

THOUGHTS ON THE HUMAN CONDITION TODAY

For several centuries, and in fact since the Renaissance, Western man has extolled the human spirit while de-sacralizing the whole of the cosmos in the name of the supremacy of man, only to end now in a situation which for the first time in history threatens man with truly infra-human conditions on a scale never dreamt of before. Clearly the classical humanism which claimed to speak for man has failed, and if there is to be a future for man there must be a profound change in the very concept of what man is and a thorough re-examination of the secular humanism of the past few centuries in the light of the vast universal and perennial spiritual traditions of mankind which this humanism has brushed aside with the claim of giving man freedom. Today people speak of the human family, but if there is to be a human family its members must be first of all human themselves. But the experience of the recent past has shown that even on the level of preserving the quality of human life modern civilization is facing grave problems and, far from freeing man, has enslaved him as never before. Man must be rendered his humanity again if there is going to be even hope of a world wide human family, and this humanity can only be brought back through the rebirth of a conception of man which the Promethean revolt of the modern world has placed in oblivion.

The current concept of man as a self-centred creature not responsible to any authority beyond himself and wielding infinite power over the natural environment cannot but end in the aggression of man against himself and the world of nature on a scale which now threatens his own existence. The type of Promethean man who conceives himself as being in revolt against God, complete master of his own and others' destiny and possessing unbounded energy and power over the earth which is used to an ever greater degree to quench his insatiable passions cannot but reach a state of disequilibrium and chaos which is exactly what modern man faces at every junction of his life today. This disequilibrium leads occasionally to war which is its most obvious and threatening symptom. At this point an attempt is made to overcome this symptom and to establish some kind of peace. But this act is carried out not with the hope of correcting this disequilibrium and of turning the chaos into order but of allowing the innately unstable state of things to continue somewhat longer without excessive disturbance. Few even ask if modern man deserves to live in peace while he is at war inwardly with the inner man, who despite everything continues to live within him, and outwardly with the cosmic order and the metacosmic Reality which continue to be present and will have the final word whether man heeds the call of the Real or not.

To prop up the disequilibrium which he carried within himself modern man has sacrificed everything at his disposal. He has accepted to forgo the certitude of metaphysical and religious doctrine and even accept that two and two makes three in order to compromise with someone who has insisted that it makes two. He has raped nature with unparalleled ferocity in order to fulfill ever increasing

needs which in turn enable man to forget himself, his end and the purpose of life as much as possible. He has turned the urban environment into a veritable hell on the way to establishing heaven on earth. Nothing has escaped being sacrificed to sustain the disequilibrium contained innately in the modern concept of man, nothing — from religion to virgin nature, and finally to the sacrosanct character of the human person itself. But all this is of no avail because the disequilibrium continues and threatens at every moment to crumble on the heads of those who have so glibly and so persistently defended the concept of man as the lord of the earth, possessed with unlimited power to do what he wills, and even with pretensions to eradicate every form of evil from human life, as if anything other than the absolute Good could be absolutely good and anything other than Perfection Itself could be devoid of the mark of imperfection.

To speak of the possibility of a happy future for mankind without a fundamental change in the currently held conception of what man is is no more than a sentimental and fleeting dream. Men want to live together and they must literally live together more than ever before thanks to their destruction of the ecological equilibrium and the population explosion. These are the fruits of modern man's own doings and which cannot be blamed on those civilizations in which man was seen as the theomorphic being that he is. And in order to live together men speak of the one human spirit or one single human family. But they are forced to remain content with only speaking about it. The one spirit somehow evades them, leaving in its wake a multitude of contending ethnic egos and the family is splintered into feuding branches. Nevertheless people continue to speak in these terms, seeing the necessity of living together on a planet whose resources cannot bear any longer any major aggressions either against other nations or against the natural order.

The oneness which people of good intention seek cannot, however, be achieved save through contact with the Spirit which is one in itself and many in its earthly reflections. The Holy Quran mentions concerning the Spirit that it is "from the command of my Lord". No contact with the Spirit is possible save through the dimension of transcendence which stands always before man and which connects him with the Ultimate Reality. Whether It be called the Lord or Brahman or *shunya*. To forget the Spirit and settle for its earthly reflections alone is to be doomed to the world of multiplicity, to separation, to division and finally to aggression and war. No amount of extolling the human spirit can fill the vacuum created by the forgetting of the Spirit which kindles the human soul but is not itself human.

In Islamic thought and following the language of the Quran the spiritual dimension of man is identified with the "face of God" which is also the aspect of the Divinity turned towards the world. To speak of the human spirit without consideration of the Spirit in its trans-human reality is to speak essentially of a faceless humanity which is then reduced by force to animality and the tedious uniformity which stands at the very antipode of Unity.

The problems faced by modern man all point to the same cause, namely to man's living below his own possibilities and to his forgetfulness of who he is. Today those who have pondered over the human condition and the future of man with any degree of depth assert in unison that certain new and at the same time old qualities must be cultivated by man if he is to survive, qualities such as self restraint, humility, charity towards one's neighbour including the world of nature, magnanimity, justice, etc. But to allow a heavy stone to fall and then

extol the way it accelerates is one thing, and to move against gravity quite another. What is going to induce men, whom all the external forces of human society during recent times have been pushing to an ever greater degree of outwardness, of self-aggrandizement, and the like, to suddenly turn towards the inner pole and to become transmuted from the state of a falling stone to that of a soaring eagle? What force is able to turn the interest of men from purely quantitative growth to the qualitative which so many students of the ecological crisis suggest as the only hope for averting a major catastrophe? If some think that sentimental assertions or political resolutions will achieve such ends they are mistaken, for they neglect completely the power of the human passions, of the dragon within, which only a St. Michael can slaughter.

The reversal of all the tendencies which are now threatening the whole of life on earth and are making the very existence of a future for man doubtful amidst all his futurology, cannot come save through the reversal of the pole of attraction. Only contact with the Spirit can provide a pull from on high and reverse the powerful gravitation which drags men ever more rapidly downwards away from the Unity which characterizes the Spirit. To speak of one human family without recourse to this celestial pole is no more than to dream, with no guarantee that this dream will not turn into a nightmare.

Men speak with great confidence about making the future and draw plans which appear perfectly logical on the level of blue prints, but which soon become tainted by all kinds of imperfections not envisaged at the planning stage. The reason is that the human beings who are agents for the execution of these plans are not seen to be what they really are, namely creatures with imperfection molded within their being, an imperfection which touches everything they do and which becomes more dangerous to the extent that its existence is denied. It is forgotten that the future cannot be better than the imperfect state of those who act in bringing it about.

And this is again a basic fallacy related to the false conception of man which has grown out of modern civilization, a concept which posits a perfection for man in his present day state which is simply not there. The result of this falsification of the real nature of man, who lives below his possibilities yet does not recognize his own evils, is that reform in the modern world is carried out in every domain except in that which concerns man himself. Even the Divine Norms which alone can judge man and guide him towards perfection are deformed to fit his every changing state. No one takes it seriously enough upon himself to ask whether modern man should not begin his discussion of making the future by reforming himself and by seeing himself as he really is, namely God's viceregent on earth, endowed with exceptional powers but also with great responsibility towards all creatures which he cannot shun at any price except through his own destruction.

The great role of religions today should be not to placate the weaknesses of modern man by reducing themselves to one more "ism" or ideology to compete with the many existing ideologies which man has spun around himself over the past few centuries. Rather, their task is to hold before men the norm and the model of perfection of which they are capable and to provide the channels for that contact with the Spirit which alone can show the myriad colors and hues of the human spirit to be not sheer multiplicity and division but so many reflections of Unity.

The human spirit is One only at the summit of the human soul. Therefore means must be found for men to climb to this summit of their own being.

Otherwise on the level of external forms, of the earthly aspect of the human soul, there reigns but multiplicity leading to division and strife, and now thanks to new means of destruction to total war and total annihilation.

The incomparable Persian Sufi poet Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī sang already seven centuries ago that:

The difference between creatures comes from outward form;

When the meaning (literally the Spirit) is reached there is peace.

Man can only have a future if he lives on the level of the full possibilities of the human state, which means centrality and authority on the terrestrial plane combined with responsibility, but which is also inseparable from receptivity toward Heaven and of submission to the Divine Norm which determines man from on high whether he wants it to or not. Man can speak of one human spirit provided he envisages the human spirit as an extension and reflection of the Divine Spirit and searches for this oneness at the summit where the terrestrial mountain touches the infinite expanses of the sky.

Man can speak of one human family provided the sacrosanct character of the individual member of the family is preserved as is the hierarchy which the very structure of the family implies. In nearly all the religions of mankind there has always been a holy or sacred family which has served as the prototype of family life itself. For example the family of the Prophet of Islam has served not only a purely religious function but also has been the model for every Muslim family from the social point of view. Over the millenia, therefore, men have not faced any problems in preserving the institution of the family. But one cannot break the norm and cause an eclipse of the archetype and yet hope to preserve its earthly reflection. How can one speak of one human family for a generation in which the male and female elements within the primary family unit are in constant strife rather than harmony and equilibrium, where all sense of authority which is based on the hierarchy which is in the nature of things is forgotten and where the atomic family is the target of bombardment from every direction leading to its splitting with the same success that man has been able to split the atom? If by the family is meant the painful chaos which so many of the young have come to experience in urban centers throughout the world during the past few decades then it is better not to have one human family at all.

To live within the human family in the positive sense of family, to speak of the human spirit, to hope for a peaceful future means first and foremost that man should awaken to his own condition, that he should submit himself to a thorough criticism and re-establish peace and equilibrium within himself and *vis-a-vis* the Divine Norm. There is no hope for a peaceful future for a creature who is usurping his rights and who is living in such a way as to be in total disequilibrium with both the natural environment and members of those cultures which are still anchored in the teachings which have descended from the world of the Spirit. There is no hope for man to preserve his humanity unless he reaches for the transcendent beyond him. To seek to be merely human is ultimately to fall into the infra-human state, as four centuries of Western history have demonstrated amply for the whole world.

Let us hope that on this 30th birthday of the United Nations a pause will be made not only to consider what men should do in the future but most of all what they should be, for only he who is what he should be according to the profoundest demands of the human state can also act rightly and according to the norms which of necessity govern all things. Only such a person can live at

peace with himself, with other human beings and with the natural environment. And ultimately it is upon the words, acts and most of all presence of such persons, more than any form of socio-economic planning, that the possibility of the realization of the Oneness of the Spirit and of harmony among human beings depends. To be concerned with the future of mankind cannot but lead to the wish and the prayer for the continuing and ever increasing presence, in all human societies, of persons in harmony with the Real.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr