

SOME ROOTS OF HUMANITY'S HYPER-ANXIETY TODAY.

(Bishop Paul Gregorios)*

"Little knowledge, but much joy

is given to mortals.....", said the poet Noelderlin almost two centuries ago. And today the reverse has become true: much knowledge, but little joy.

This absence of joy, or the anxiety underlying it, could thus not be a universal or perennial phenomenon. It is the times that have brought us much knowledge and taken away most of our joy, filling us with foreboding anxiety and intangible fears.

But is there a constant relation between the quantity of knowledge and the measure of joy so that when the one increases the other has necessarily to decrease? Hardly. It is not the quantity of knowledge that is decisive, but rather its quality, the reason for which it is sought and the way in which it is pursued.

Why do we seek knowledge? To walk by its light, and to be in its warmth, or to grab what it shows up, so that in our 'having' we can possess our 'being'? What kind of knowledge - calculating and controlling, or knowledge that frees us from the need to calculate and control in order to be? What kind of truth does it pursue? veritas est adaequatio intellectus ad rem, according to the Hellenic tradition of Aristotle. But can we put intellectus and rem in the same class, with the latter as something objectively ideal, to which the intellect has to achieve some measure of adequacy or approximation? When knowledge becomes fixed on things, the knowing mind itself undergoes a subtle change that denatures it.

And that, by and large, is the ground of the anxiety of modern man, especially Western man. The subtle change in the manner of pursuing knowledge seems to have come about, at least in the case of Western man, by almost an accident. When did it begin? Perhaps already in the days of the schoolmen.

We can today laugh at our medieval ancestors who sincerely believed that there was no security to be had in this fleeting and transitory world, the only security being in the unchanging and unseen world which was fixed and immutable. What Cardinal Newman called the Benedictine Age (Seventh to 12th century?) was one in which security and stability could be associated only with eternity and the unseen world. The value of things on earth was directly related to their connection with the eternal and the unseen. How else do we explain the fact that the preciousness of Charlemagne's

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throne in Aachen (built to the specifications of Solomon's) came not so much from the diamonds and pearls adorning it as from the relics hid in its many cavities?¹ The relics belonged to those who had become united with eternity, and it was their power that operated in them. Hence the relics in the throne or on the crown or on the necks of kings moored the kingdom to eternity, thus providing it with stability and security.

And in the so-called Benedictine age, the security of the kingdom was also assured, not so much by fortresses as by monasteries. The real enemy, the source of insecurity, was in the unseen world, where the powers of darkness, the hosts of satan were waging war against mankind. And the only way to defend the kingdom against the wiles of the Wicked One, was to endow and build large homes for monks who knew the rules of battling with the Devil, through prayers, fasting, vigils, alms, chants, and daily offerings of the mass. The Rules of St. Benedict reflect this belief.

In these castles built to fight Satan, the "Crowned Champions" of St. Benedict waged war with satan, by not only prayers and vigils, but also ~~the~~ lectio and contemplatio of the sacred texts. They read the scriptures, not to amass knowledge, but to lift up their souls to God. There was no objective knowledge of the scriptures sought, such as our own period with its methods of criticism has learned to create. They learned to read, in order the better to raise their souls into the unseen and abiding kingdom.

It was but a short step from that lectio-contemplatio approach to the scriptures, to a quaestio-disputatio approach, wherein the purpose was to distil a clear and indubitable proposition of truth, which would be 'objectively' true. Paris and Bologna, Oxford and Köln became centres where this 'objective' knowledge was assiduously pursued. New techniques were sought to distil truth into propositions and formulae that brought the task and fruit of knowledge within human control.

This transition in the West's collective psyche was subtle and complex. The moorings of that security in the unseen world became progressively shaken as new forms of security through higher degrees of objective and man-controlled knowledge were achieved. In that Faustian journey, Western man carried with him an uneasy conscience, which remained as the ground of his fundamental anxiety throughout his aggressively imperialistic expansion into the world.

1. W. Braunsfels, ed. Karl der Grosse, Lebenswerk und Nachleben, 5 vols, 1965-68. esp. Vol. III: 306-307, 452, 464-79 and 501-505, cited by E.W. Southern, Western Society and The Church in the Middle Ages, Penguin, 1972. p. 30.

That expansion, symbolized most primitively in the Crusades, was both powered by anxiety and generative of new anxiety. The threatening sign of divine judgment took concrete form in the Turkish invasions. Islam was to the West what Israel was to the nations of Palestine in the time following the Exodus. It was a scourge that plagued the West for so long and the threat of being over-run by Islam went so deep into the soul of Europe, that the West still finds it difficult to be objective in its evaluation of Islam. R.W.Southern has given us a memorable excerpt from the letter of Roman Pope Clement IV to Byzantine Emperor Michael Paleologus in 1267.

"The Crusade is being prepared, and the whole of Europe is rising at our bidding. If you will attack the Moslems on one side while the Crusaders attack them on the other, we shall see an end of their damnable religion for ever. And if you say you are afraid the Latins will attack you while your troops are engaged on your other frontier, the answer is simple: return to the unity of the Roman Church and all fears of this kind can be put aside for ever"².

Yes, the West could provide the same kind of security it itself had, if only the rest of the world would accept its religion and its command.

Man-controlled security, not only through objective knowledge, through *scientia* as *scientia*, but also through political, economic, religious and cultural control of the rest of the world by this Europe with its superior knowledge. Any "damnable religion", be it Islam or Hinduism, Buddhism or Shintoism, or even Eastern Orthodox Christianity, must simply be "put an end to". There is only one truth and the West had distilled it into dogmas, and all that the world had to do was to give its assent.

The security of Europe thus shifted from the unseen and intangible world to the visible, manageable, manipulable world under Europe's control. The three elements of this new security are:

- (a) empirical knowledge based on man's experience and a manipulative technology based on human skills, eliminating the need for religious knowledge or dependence upon God's grace and power;
- (b) politico-economic control of the world, through trade expansionism, phasing into imperialism and now into neo-colonialism.
- (c) religious-cultural dominance of the world, first through the missionary movements from the Roman Catholic Iberian peninsula, to be followed a few centuries later by Protestant Northern Europe. As religious power dies out, the attempt is to maintain cultural dominance by setting

2. Southern, op.cit from A.Potthast, Regesta Pontificum Romanorum, 1874-5. No. 20012.

standards and controlling the terms for all international competition. The technological culture tinged with laissez-faire liberalism or various adaptations of Marxism, becomes the tool of a new cultural imperialism.

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The fact of the matter, and the root of the prevailing anxiety, lies in the collapse of all three aspects of Western security.

The ecological crisis, the resource depletion menace, and the vague possibility of nuclear self-annihilation have together conspired to undermine Western man's confidence in his science-technology. The alienating character of science-technology is also being increasingly acknowledged by scientists. In objectifying the object of knowledge, reifying it and seeking to manipulate it, science-technology does violence not only to all objects under scrutiny, but also to the knowing subject, the human being who is asked to maintain an objective or non-emotional and uninvolved stand vis-a-vis the object of knowledge.

Besides, it is becoming increasingly clear that 'scientific universality' applies only under certain conditions which include the presence of the observer. The work of Carlos Castaneda has shown that the world known to our ordinary senses augmented by our science, provides only one alternative version of reality. With change of perception through chemical changes in the brain, new, consistent and alternate patterns of reality emerge. The world of science-technology thus fails to give the certainty and security it used to provide.

As for the political-economic domination of the West in the world, our half-century began with political decolonization, which was itself a traumatic experience for the West, shaking the very foundations of its security. The loosening of political control was, however, compensated by a tightening of military and economic control, through trade and price regulations, the direct defiance of the UNCTAD, the escalation of armaments manufactured and trade, and through military interventions when necessary as in the case of Chile. In spite of all this the OPEC nations dealt a heavy blow which has thoroughly un-nerved the West. The financial crisis coming in its wake makes the peril seem really momentous. No wonder Western anxiety is becoming more and more irrational and in some cases hysterical.

This collapse of the confidence in science-technology and the breakdown of economic-military domination in the world, are now accompanied by a loss of nerve on the part of the West in

/relation to its cultural superiority. Even after they had assigned the world cultures and civilizations to the third-rate status of ~~the~~ 'Third World', they are surprised to see these cultures now affirming themselves over against the West. The West's own young people are going in for Yoga and Zen, for Transcendental Meditation and Instant Tranquillity ^e à l'orientale, in a big way. The new generation is questioning the accepted values of the dominant bourgeois civilization—love of comfort, avoidance of conflict, personal sexual morality, acquisition of wealth, cultural rigidity and so on. With the collapse of the value system, fundamental anxiety wells up to the surface, threatening to paralyse Western man's self-esteem and self-assurance.

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Much knowledge, but little joy. Miguel de Unamuno said more than half a century ago to Spanish youth caught up in the fervour to recreate Europe by recreating a European kulture:-

"Now to you, the younger generation, bachelor carrascos of a Europeanising regenerationism, you who are working after the best European fashion, with scientific method and criticism, to you I say : Create wealth, create nationality, create ^{art} ~~art~~, create science, create ethics, above all create or rather, translate - kultur, and thus kill in yourself both life and death, Little will it all last you!"³.

We are now one stage beyond the debate between ~~raz~~ rationality and feeling, a debate of the giants, which resulted in the fading flower of a personalist existentialism. Unamuno was strongly on the side of feeling, along with such stalwarts like Nietzsche and Bergson, Schopenhauer and Schelling. If John Macmurray's distinction between maturity and immaturity is as basic as he claims⁴, the debate itself has to be resolved in terms that were not properly visible when the debate was at its hottest.

A new maturity demands a new break-through. Three elements seem to be basic in making such a breakthrough.

3. Unamuno: Tragic Sense of Life. Eng. Tr. J.E. Crowford Fritch, Dover, 1954. pp 329-330.

4. Reason and Emotion, Faber, 1935 p. 233

1) A collective repentance. The West has grievously sinned against the world by:

- a) plundering its resources
- b) trampling upon the dignity of its people
- c) building up a system of exploitation in which wealth and the choicest of goods flow to the West
- d) a cultural imperialism seeking to impose a pragmatic, science-technology-based utilitarian civilization on the peoples of the world, which is destructive of their own inherited values.

A collective repentance does not mean essentially a beating of the breast or a new addition to the already unbearable burden of guilt, but a sincere change of mind, resulting both in remedies for past injustices and a new attitude in building new relational structures which are non-exploitative and non-repressive.

2) A restructuring of the religions. Most religion today, and especially the Christian religion, suffers from the estrangement or alienation (*Entfremdung*) of Man from his own true self. New theologies cannot reintegrate man. The problem is not primarily intellectual, but one of practice. The practice of religion will have to be based in a community where

- a) personal relations between human beings receive priority of attention over correct statement of truth - i.e. the being of the community must be true and faithful, only then can its words also be true and faithful. The priority of love over dogma should not itself degenerate into a dogma, but be manifested in practice;
- b) worship receives higher priority than mission. Worship does not degenerate into a series of exhibitiv new verbal gymnastics or attention-getting new gimmicks; worship is not ancillary or preparatory to anything else, including mission; worship is the highest activity of man in acknowledging the true source of all being and goodness and rejoicing in that presence;
- c) the actions of the community, whether in terms of love, worship or service, are not overly self-conscious or too rigidly structured. Spontaneity of human existence is destroyed where there is too much structure or too much self-consciousness and focussing upon oneself. Intellectual effort as well as prayers should also become not only more spontaneous, but also calling less attention to the personality of the person leading in prayer. There

should be less verbal productivity and more ritual, rhythmic, liturgical action with silence, meditation and contemplation, but also para-verbal, non-exhibitive experiences of the senses of touch, taste, seeing, hearing and smell as well as body movement. The transcendent can seldom be experienced in self-consciousness and rigidity.

3) A new vision of the universe. What is meant here is not a conceptualization, but an experience of the partial and distorted nature of our perception of the universe. We have need to get rid of the basic dualism in our thinking about "this world" and "other world"⁵. The vision of the universe (a) as one, (b) as upheld by God & (c) as including me in it, has to be achieved through a way of experiencing reality which is mature and goes beyond the confining boundaries of the scientific-technological reason. Such a vision is a religious experience and can be induced only as a result of years of striving and self-discipline. Society itself needs a new kind of training. The educational systems we now have bear a major share of the responsibility for killing the power of vision. A totally new educational approach with much more integration of feeling and thought, of worship and love will have to be devised.

This may result in a temporary stagnation in the multiplication of scientific knowledge and technological skills. That may very well be necessary in order to gain more wisdom and sensitivity. Without the vision that heals and helps us to strike our roots again in the transcendent dimension of the world, we will never overcome the anxiety of our civilisation.

Much joy, even with little knowledge, seems not only possible but preferable. The little knowledge will not be so much ignorance as an awareness of our present ignorance.

5. John MacMurray had said a half century ago: "The failure (of 'emotional reason' to achieve maturity) expresses itself in the sense of estrangement between two worlds between the natural and the supernatural, this world and another world. The development of religion to maturity will be the fusion of the two - for they are but one. What our childishness thinks of as another world, a supernatural world, is merely the reality of this world which is hidden from us by the imperfection of our sensitiveness". op cit. p.65

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4) A Restructuring of Science-Technology. This is likely to prove to be the hardest break-through. A change in the objectifying and reifying approach to reality would mean a radically new consciousness. The "secular" approach to reality which regards this world as a self-contained and self-regulating entity working according to certain mechanical rules will have to be abandoned. The vast and uncharted realms of non-objective life-experiences will have to be taken into account, and the laboratory may have to recede into the background. Research will take new lines into the psychic and cosmic forces, and a new integrated scientific theory will have to be developed which goes beyond the materialistic-mechanistic view of the world.

5) A restructuring of world relations. Europe will have to accept a position, not necessarily on the periphery, but no longer at the dominant centre. It will have to accept a poly-centric, multi-cultural socio-economic and political structure in the world. Europe need not fear marginalization; but it will have to accept the fact that it is no longer at the top or at the centre.

These are far-reaching changes, indeed. Anxiety can activate creativity or paralyse it. Kept within limits, Europe's very anxiety may become the matrix of a new creativity.