

**Book Review** – Richard Higginson

# The Human Odyssey: East, West and the Search for Universal Values

By Stephen Green

SPCK, 2019, Hardback, 310 pp, £19.99, ISBN 978-0-281-08113-4

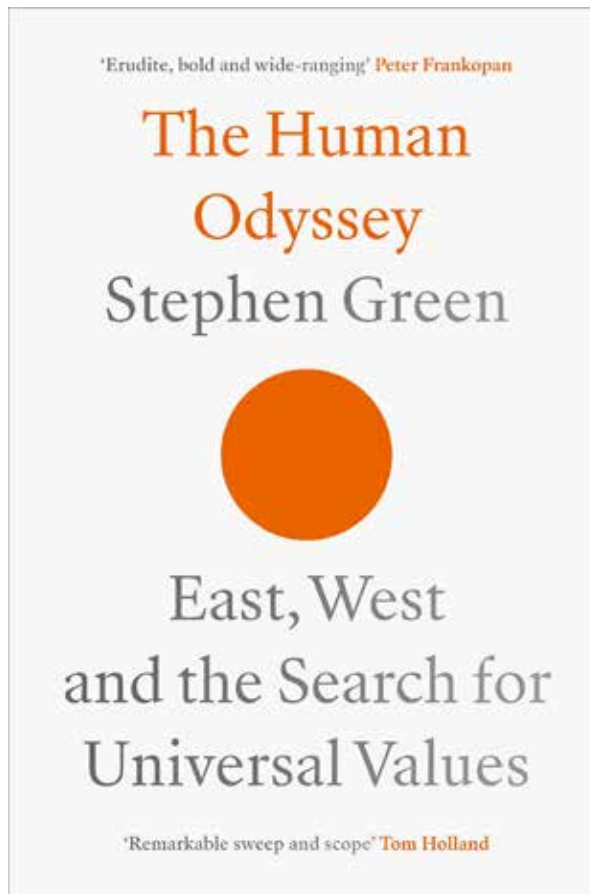
Stephen Green is a leading figure in Christian business circles. As is widely known, he rose through the ranks of HSBC to become both Group Chief Executive and Chairman. He went on to become Minister for Trade and Investment in David Cameron's government from 2011-13. Along the way he became a non-stipendiary priest in the Church of England.

What is also evident to those who know him well or have kept track of his writings is that he is a person of enormous learning and erudition. His latest book, *The Human Odyssey: East, West and the Search for Universal Values* is a veritable tour de force. It reveals Green as a part-time scholar who is astonishingly well read and versed in a wide variety of disciplines: history, literature, philosophy, religion and cultural studies.

The book begins with this striking personal statement: 'I have had the great privilege of living in different parts of the land mass we call Eurasia, and of travelling extensively over three decades throughout many of its countries' (p.ix).

This has led him not only to research deeply into the history of Europe, Asia and the Middle East, but to explore 'Where are we heading?' He believes that all the greatest challenges of the

next century will centre on Eurasia, though he is quick to add that America will also be heavily involved in determining the world's destiny.



## Two Polarities

There are two polarities – perhaps better, two dialectical tensions – that run through *The Human Odyssey*: unity verses diversity on the one hand, and individualism verses individuality on the other.

Green sees the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia as a key moment in Eurasian history. It signalled the end of the destructive Thirty Years War, but it came with a price: countries agreed

to go their own way, and nation-states began to define themselves by their distinctive cultures. Cultural nationalism has actually increased in recent years, and this leads Green to raise the 'uncomfortable possibility' *that there may be cultural differences deep enough to put in question whether there are universal ideas or values at all*' (his italics, p.18). He proceeds to illustrate in graphic detail how different the countries of Eurasia are in all sorts of way; this includes differences within these countries as well as between them. Yet he refuses to see this diversity as so far-reaching as to lead him to despair. On the contrary: some of the most fascinating parts of this book are where he traces unexpected convergences between cultures. For instance, in chapter 7, entitled 'Not lost in translation', he identifies common themes across Greek, German, English, Indian,

Chinese and Japanese literature – themes such as the search for character flaw or a fatal error of judgment; the highs and lows of love; the heartache of loss. 'All cultures, however different from one another, have been touched by tragedy and

know about the tears of things' (p.194). The things that cultures have in common give Green hope that the search for universal values is not in vain.

Human beings will only make progress in this quest, however, if we can grasp the difference between individualism and individuality, and make the progression from one to the other. Individualism is the way of thinking that makes the self the subject of every sentence. It is the self-centredness that self-certainty can so easily become. In contrast, individuality does not sacrifice or subsume the individual in the collective whole, but understands that *we discover ourselves fully only as we discover the other* (again italics his, p.2). The individual reaches maturity only through genuine mutual engagement. So Green's penultimate sentence is that whichever great metaphysical system 'we choose to live by, we will gain immeasurably in our individuality and in our humanity if we are open to learning the wisdom of others' (p.275).

Along the journey, he makes many profound observations about national cultures he knows well. On China: 'although there is barely a single true-believing traditional communist anywhere in China, the Communist Party is still unwilling to slough off its Marxist metaphysics, even as it deliberately borrows Confucian terminology to express its vision and objectives' (p.16). On Japan: 'Japan has never confronted

its twentieth-century past in the way Germany has, partly because there was no equivalent to the Holocaust, and partly because Hiroshima dealt it a sense of victimhood' (p.135). He sums up the split identity of Russia (beauty and brutality) as its 'facing two ways', towards Europe on the one hand and Asia on the other. On the USA: 'two souls live in America's breast. One soul wants to put the world right; the other soul wants to go back home to its own simpler world' (p.166).


### Some Puzzles

Although *The Human Odyssey* contains many strengths, and I found Green's central argument persuasive, it also reveals some puzzling aspects. One is the extent to which his personal history remains hidden through most of the book. Green begins on an attractively autobiographical note, and his account of urbanisation (a key modern phenomenon) starts with his recalling how in 1984 he looked out from Hong Kong – where

he lived and worked for many years – to observe the sleepy mainland town of Shenzhen, which then numbered 20,000 inhabitants. It is now a vast sprawling industrial city of 10 million. But from chapter 2 onwards, there is very little by way of personal anecdote. He takes on the mantle of the objective scholar dispensing wise judgment on all that he has read and absorbed. I find this omission strange and rather sad.

Surely the operation of the financial markets is crucial to understanding the contemporary world? But despite all his experience with HSBC Green has nothing of note to say about the banking system. And there is no inside knowledge that appears to come from his being an Anglican priest. Sure, he is knowledgeable about Christian history and theology, but so too is he about Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism. Green surveys and comments on all the world's major faiths in a cool even-handed way. Is there no distinctive Christian insight he might want to promote in understanding Eurasia at this particular juncture in world history? One might have expected this especially as the book has a Christian publisher, SPCK.

### Greater Understanding

So do I recommend *The Human Odyssey* to a Christian business readership? Yes I do, despite the reservations I have just expressed. Any book which helps a world that is so badly divided to understand itself better is worth its weight in gold. I think Green's wisdom is especially valuable for those who work for a multi-national organisation, as he did himself. They stand to gain by learning more about the astonishing world in which we live, so that they are better able to understand the many different peoples with whom they work, engage and compete. As Green says, context matters for all human creativity, and everything we create is a creature of the particular culture we belong to (p.180). It is as important for businesspeople to understand that as anyone else. 

**'Any book which helps a world that is so badly divided to understand itself better is worth its weight in gold'**



*Richard Higginson was Director of Faith in Business at Ridley Hall from 1989 until his retirement in 2018. He is now Chair of Faith in Business. He is a founder-editor of FiBQ and the author of several books, including Faith, Hope & the Global Economy and (with Kina Robertshaw) A Voice to be Heard. He is an international speaker on business ethics and the theology of work.*