, his life's work.

The museum owns a rich collection of African objects, collected by friends of Schweitzer on an 8 week to work of Africa in 1931. Unfortunately, this collection has not been carefully catalogued and annotated. So although the collection is a rich one, it has not been helpful in actually explaining the realities of life in Africa. The museum would greatly benefit from using this collection to create a real Museum of African life and the center for reflection on colonialism and Its Legacy in Africa. Some people have blamed Schweitzer for having no deep interest in African beliefs and customs. This collection could provide the opportunity for reflections not only on colonialism, but on north-south relations and race relations and their importance in our world today. A part of this reflection would be the famous statement, "What you do for me without me is against me." This collection could also help Africans to reflect on their own importance to the

future of the world today. We need to focus on our common development since we all, all societies, are still developing.

In a brief discussion here, we came up with a number of ideas for the museum, such as rotating exhibits, displaying different artifacts, and changing the displays, so as to invite and reward repeated visits to the museum. The museum might also sponsor annual conferences on different topics related to Schweitzer, including music, medicine, north-south relations, philosophy, theology, and such comparative topics as Schweitzer and Jungian psychology, or Schweitzer and Freudian psychology. There are many engaging stories to tell about Schweitzer and his life and work.

Another topic with great appeal to young people is the whole issue of human – animal relations. Reverence for life is very different from utilitarian ethics. In Schweitzer's view no life form is any higher than any other life form, but there are times when one is forced to choose which life to sacrifice or to preserve. Empathy is a subjective feeling but that doesn't mean it is any less true than cold rationality. (At this point Chris interjected that we should not oppose rationality and feeling but rather combined the two. Reverence for life is absolute but its application is relative.) Schweitzer gave no list of rules to follow to live an ethical life. He wanted reverence for life to continuously awaken in us and to develop. Tension is inherent in all ethical choices. What is good for Schweitzer is to abolish the division between man and animals. (Predrag interjected at this point that the Jain religion may have been an important inspiration for Schweitzer. Jains will eat the fruit of a plant, but won't kill a plant. Jainism is older than Buddhism, and has about 10 million followers in India today. Schweitzer once wrote a chapter on the Jains and their beliefs.

3. Deficiency in philosophy. In addressing the imbalance today between the North and the South we need to ask, What is a good philosophy for the world? This is more important than asking, What is a good academic philosophy? In facing and shaping the future, we need an entire worldview, not just an ethical philosophy. In contrast to analytical philosophy that continuously narrows categories of thought, Schweitzer wanted to open and widen categories. Schweitzer abandoned academic philosophy because he believed academic philosophy abandoned the world. Einstein once commented that "Schweitzer is the only real philosopher." And Einstein saw Schweitzer as real because he gave his life for others.

Even as a child, Schweitzer wanted to pray for all living beings. He felt cramped on many levels. The academic world he found too self-enclosed, all talk and no action. Academic philosophy was much too narrow for Schweitzer. The whole of Western civilization was too narrow for him. Society, he felt, too easily suffocates creativity and compassion. He found the church too narrow as well, and Europe as a whole too narrow. According to Schweitzer's philosophy of reverence for life, our usual moral frame is also too narrow. Reverence for Life reminds us that we can't put life into narrow categories.

4. The place of the individual in society. This is a very important question for young people today, and it's very important for us to nurture the natural idealism of the young. Many young people today have no dreams. They don't easily see what they can do. Reverence for the spiritual life of individuals was also part of Schweitzer's reverence for life. And it is also necessary for us to cultivate a reverence for spiritual life. Too many people today have to fight for their very own survival, so they have little energy left to practice reverence for life. Schweitzer noted that many laborers are overworked and therefore parents sometimes ignore their children's upbringing. Many people are so busy today that they have no time for spiritual development, they have only time for work and for empty entertainments. Schweitzer ultimately is a critic of industrialization and the specialization of labor. Under such conditions human artistic power easily atrophies. Increased material production demands specialization, and the over-organization of public life subordinates spiritual life and squelches creativity. Young people today are idealistic, but obstacles are constantly put in their way. (Paul Ropp observed at this point that Schweitzer's moral critique of capitalist industrial society was similar in many ways to the critique of Karl Marx.)

Jenny concluded her remarks by noting that in many respects Schweitzer was profoundly pessimistic about Western civilization and its discontents, yet he remained profoundly optimistic in the sense that he affirmed that we as individuals are not helpless but rather we have the power to make a difference, and a profound difference, by practicing reverence for life in our vocational decisions, and in all our daily activities.

One other planned participant of the workshop, Simone Fermi Berto, from the International School of Advanced Studies in "Science of Culture," in Italy, was unable to attend at the last minute because of a family emergency.

At the final formal session of the workshop, Paul Ropp made some general observations, and led a discussion of all the participants. He briefly reviewed the topics covered by the four presenters, and asked a series of questions that he saw as implicit in the presentations. In comparing the legacies of Gandhi and Schweitzer, he asked, are there lessons from the experience of Gandhi and his legacy in India for reviving the legacy of Schweitzer in the Western world?

What is the place of Albert Schweitzer in Christian theology? Or in the Christian church? Should we see Schweitzer as a useful lever to move the Christian church to be more truthful to the ethics of Jesus? Or should we place more emphasis on the radical and heretical universalism of Schweitzer, that is, on his unorthodoxy? Should our mission be to reintroduce Schweitzer to the academic world first and foremost, or to the general public first and foremost? (His own answer to this, he said, would be to reject this contrast as a false choice. We should promote Schweitzer and his ethic both in the academic world and to the general public.

He pointed to several common themes from the presenters at this workshop. One lesson is that we should strive to humanize Albert Schweitzer. We should welcome controversies and not shy away from any shortcomings or blind spots that Schweitzer might have had. We should work to portray him within the context of his own time, and also strive to apply his ethical teachings and his life example to the challenges and issues of our own time. We should use all media options to communicate and develop effective materials for all audiences.

There are many contemporary topics that could be addressed through a discussion of Albert Schweitzer's life and teachings. These include: religion and atheism, humans and the environment, medical ethics, the ethics of everyday life, Schweitzer in the context of the history of colonialism, Schweitzer as a Christian prophet, Schweitzer's universalist religion, animal rights and animal spirituality, Schweitzer as a peace activist and a critic of nation states, of nationalist ideologies, and of atomic warfare and atomic testing. Schweitzer saw nationalism as the ultimate negation of reverence for life and this is a message with compelling relevance for our own time.

Schweitzer's statement that "my life is my argument," was perhaps philosophically ineffective as a rational argument, but his life was and is still inspiring in a personal sense. He was an artist whose life was his greatest work of art, and great works of art move us in both head and heart. A great work of art easily stands against all argument. Our moral choices are always shaped both by thought and feeling and Schweitzer's life combined inspiring thought and feeling in abundance.

In the discussion that followed it was observed, by Predrag, that many great moral leaders tend to be profound critics of their societies, gadflies like Socrates and Jesus, Schweitzer and Gandhi. These critics do not allow their cultures to rest content. Some of these, like Schweitzer, tend to be forgotten. Some are ridiculed and turned into caricatures, such as St. Francis of Assisi or Leo Tolstoy. And some are idolized and in some senses mummified without really being understood as is the case with Gandhi in India today. So it is never easy to reinvigorate and revive the passionate dedication of the great moral leader. But it should also not be impossible to do so. And when we recognize and accept the teachings of a great moral leader, we can't continue living our lives as before.

We concluded our discussions with a strong sense of agreement that this work—to make better known to the public the life, career and ethical teachings of Albert Schweitzer—is important and exciting work that we are all happy to be a part of.