

REDEFINING THE GOOD SOCIETY

Some Reflections on one Aspect of the Theme
(Paulos Mar Gregorios)

1. The theme as formulated seems to imply certain assumptions which need to be examined. First, can the Good Society be defined at all. not to speak of any 'redefinition'? What is the prevailing definition of the good society which we are now seeking to redefine? Certainly there never has been **one** precise model of the good society which would fit at all times and in every given situation. Several possible models can at different times be constructed, depending on a people's historical experiences, geo-political situation, geography, population, resources, cultural development, technological advancement and several similar factors prevailing at a given time in a given situation. But right now we have no one agreed upon definition of the "good society". We are all largely ad-hocists and pragmatists, when it comes to defining the good society. We will take this job of 'redefining' as more meaning reorienting ourselves on the pathway to the future, rather than precisely defining or redefining.

2. Second, do we construct societies after a mentally conceived model, as we seem to do in the case of buildings,

roads, dams, or a piece of clothing or a work of art? Of course there is what is known as planning, which sets targets and schedules, provides resources and personnel, and achieves or fails to achieve certain specific goals. Social engineering has often tried, but in fact failed, to follow the methods and models of civil engineering. Societies are not made out of whole cloth, or out of building materials readily available in the market, but out of existing socio-economic and cultural-scientific conditions, of course bringing in such elements from outside as are deemed necessary and available. The platonic ideal of mentally conceiving the best society and then sitting down to construct it, does not seem to work. It did not work in the days of Plato or Plotinus (Platonopolis, 3rd century AD) either. All we can hope to do is to chart some points on the horizon, and to find ways of moving in that direction, starting from where we are and not from a **tabula rasa**. This demands first of all a fairly thorough analysis of where we are today, how we got there from an earlier starting point, what prevents us today from moving, and of the forces pulling society in directions other than the one she should be pursuing. The best analysis in the world would not get us far, if we do not fully understand the forces fighting against the good society, because they think they can profit better from a bad society, and develop an adequate structure of counter-vailing power.

3. It is also an important question to ask: **who** defines the good society in each situation, and **who** sets common goals

Good Society

for a whole nation? There are very few constitutions in the world which have resulted from a free consensus among the people. To take the example of India, the present Constitution of India was not born out of a nation-wide consultation among all the people of our land. Our Founding Fathers, as was also the case in the USA, were a noble, humanitarian team, though there were some exceptions. In India, some of the interests of Dalits and other backward classes were ably safeguarded by personalities like Ambedkar. But who was there to articulate and defend the needs and aspirations of the many communities of Girijans, Adivasis and Tribals? The majority or "Mainstream" opted for commodity development, thinking primarily in terms of GDP, jobs, loans, savings, investments and the lot. The Adivasis, left to themselves, would have, in choosing national goals, emphasized living close to nature, curbing one's needs and our greed for commodities, putting the accents on **peoples' community development**, rather than on largely wasteful and sometimes useless commodity development, which can serve only the interests of the trading, business and finance communities. So, who are we here defining the Good Society for others? What is our representativeness in relation to the people of India, and in relation to the global human community. Can a nation like ours choose what western liberals choose, and leave the Girijans to the awfully unkind choice of either joining the mainstream and thereby losing their identity, or being confined to unnatural habitats and there going to seed. The people as a whole, if they are truly to make a common choice, can do so only through a people's

Good Society

revolutionary movement sweeping the nation as a whole in a wave of people-led reform and social renewal, and not under government or ruling party aegis.

4. The present document has chosen six aspects of the good society as objectives to be pursued: Liberty, Equity, Fulfilment, Community, Science and Non-violence. Somewhat arbitrary, but still a great improvement on the French Revolution's **liberte'**, **egalite'** and **fraternite'**. Replacing **fraternite'** by the four new concepts of meaning, community, non-violence and the right use of science, should be welcomed. But are we stuck with some of the concepts thrown up by the specificities of western liberal-capitalist development? Some of these very categories and concepts themselves carry over aspects of their peculiar western historical development, the struggles among feudal nobility, the industrial bourgeoisie and the working people in farms and factories. Our own history is different and we need fresh categories for choosing national goals. Take concepts like democracy, development, liberty and freedom. These concepts have substantially different content in their situation and ours. The concept of freedom, for example, is a richer, nobler concept, but the west still likes to talk about **liberation** than about **freedom**, a concept with which the West seems uncomfortable.

And **equity**, which now replaces the French **egalite'** cannot be a sufficient substitute for the richer concept of **justice** which many would regard as the essential foundation of the

ood Society

good society. Peace and Security, Ecological health, etc. could of course come under "Non-violent and Humane World Order", but could have been made more explicit in our subgroup titles. At this stage all that is meant is a warning about the perils involved in "category choices". The categories in which we think often decisively affect the nature of our conclusions.

5. It seems that there are two ways of structuring the paradigm for our discussion here. The first is the one which most such conferences follow, and which we ourselves at this Fourth Indira Gandhi Conference are likely to adopt. This method consists in basically accepting the western liberal-democratic ideology and categories, make some slight changes here and there, often from a western Marxist perspective, but without stopping to ask any fundamental questions about the philosophical foundations of that very ideology and category structure, accepting the prevailing pragmatic method of not asking questions one is afraid of asking, because one's training as an academic has not equipped one to do so adequately or with confidence.

6. The second method is infinitely more difficult and time-consuming as well as being beyond the competence of most of us, and therefore hardly likely to be adopted here. This is to begin by asking some simple but profound fundamental questions, as our great Indian ancestors taught us to do. Begin with questions like: What is there? How do we know? And

Good Society

where do we, as human beings, fit into that Reality? What is real fulfilment for human persons and communities, or in more traditional (and, as is to be anticipated, male-chauvinistic) language, What is the true end of Man)

5. After these preliminary remarks, let me confine myself to some reflections on one of the sub-themes: "Science in Society". This is a topic on which I have been privileged to work for several years with some of the leading scientists of all countries. (See my **Science For Sane Societies**, Paragon, New York, 1987). "Modern Science", as distinguished from pre-Newtonian science, is a specific outgrowth of western socio-economic history, and bears the marks thereof. We have space here only to highlight some features of this "modern science".

6. The concepts of **science** and **scientific method** are notoriously difficult to define. The precise contours (demarkation criteria) of the dividing line between **science** and **non-science** simply cannot be determined. There is no **a priori** definition of science and scientific method, beyond simply denoting what is generally accepted by the prevailing scientific community which happens to have certain given ways of working together, and certain norms for certifying scientific propositions.

7. The Public Character of Science. There may have been a time in the past when the distinction between "pure science" and "applied science" had some relevance. Today more than 95% of science is applied, and scientific research is

ood Society

today so bound up with technological prowess, that the distinction between science and technology is today difficult to maintain. The cutting edges of scientific research are so bound up with sometimes unaffordable, and often unpurchaseable or unavailable, high technology. This is so in High Energy Physics, in Super-conductivity, and in biology, biochemistry and genetics. Scientific research is no longer an open possibility for all societies. Science, having lost its innate public character, becomes inauthentic, and something less than its original true self.

8. There was a time when it was part of the Canon of Science that all scientific knowledge should be public knowledge, open to experimental confirmation or refutation by any competent scientist. This is no longer so. The world scientific community today is divided into two classes: first is that class of scientists employed by defence or military establishments and large profit-oriented corporations, who are sworn to secrecy and are not allowed to share their scientific knowledge with others, for security reasons or for monopoly patent/copyright considerations.

9. **Science in the Service of War and Profit,** This has at least two major consequences: First, war and profit minded establishments, notoriously unpublic and thus undemocratic, can afford to corner the best scientific talent in the market by paying them extra incentives; the cutting edge of current scientific research thus goes in search of greater killing

Good Society

capacity or greater profit and power for the few. Science is thus prostituted and misused in large part. So little of science, and that too not the best talent, is available for humane purposes like healing, healthy and economic housing development, non-monopoly non-chemical food production, and for good education in a healthy environment.

10. **The Commercialisation of Science.** The second consequence is that science/technology itself becomes commodity and private property. Since high-tech is much in demand by the poor, for good or bad reasons, its high marketability becomes a new tool of exploiting and oppressing the poor. The whole corpus of patenting and copyright laws lead us to a situation where knowledge itself becomes a commodity for trade and profit making, and also for exploitation and enslavement. This commercialisation of science and the prostitution of sci/tech for mass murder and easy profit, detract from the original nobility of science and technology.

11. There can be no doubt about the immense magnitude of the achievements of modern science and the technology based on it. In the evolution of the human species, there have been several quantum jumps in human capacity for good and evil with the advent of modern sci-tech. Since higher capacity for good and evil is a top class challenge to the human will (both individual and social) to direct its abilities towards the good and not towards evil, the age of modern science-technology demands from humanity greater moral and spiritual effort;

Good Society

instead we are on the whole letting ourselves morally disintegrate, by choosing a culture of meaningless affluence, instant gratification of all urges, and flabby moral vigour. Here even religion and its leadership, instead of setting standards as they should, seem to fall below the prevailing moral standards of ordinary people. Scientists themselves had at one time an enviably high moral level, in their commitment to the truth and in their pursuit of knowledge. We have a situation now where those high standards of scientists are being eroded by the blandishments of power, pelf and paisa. The link between science and integrity seems to grow weaker day by day.

12. The hopes pinned on to Modern Science were many, but most of them have come to grief. Once it was thought by some at least that Scientific Rationality would provide us with the right morality. Every attempt so far has failed to yield the desired fruit. Again, once it was thought that scientific reasoning would open all the doors to all knowledge. We now know that science has its limits, and that much that we know does not come from science, but from other forms of experience, including human relations, art and music, literature and drama, pain and pleasure, and perhaps even what is termed religious experience. It was quite foolishly believed by many once that scientific knowledge is objective and therefore true, while other convictions in so far as they are subjective, are prone to error. Today we know that totally unsubjective objectivity is unattainable, since subjectivity is an essential aspect of all knowing. And we know that current scientific knowledge is subject to revision

Good Society

in the light of future knowledge, and that there is no "finally proved" status to any scientific proposition.

13. Even more pernicious was the ridiculous dogma propounded by 19th century European Positivists to the effect that all human knowledge invariably passes through three stages: theological, metaphysical and scientific, and that the latter is the only true knowledge which supersedes the two previous infant(theological) and adolescent (metaphysical) stages of human evolution; the conclusion was that science makes all theology and metaphysics obsolete. Today this is recognized by sensitive people for what it is - a dogma produced by the European Enlightenment of the 18th and 19th centuries with the comic effort of European thought to do away with all external authority. But many of the culpable attitudes stemming from this European hubris still prevails among many scientists.

14. Perhaps the most damaging caveat against modern science is that its gnoseological technology not only distorts reality, but even deforms the human person. It starts from many unexamined assumptions: for example. it dogmatically and unscientifically assumes the given-ness of a self-existent entity called 'Nature' which is not contingent upon anything else; the frequent assumption that things are what they appear to be; the Naive or Constructive Realism which refuses to ask questions about the ontological status of phenomena because such questions cannot be answered by science; worst of all the mistaken assumption that man, the knowing subject, can stand outside the world and objectify, know and manipulate it.

Good Society

Science has tended to distort the human personality by overvaluing objectivity and underplaying subjectivity, which latter is by far the richer aspect of human existence. The long years of disciplining oneself to be always objective renders human beings very inhibited in their subjective human relations.

15. The uncritical devotion of both scientists and lay people to Modern Science and Technological Rationality as the ultimate arbiter of truth, bears some resemblance to the uncritical obedience of Medieval European society to the Roman Catholic Church as the ultimate arbiter of truth in all fields. The notorious medieval dictum: **Roma locuta est, Causa finita est** (Rome has spoken, the matter is settled) has today become: **Scientia locuta est, Causa finita est**. Medieval priests in their black robes, Cross in hand, have been today replaced by Modern Scientists in their white smocks, computer at hand.

16. The questioning of the Medieval church' arbitrary authority took a long time to become effective. There were the pre-Renaissance protests of simple peasants against the exploitation and domination by the Church as major landholder. Then came the European Renaissance which couter-posed the authority of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and the Greek Classics to the authority of the Church, as an alternative to the authority of the Church, especially in art, music and literature. The Renaissance Popes, many of them both erudite and self-indulgent, managed to domesticate the Renaissance

Good Society

within the Church. Then came the Protestant Reformation which pitted Scriptural authority against Papal authority and broke loose from the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century, developing its own forms of non-responsible authority. Only the French Revolution and the European Enlightenment of the 18th and 19th centuries, finally triumphed by repudiating the authority of King and Priest, of Church and Tradition, and setting up human rationality as the final arbiter of truth. It is in that ethos that Modern Science developed and flourished. Man became the measure and centre of all things, with Humanism, whether liberal or Marxist, became the dominant ideology of our own era. Human reason gave sufficient evidence of its own omnipotence or omni-competence.

17. We are in the post-modern era, where intellectuals want to go beyond the norms of modernity. This is not the occasion to propound the doctrine of the post-modernists or to refute it. The main point is that the people's revolt against scientific rationality, against the Urban-Industrial Technological Society, and the Europe-generated model of the modern nation-state, has only begun to be heard by the academics. The protest will take at least several decades to mature and gain sufficient momentum to compel attention. I firmly believe that when the protest matures, the foundations of a new society will also come to light.

18. Since the purpose of this exercise here is not the denigration of science, but seeking for some reliable founda-

Good Society

tions for the 'good society' which we seek to redefine and reconstruct, the thrust of this paper is to warn against any facile assumptions about science and technology being the major tool for such definition and construction. Neither can the task be done by putting together Science/technology and a packet of specially chosen 'moral values'.