

Conversations in depth: Grigori Pomerants

The philosopher Grigori Solomonovich Pomerants in conversation with Christian Egge on education, life and the image of man in a multicultural society.

Christian Egge

Introduction:

Towards the end of their book - Great religions of the world the authors Grigori Pomerants and Zinaida Mirkina write: In each of the world religions there lies a spiritual core, a depth which can only be reached by the expenditure of effort. This deepest core in each religion is far closer to that of another religion, than to its own periphery. This quotation encapsulates the thinking and philosophy of Grigori Pomerants. His project could be called Dialogue at depth.

We see that, in our increasingly multicultural society, religions play a larger and larger role. Today the focus is fixed on Islam. You only understand that which you love – whether it be another human being, mathematics, languages, biology or religion and so on. If love is interest on a deeper level – and if love requires active openness – then the teacher has to “open up” to his subject. Such openness is required in all dialogue. And dialogue is a necessity for the fruitful development of a multicultural society. The opposite would be: a “clash of civilisations”. Is it possible that the teacher of religion and how he relates to his subject could be one of the keys to peaceful global development?

Pomerants:

The philosopher Grigori Solomonovich Pomerants (b.1918) studied Russian literature at the philological faculty in Moscow. He has produced a large body of work and has a growing number of readers in Russia. He has lectured at the University of Moscow (faculty of cultural history), appears on radio and television and delivers his own monthly “private academic” lectures. For years he wrote regularly in a pedagogical magazine and is also engaged in several schoolbook projects.

All of this only became possible after Gorbachov's perestroika. His first doctoral thesis on Dostoevsky was burnt by the KGB when Pomerants was arrested after the war. He was then prevented from disputing his second thesis Trends within Eastern religious nihilism (title tr. from the Norwegian) because of his involvement with dissidents. Many of his essays have been published abroad but at home there was a prohibition on referring to him and his work in the Soviet Academy. During the 1970s he was active in underground academies. Andrei Sakharov was one of Pomerants' admirers. He taught and wrote about the great world cultures and their potential enrichment of one another, directly contrary to – and twenty years ahead of – Samuel Huntington's “Clash of civilisations”. The essay Theory on cultural continents and the problem and distinctive character of the complex culture (title tr. from the Norwegian) has been translated into many languages. Apart from his vast literary training, life itself has been Pomerants' school.[1]

Conversation: The Human Being – Responsible Agent or “Product”?

Christian Egge:

I would like to start with a question that I have posed to a number of teachers and academics in Scandinavia and elsewhere. It deals with the all-embracing, humanistic ideals and goals of the work in Norwegian and Swedish schools. The mandatory school curriculum in both countries describes the main task as helping children and adolescents to develop that fundamental human characteristic: *the ability to take personal responsibility*. It is based on man's potential freedom of choice, and we must see each individual as unique. The Norwegian curriculum even states that *man shall be looked upon as a moral being*. All ideals or intentions are in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. If we have now *discovered* that man possesses these qualities, or if we simply *postulate* it, we have a stated image of man to work from: *man is an agent, responsible for his own actions*.

On the other hand the biology we teach describes man as an *organism*. Some biologists and philosophers, using the scientific, biological description of man, draw the conclusion, or rather, frame the hypothesis, that what we call *life* and *consciousness* are physiological or biochemical, in other words material processes. These qualities are often called *emergent* qualities; they “emerge” from purely physical phenomena according to the premise: “something more from nothing but...” When it comes to what we call a reductionist view on the mental qualities of man, I want to look at a quote from Nobel Prize winner *Francis Crick*, who mapped the structure of the DNA-molecule. In his 1995 book *The Astonishing Hypothesis* he says:

The Astonishing Hypothesis is that “You”, your joys and sorrows, your memories and ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. You're nothing but a pack of neurons.[2]

This statement is close to saying that there is no room for human freedom, and therefore no personal liability. Implicit in the natural scientific subjects lies, potentially, a deterministic image of man. Man is above all a *product*. I would suggest there is a potential clash between the two images of man that are simultaneously being taught in our schools. What is your perspective on this?

Grigori Pomerants:

This battle or opposition between the cultures of humanism and the natural sciences has been recognised in Russian history since the turn of the 20th century. The famous philosopher *Vladimir Soloviev* has spoken ironically of the contradiction in the so-called “progressive outlook on life” of that time with this sentence: *Man is descended from the apes, therefore we shall do good!* And to this day we live with this contradiction. I encountered this problem myself on an existential level

when I was 16, and then it hit me with full force when I reached the age of twenty.

The way I see it today, the problem is that the scientific models are based on the following sentence: *The world is made up of atoms, of small particles, and is constructed from these atomic particles, in much the same way as a bicycle is assembled from the wheels, frame, chain, handlebars and so on.* This model is fruitful for scientific research, but it undermines man's sense of freedom and purpose in life – something he cannot live without. At the age of 16, 17 or 18 it is natural to feel anxiety when facing the existential question of the reality of the I and the universe. Many people forget the anxiety they felt then and carry on with life “unconcerned”. But for those who do not lose this anxiety it remains an important question. I would offer this solution: *the scientific model is not identical with the universe; it does not “take in” the whole of reality.* In reality the world does not consist of atomic particles; the whole is not a sum of the parts or of “atoms in time and space”. That which is made up of parts in time and space is conditioned and perishable. But the world is also a oneness or unity which is identical with that which religions celebrate as the holy or transcendent. All great civilisations are based upon a sense of “the transcendent oneness”, upon which our morality and sense of freedom are also based.

Over the course of centuries, scientific progress has challenged the religions' understanding of the world. The original religious leaders based their descriptions of the world on knowledge around 2000 years old. Advances in astronomy and biology have rendered the literal validity of the religious messages more and more questionable. Nowadays, the growth of general knowledge means that almost everyone doubts the truth and validity of those messages. But the messages remain valid as *metaphoric* descriptions of the world as a transcendent oneness. Despite the fact that they are not literally true, they hold as metaphors. Such descriptions of the world go back more than 2500 years. *Buddha* understood it, but not only him. *Yagnavalkya* in the *Brihadaranyaka-upanishad* – and the wise men in the *Chandogya-upanishad*; they all understood that the transcendent oneness cannot be described. You can only answer: “It is not this, nor this” or: “It is something you can only feel in the depth of your heart”. And *Buddha* was referring to this when speaking about the transcendent oneness as something “unborn, uncreated, unformed” and so on. The question remains. And all the victories of science cannot remove the transcendent oneness, because in a description in negative form there *is nothing that can be moved or shaken!*

This negative, or as the Russians say, this apofatic (gr.) description of the holy is impossible to reach through science. You have to experience, to feel in your inner depth that it is something real and not a happy invention. But modern civilisation has rocked or wounded the sense of the *depth itself!*

In the *Chandogya-upanishad* the wise man talks to his son about the *One, the Being, the Universe, the most inner being in all things, the Holy* - and he says: “This is what you are!” (*Tat twam asi*). He based his sentence on the clear feeling of a You – or the I in him. This is real and synonymous with the eternal truth. It is precisely this that modern civilisation has shaken by drawing our attention more and

more to everything that is superficial. We have to be constantly aware of individual phenomena because otherwise we risk an infinite number of catastrophes. We have to keep control of the technology we have created but in having to turn our attention to parts of the whole, we often lose our feeling for the transcendent oneness. Herein lies the problem.

Metropolitan Antoni Surozhsky says in his *Conversations*: “The first books of the Bible are mere attempts to describe something which cannot be described through language, with the “language of the fall” – (theologically:) the language after the fall of man.” If you can reach the feeling for what it is all about, then it is easy to re-establish all that has been lost. But there is a problem: how to re-establish or reach the depth of feeling on which we base the experience of the meaning of life and the freedom of our actions? For example, the feeling that Dostoevsky expressed in the sentence: The conscience is God’s activity in our soul. Here I think it is necessary to introduce what I call the contemplative pause to our civilisation. And that is an educational task which should be embarked on as early as kindergarten. But we can come to this later.

Openness to the abyss. The path of the riddle.

Egge:

What I have learned both from you and from your books makes it clear that you have personal experience of the “transcendent oneness” we are talking about and that reaching it has been painful. Would you mind taking us through your existential crises and “experiences of the abyss”? There are people today, including adolescents, who are having just such experiences – or the feeling that one calls an existential vacuum.

Pomerants:

I first came into contact with this problem when I was 16, reading Marx, Engels and Lenin. Confronting Lenin’s materialism and his “empiriocriticism”, an abyss opened up before me. I was filled with fear. Reality was presented as “a material infinity”. The infinite existed in the external, in matter – not as an inner infinity of the soul or self. This abyss of external material infinity threatened the meaning of my existence. I pushed this problem away and it was not until four years later that I dared to confront this abyss. I studied Russian literature at Moscow University. I recognised my own problem in poets and novelists. Tjutchev, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. A poem by Tjuttsjev made an indelible impression on me. Translated word for word it goes like this:

Nature knows no past. Our illusory years are unknown to it. And in meeting it we acknowledge as in a fog that we ourselves are nothing but the dreams of nature. By performing its unnecessary feat, nature blesses all its children equally, with its all-engulfing and peace-bringing abyss.

Reading Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* I was inspired to go to the bottom of the existential problem, to throw myself into the abyss so to speak. I asked myself a question similar to a *Zen-Buddhist koan* ("riddle"), even though I had never heard of Zen:

If infinity exists as pure materiality, then I do not exist. And if I exist, there is no such pointless infinity.

I knew nothing of meditation, and I don't know if I really meditated, but I repeated this sentence, over and over: "If this infinity exists, then I do not exist..." constantly. This went on for three months. It was 1938, in the midst of the great terror. My father was arrested during this time. I was only partly aware of political events. I was still thinking of the dilemma of the "koan". Finally I experienced an inner light, and in this light I came to philosophical conclusions. I will not go into that now, because at that time I did not understand that it was the inner light experience itself that was important, not the ideas. I told a girlfriend of the ideas I had had. She answered: "The first is objective idealism, the second is subjective idealism." Today I think she was right! But at that time I was hurt because I thought I had come up with something new. No, nothing new was discovered in this field. But I had made a personal discovery. In the abyss, in the openness to the abyss – or in the "fall", I had found the eternal self, a self whose consciousness can include the whole world and cannot be extinguished, not even when the body is dissolved in time and space. I had overcome metaphysical anxiety.

This was to reappear four years later, during the war. In 1942 I was at the frontline. For the second time we were exposed to bombing. This was during the battle for Stalingrad. (Pomerants was a war correspondent and officer.) The first time I had experienced the bombing I wasn't afraid; I was too romantic. But during the second rounds of bombings, and after being wounded, I experienced terrible fear. I threw myself to the ground and thought: how can I overcome this fear? It was half an hour of inner struggle. Finally the thought came to me that once before I had overcome my fear of the abyss of infinity. I told myself: "If I do not fear infinity, then I cannot fear the German bombers." Instantly I was liberated from my fear. I think this liberation came from the feeling that there is something inside of me that can overcome fear.

The precondition of love

Later I read, "*complete love overcomes fear*". It is written in the gospel of St John. I must have read it before but without understanding; now I had experienced it. Gradually I had moved towards this truth. I experienced the precondition of love in the concentration camps. After the war I was arrested and spent four years in one of Stalin's camps – up to 1953. It was in the far North. I had amazing experiences there. For example the white nights. The sky was suffused with the most varied colours, colours so beautiful that I "swam" or "dived" into their beauty. In this sky I felt the transcendent oneness, this light that never dies, that is never extinguished. It was something real and tangible to me. Many of my friends laughed at

me: I was so absorbed by the sky, I was almost unaware of the barbed wire around the camp. I was after all in prison. But the sky set me free. It was an overwhelming experience.

In the camps we had access to books. I found support for my experiences in the literature of the great traditions. I felt most affinity with *Zen Buddhism*, which I first read about only after my internment. Because it is not related to any dogma you are expected to believe in, Zen throws the student into the same abyss that I had thrown myself into. But this is not the only path to understanding. Another path is through love for a personality who has experienced the depth and has described it in some way. How can one come to such a love? In the camp I made a discovery. One must be able to come second. Two of my friends and I had a stupid fight. One of them bragged about understanding not only science but also philosophy, and in my mind I thought: "He thinks he is the cleverest. But I know that I am not more stupid than him, on the contrary..." We were both about 32 years old. The younger, 21 years old, was very forward. He had been arrested during his first semester at university and brought to the camp. He said: "I think I am the cleverest!" The friend of my own age was astonished and lost for words. In this moment I understood that we were all mad. "Each of us thinks he is Ferdinand the seventh..." (from Gogol's story *Diary of a Madman*). I thought: "This is terrible, three intellectuals, each of us convinced he is the cleverest. This is madness." It was painful for me, but I called out: "You two can fight for first place, I'll take second." This was very important, because it became the *discovery of the path of love*. One must root out one's feeling of "I am the most important". One has to be ready to come second. At first I only understood that it was absurd of us to think, "I am the cleverest". But for me the consequences of this became something completely unexpected.

Love's fulfilment

There were women in the camp but I met none with whom I could really converse. It was only later during the internment that I met someone with whom I could talk about interesting things. She also awoke a great love in me. It was an unhappy love, because it was not mutual. But I discovered that I was capable of feeling true selfless love.

After the liberation I worked for a while, first in the province, and later in a library for foreign literature in Moscow. There, in the mid-50s, I experienced this love for the woman who was to become my first wife, *Ira Muraviova*. One night with her, I knew love that was like a feeling or experience of inner light. It lasted for a few hours. When dawn broke, the inner and outer light fought one another so to speak for a few minutes – until the outer light prevailed. During these night hours I was made aware that the transcendent oneness exists. It is not an intellectual knowledge – but it can be felt.

Egge:

So the precondition for reaching this experience of love was that you had learnt to “come second”?

Pomerants:

Yes, and love opened up the feeling of oneness to me, of the inner light. But that was still not all. Ira and I were very happy for a year and a half. Then she died suddenly during surgery – completely unexpectedly. She was 39 years old, and I was 41. So imagine: it was in the middle of a time of glowing love - and in this moment comes death! It was a horrible time for me. I even had hallucinations. I experienced being split into two. My intestines were hanging out of my body and dragging on the pavement as I walked. This went on for two months. Then New Year was approaching. I was going to celebrate the evening with Ira’s two sons, my stepsons. They too were suffering deeply from losing their mother. I knew I should really try to face the New Year with hope and cheerfulness so that we could come out of this everlasting sorrow. In my solitude I tried to say the words *Happy New Year. May it bring happiness and joy to you.* But all I could do was cry. So I began to practise saying these words, almost meditatively. I had two weeks. And I succeeded. Not only could I help my stepsons to welcome in the New Year; at dusk on the 1st of January 1960 I had a dream that my intestines dried up and fell off. After that I never had such hallucinations again.

But a wound still remained inside. I had a contradictory feeling: it became impossible to be devoted to God, a God who rules everything so that not a hair can be harmed without Him willing it. After the experience I had had I could not accept such a God. So in this condition I was cheerful on the surface, but in the depth of my soul was a concealed wound.

“God screamed”

After a time I met a woman who wrote interesting poetry, *Zinaida Mirkina*[3].

The first poem I heard, God screamed, made a huge impression on me. This poem described God as compassionate. God suffers with all who suffer. Behind our own scream is the scream of the living God. It was not an explanation as to why God cannot take part in this world without suffering; it was merely taken for a fact. *God was described as participating with me in my suffering, and I take part in His eternity and His creative power.* The poem ends like this:

No! Never dies the Eternal One
I
die
for Him

So I am part of God's destiny. I think we see something similar with *Martin Buber*. Regarding the Indians' way of experiencing the world as *Lila*, "God's game",

Buber said: "No, the world is not God's game, the world is God's destiny!" This poem by Zinaida has given me access to the religions that speak of God. Myself I do not belong to a particular confession. But I accept all great religions. As a person living in Russia where culture is related to the Orthodox Christian Church, I am interested in it, and I feel it as a kindred religion because I live in this sphere, in this culture. But generally I do not think it is so important in which form or with which words a civilisation expresses itself. Many people cannot access this themselves; they need orientation through others. It can be accessible through love for people who have had the deepest experiences – in Christianity, for example, the love for Christ. Think of Mary Magdalene; she loved Christ. She did not understand him, but she loved him instantly. And through that love she reached a communion with the divine Love. Every civilisation has to find an outlet for the expression of such feelings. The problem is: how to convey the expression of these feelings so that they are not in conflict with everyday experience.

The importance of religions in a multicultural society

Egge:

This touches my question regarding the multicultural society that is now developing in every part of the world. Today people with the most various religions live in our country. In Norway and Sweden we are not allowed to convey a belief to our students. Schooling is required to be non-denominational, even though we build our values on Christian tradition and Western humanism. We teach about Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and so on, just as we teach other subjects. But when I listen to you, I understand you to mean that man actually *needs* religion?

Pomerants:

Yes, man needs a philosophy that includes all the great religions as forms, or expressions for, a *mystical matrix*. I want to mention an example, a highly interesting Indian. He lived to be 136 years old. The last 50 years he lived in solitude outside Katmandu in Nepal. His name was Shivapuri Baba, the Holy from Shivapuri forest. And the English Minister Resident – it was during the British rule – was his student. This Resident was the King's Counsellor. It was the Resident's advice that determined the outcome of the King's decisions, just as in the case of the Counsellor of the Japanese Emperor. There was a kind of a colonial rule in Nepal. But the Resident's "schoolwork" was to keep Shivapuri Baba's house clean! The Resident writes: "When an Indian came to the master, a Hindu, he taught him the Bhagavad Gita. Came a Buddhist, he taught him the sutras. Came a Muslim, the master taught him according to the Koran. If the student was Christian, he taught him the Gospel."

Egge:

So the consciousness of the teacher of Religion should ideally be pointed towards a kind of convergence of the different religions; the religions can meet “at depth” so to speak? Have I understood you correctly?

Pomerants:

Yes. And I think the book that Zinaida and I wrote together, *The great religions of the world*, can be useful. It was published in 1995, the result of 20 years work. At the end of the book we write:

In each of the world religions lies a spiritual core, a depth which can only be captured by the expenditure of effort. This deepest core in each religion is far closer to that of another religion, than to its own periphery.

At depth all religions are very close to one another. I do not mean that they are identical, for God also has different aspects as conveyed by the symbol of the Trinity. I have written an essay on Andrei Rublev’s icon “The Trinity”. I mean that the principle of the Trinity exists initially in all religions, including Buddhism for example. I am thinking of Buddha’s three bodies: dharmakaya, sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya. In the essay I put it this way:

“The Trinity is the meeting place of all great religions, Buddhism and the others, where the trinitarian thinking is not as developed, but merely lies within as a tendency”....”The Trinity is in reality completely unknown to most Christians and even theologians. Christianity therefore has no reason to consider itself superior to the religions of the Father (Judaism, Islam) nor to the religions of the Holy Spirit (Buddhism, Vedantism). No confession is blessed in its vanity; they are all blessed in their humility. They are all able to step out onto the field of metatheology, where the dogmatic religions are considered to be reflections of a great secret in different mirrors. No superior union is needed to do so, only a deepening in each religion, both as open questions to God and anti-dogmatic paradoxes (as we know them from Job, Zen and Kierkegaard), and as a fruitful continuation and widening of the dogmatic. But the most important is that this is all done in the spirit of love, compassionate concern and understanding.”

So what we call God can be expressed in different ways. The important thing is that at depth all religions are close. This needed to be expressed and we did it. Unfortunately there are only 33,000 copies of our book, which is far too few for a country the size of Russia.

The contemplative pause

Egge:

Maybe now is a good time to come back to what you mentioned earlier about “the contemplative pause”. In different situations you have said that civilisation needs “contemplative pauses” – or you talk about “the future of contemplation”. In other words, it is crucial for civilisation to develop this contemplation consciously in order to ensure its continued existence. Since my research has to do with schools and pedagogy I want to ask you: what are the themes that could be used in practising “turning inwards” with children and adolescents? I am thinking of the fact that in our secularised society we are not allowed to *pray* with the students.

Pomerants:

The approach to the transcendent oneness is of course an individual matter. In reality each human being is an individual problem. I have walked my path; that is a reality. Now we are going to talk about something that has not been done before. That is theory. One can question what is good and what is bad. I think there are many paths. The characteristic for the path of Zen is that the person is thrown into an abyss, into a state of mental shock. The student must ponder seemingly meaningless paradoxes – until the mental structure falls. The enlightenment that suddenly occurs cannot be described in words. In the West we also find mystics and philosophers giving witness to similar experiences: *Meister Eckhart, Carl Gustav Jung, Erich Fromm, Heidegger and Wittgenstein*. One is thrown into an abyss and must begin to swim in that abyss. Just as in teaching a child to swim, you throw the child into the water, the child begins to move its hands and feet – and starts to swim. That is one way.

But it is only a path for those strong enough, and it must be voluntary. Therefore it is not a path for everyone. It is for a minority. In no Buddhist country do we find a majority of Zen Buddhists!

Another path is through the love for a person who experienced “The Encounter”, for enlightened, saint being in whose heart dwells God. It does not need to be a real historical person; it may very well be a mythological being. Mythology is also the discovery of something real, but not historically real. It is a constructed truth. It is about the love for a personality who has experienced the light of the eternal love. Francis of Assisi can be such a historical personality or, to mention one from the 20th century, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton. In Russia we have Antonius Sorosh (Surozhski, as mentioned before). His family, originally called Bloom, came from Scotland and were naturalised Russian during the 18th century. He said in one of his speeches: “We need people who have experienced meeting God. Not everyone can have such strong experiences as Paul”, he said, “they can be smaller experiences, but nevertheless with a hint of the holy”. Such people are also a minority. But they can inspire others; they can give an orientation, an image for the hearts of men.

We can furthermore use art, the great images or the sublime music existing in all traditions. Titian, Rembrandt, El Greco, Rublev, Bach. You can listen to music in the dark. A tranquil, peaceful contemplation – even in kindergarten. We need still-

ness. The solution to many problems is born in stillness. We must introduce this into our culture full of noise. Heraclitus spoke of this: "On the surface is hostility and conflict. In the depths is the eternal fire – and peace". This is true at all levels, from the international to the domestic.

In Islam, where painting is renounced, we can find inspiration instead in the mythical and mystical poetry such as the significant *Sufi-direction*.

We can also use fairy tales which saw a renaissance during the 20th century as evidenced by Tolkien, C.S Lewis and Michael Ende. The fairy tale conveys something metaphorically which also has an appeal for adults. In this field, metaphors and fairy tales can convey more than conceptual thinking. Art, whether sacred or profane, is full of possibilities.

Prayer naturally has a contemplative element. When it comes to Islam we should not forget that the five daily moments of prayer are such contemplative pauses! It is also good for the heart, medically speaking if you wish!

Egge:

So you mean that we have many possible ways of practising this – even in our secularised schools? I mean, if a teacher is afraid of ending up "practising a religion"?

Pomerants:

Absolutely. You can contemplate fire. In the woods or walking in the mountains. Or take Chinese art, for example. In Chinese art it is possible to deepen the experience of nature. Nature is so to speak a "natural icon". A living icon. The sea and the mountains also are "iconic" windows to a spiritual world. Everything that is elevated in art or nature can be an image of the hidden depth. Even a single tree can be such an image. As Prince Mishkin said: "It is impossible to see a tree without being happy!" When the heart is ready for an encounter with the transcendent oneness, a tree can be such an image, a sign from the depth. In this way a feeling for the depth develops that can counterbalance the surface-consciousness that is distracted by a thousand and one individual impressions. In stillness creativity is born; a poem, music - and above all - the possibility of dialogue.

Contemplation must be without a goal, unselfish. This not only leads to a deeper image of the world. It also changes a person in his personal relationships. It opens the path to real love and fosters true family life: a world where children see their own parents as a model or pattern. Among so-called primitive people the parents are "revered". In our time it is quite the reverse; the young see their parents as spiritually bankrupt and not to be counted on. This is the disease of our civilisation. But true, deep love supports family life where children can have an image of their parents as important people, an important man, an important woman. Such love grows in stillness.

Contemplation and ecology

Egge:

Do you think the abilities one develops through these contemplative exercises can be significant for the future of our environment?

Pomerants:

I think so, but there are two principal aspects to this matter. On the one hand this question relates to a range of scientific, technical, administrative and legal problems or controls. We already have regulations to protect the environment, and are constantly framing new limits on pollution control. On the other hand we have the question of our relationship to nature – nature as an image of the transcendent oneness. How do we set about developing a spiritual attitude of respect for nature? This may be the fundamental change that is needed to ensure that we comply with the laws and regulations to protect the environment – something that, unfortunately, we are often reluctant to do. Without respect for nature, all such protective legislation will be inadequate. Many people frown on such legislation; there is a natural resistance to it and many people think: well, I'm not going to live more than another 20 or 30 years; why should I worry how it will look in 50 years time? I really don't care. This attitude means that the attempt to enforce regulations will not be very effective. In the light of this, I think we have much to learn from the culture of the Far East with its reverence for nature. As I said earlier: the superficiality of our lives makes us ignorant. The problem is growing bigger all the time.

Egge:

You say at one point that the biosphere is not elastic, that it cannot accommodate unlimited, material growth. You even say it is essential for us to replace material growth with spiritual growth. As well as destroying the biosphere we will undermine our own existence. Now you are working intensely to show us a possible path we can take to change, or deepen, people's consciousness. Are we going to make it? Do we have reason to give the young hope for the future?

Pomerants:

To be perfectly honest the future is not guaranteed. A catastrophe, or any number of catastrophes may happen. Many people are stupid enough to imagine a future without catastrophes. I think we have to expect a number of catastrophes both large and small; we must recognise that they are unavoidable. But such painful crises awaken people to the need for change. Ordinary men and women understand that a turning point in history has been reached, and that mankind must learn humility towards nature.

A moral universe?

Egge:

Desmond Tutu writes in his book *No future without forgiveness* that he thinks and believes that we live in “a moral universe”. He says that people can do a great deal of evil, but sooner or later it will come to an end. Or in his words: “God prevails!” In other words he is saying that one cannot go on doing evil deeds forever. Something will happen. At the same time he says that God has created us free. In other words we have the freedom to commit evil! This might sound like a paradox. But bear in mind - Tutu has struggled his whole life for freedom.

Buddhists imply that there are spiritual laws. They talk about the law of karma. Both the thought of “a moral universe” and the conception of “karma” – and not forgetting our inner voice of conscience – has made me ask the question:

We have on one hand the laws of nature, such as gravity for example. We accept that it is there, and we relate to it. Can we then also assume that there are spiritual laws in the cosmos that apply to all people? This is important in the context of our increasingly multicultural society, where we see different sets of values. Are there in your opinion common moral or ethical norms or values that all can find, where people can unite?

Pomerants:

I think it is possible to find certain values, but what we need, what is crucial, is not an intellectually thought-out choice for everyone. It is, as mentioned before, the experience of the depth in stillness that can give birth to ways of resolving conflicts. This cannot be reached without acknowledging that the soul has more layers than we are used to. Below the everyday consciousness, we have the subconscious layer. The animal lies within. That is “natural”. But that is not the deepest level. There is a saying about this layer: the devil waits halfway down! Some internal layers must be disciplined. What we call deep psychology is often only a “halfway down psychology”. I would claim that Freud has caused damage to our culture. Muslims reject this western “Freud-influenced” culture. And from a certain point of view they are right. Zilvan said: “You shall only eat so much, or enjoy yourself sexually to the point where you can pray afterwards!”

Deeper down in the human spirit is the divine. We must permeate to this depth past the layer that deep psychology talks about. It is like passing the mouth of a fiord and coming to the ocean. That is where we find that the world is not just the sum of atomic particles. That is where we find the transcendent oneness. There the solution to conflicts lies.

Love as an organ of cognition

Egge:

You often come back to feelings. That the intellect alone cannot solve our problems. But we do state our problems, for example the ecological, through sensory observation and thinking. The way I see it, you want to find a way through the intellect, so to speak, to a *thinking of the heart*? And the path goes through contemplation the way you have described it.

Pomerants:

Yes, and in life through love. Without love you cannot understand anything. It is impossible to understand Christianity, for example, without a personal love. The same is true for the Buddhistic Amida-cult, the Kwannon-cult (in China the Kwan-Yin-cult) and other Buddhist divinities; they are connected to a *cult of love*. Love is the Master. Love has many faces. Sexual love is only one aspect of love. It awakens at a certain age, at 15, 16, and decreases in old age. At this point a form of love returns that is similar to that between mother and child, grandparents and grandchildren. The Chinese believe that the love between parents and children is the most important form of love. One must consider that death too is real. Ira Muraviova's death showed me that everything physical is fragile. One must have something to love in the other person that is deeper than the physical. Hence this search for an image of the very deepest. Without the love of the deepest, the transcendent oneness, one's personality and education are incomplete. All problems originate in this incompleteness – social, international, environmental and so forth. *Jean Paul Sartre* said: "The other (person) occupies my space." The other's mere existence is a scandal. Yes, this is what it is like on the surface. On the deepest level, on the other hand, it is possible to solve even the Arab–Israeli conflicts.

But we may have to wait until we have reached the point of exhaustion. Often, it is only then that a new impetus is possible.

The crucial thing in other words is deepening. This is very difficult, since our civilisation is so oriented towards advanced technologies, which are essential to avoid catastrophes. Naturally we cannot destroy the machines as the Luddites did in England in the early days of the Industrial Revolution. That was a movement that revolted against mass production by destroying the machines. We cannot destroy our machines, electronic communications, cars and so on; therefore we must introduce *pauses for contemplation* into our society. We must find Stillness.

Egge:

In other words as a complement, to create a balance?

Pomerants:

Yes, but step by step we must also change our civilisation, so that it comes into balance with nature. It is life at depth that must be the goal of human existence. More

art. Music by Bach and the paintings of El Greco must become more and more important. Fewer cars! We do not need 3, 4 cars to a family as they have in America. Without such a change of values we will not survive. It is crucial. The destiny of civilisation is not guaranteed to be happy. As long as we live superficially, we are very permissive about temptation. Our civilisation is full of temptations and we may very well fall as a result. Our freedom will then be used in the pursuit of evil and destruction. This is entirely possible.

The Nordic countries as intermediary between civilisations?

Egge:

Contrary to *Samuel Huntington* you write on the whole optimistically about the possibilities for constructive dialogue between areas of culture, “culture continents” or “sub-civilisations” as you also call them. Your idea is that different civilisations can enrich one another. Can you see a mission for the Nordic countries or for Russia? Do we have a common mission, a quality that can make a contribution to the way the world develops?

Pomerants:

There is the possibility; the question is whether we use it. I think that the dominance of the US as a super-power will soon come to an end. It is at its peak right now, but I think in 20 years, maybe 15, China will be as powerful as the US. Everything will be different then. I think that, on the whole, Europe should dissociate itself from American imperialism, and seek a role as an intermediary between cultures. To be an intermediary between the great “sub-civilisations” is a huge mission for the future. Europe is better equipped for this than America. America is highly limited intellectually with its North-American inwardness and understands very little of the world’s problems, its real cultural problems. I think that Europe together with Russia, with the Nordic countries, in other words the European civilisation, has a great mission globally. But I do not know which country will come to put it into effect. One possibility is the Nordic countries because they are not burdened with a centuries-long history of imperialism. They can act more freely in the role of mediator. But up to now this has not always succeeded. The Oslo agreements, for example, were a failure. So everything is possible, decisions both good and bad.

State – School

Egge:

Finally, everything we have been talking about relates to schooling – of children and adolescents. They are our future. They provide the possible foundation for positive development. In our countries the State guarantees school attendance for

every child, and finances it too. Therefore the State naturally wants to know how the school is run, whether its overall goals are being adhered to and so on. The extent to which the State should have a view of schooling can be questioned. In Norway and Sweden there is much debate about schooling at the moment, especially about the so-called independent schools. For example what goes on in Muslim schools or other schools with a religious profile, whether they do what they are required to do, or do things they are not supposed to? We often discuss forms of examination, marks (or not), if the students are allowed to wear hijab. The issues are many. But I want to ask you more specifically about the relationship between State and school: Should schools have full autonomy and, if not, where should the limits be set?

Pomerants:

This is a very complicated question. I am not completely free in this matter, because in other countries we have other states, other authorities, and thereby other relations between state and school, between religion and school. In our country I am in favour of maximum freedom for the schools because the State is re-establishing a kind of “soft, authoritative model”. And that will not lead to a good future! Therefore it is better to have different options for schools, different models; this is better than too large a uniformity. At the same time we must remember that the school has to prepare adolescents for real life, and certain minimum requirements of learning and attainment must be guaranteed. The adolescents must be prepared for their role in our technocratic civilisation. We must in other words “adjust” ourselves. But as has already been mentioned: We must adjust ourselves to the future and its needs. And then we must also take a wider perspective than we have in the past! We must consider the deeper needs of man which is also crucial for the future of the planet. This is where practising the contemplative pause comes in. This is a huge mission.

The interview took place in Moscow on February 2004. The conversation was held in German. Translation from the Norwegian text into English by: Karin Björck.

[1] The biographic facts on Pomerants are mainly taken from Peter Normann Waage's introduction to Pomerants' essay collection *Utgang fra trancen*, Cappelen, Oslo 2000 – and from Waage's own essay collection *Brytninger*, Cappelen, Oslo 98, where a very interesting description on Pomerants' life and thinking is given. Waage masters Russian and has met Pomerants on several occasions. His translations were helpful when quoting Pomerants' own texts in the interview.

[2] Crick, F. 1995: *The Astonishing Hypothesis. The Scientific Search for the soul*. Page.3. Touchstone Books. London.

[3] Zinaida Mirkina and Grigori Pomerants married soon after meeting for the first time and live together in Moscow. She is an important poet in Russia. Before the perestroika she was not allowed to publish.

