

The Survival of Civilization

by

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SUDDENLY anxiety about the survival of civilisation and even of the human race as such, has obtruded itself to complicate and confuse the intensive planning for progress that has attained the proportions of an obsession in modern civilisation and continues unabated today. "Suddenly" is the right word, for how surprised the early architects of the industrial framework would be to find that the issue of survival had so soon raised its ugly head to confuse their original intention of wealth and leisure for all!

It is not the purpose of the observations that follow to study the reasons for that anxiety in detail, and still less to propose specific remedies or palliatives; it is rather to try to find a point of view from which the situation as a whole may become more understandable, for people are not only anxious but also disappointed and puzzled. By way of preliminary it seems desirable to summarise as briefly as possible the most prominent immediate causes of the anxieties in question. They can conveniently be divided into three main groups, according to their nature, and not according to any view of their relative importance. Firstly, the availability of the hydrogen bomb, together with the continuing development of other scientific weapons, chemical, biological and even psychological, which could be at least as destructive. Secondly, the anticipation of a continuing exponential growth in the population of the world. Thirdly, the anticipation of an early exhaustion of some of the natural resources on which modern civilisation depends, not only of fossil fuels and certain metals, but also of biological resources endangered by a pollution of the environment which can also directly affect human health.

Any one of these groups considered separately could afford reasonable grounds for anxiety; taken together their effect is rather overwhelming, especially as the time-scale for the attainment of an acute stage in several of the anticipated crises must be calculated in decades and not in centuries. One may reasonably ask: why has this aspect of our situation come into prominence so suddenly, and what have the scientists and planners in whom we have so far put our faith been thinking about all this time? True, there are scientists and others who maintain that talk such as this is mere panic; that the applications of scientific knowledge have been eminently successful so far, and that therefore science can be trusted to deal with the situation, and moreover that science alone can deal with it, provided of course that it is given ample facilities for research and that people will act upon its findings. There are also people, even scientists, who are prepared to dismiss the whole business on the grounds that no doubt we shall go bumbling along in

the future as we have in the past. It is difficult to accept either of these views. The case is too strong and the time is too short. The anxiety exists and is accompanied by a growing disorder, political, social, moral, philosophical and religious. Meanwhile however every sectional interest in the field of production and distribution (and that includes most people whether in receipt of salaries or wages) is driving as hard as it can for more and more, while the organised stimulation of desire has itself become an industry and is pursued relentlessly and scientifically.

It is less difficult to accept the view that humanity, and especially its wealthier components, will probably have to postpone, at least for a time, the realisation of many current ideals of progress, and may even have to accept something that can, from the point of view of those ideals, only be regarded as a regress, in the form of a lowering of standards of living, a sacrifice of past attainments, and even, if the worst fears are realised, something like a partial return to savagery. All this however applies only to the slowing down of a progress measured solely in terms of material wealth. It is sometimes suggested that something that can be called "culture" ought to be the true measure of wealth, and that a cultural progress need not be impeded by a material regress. Everything depends of course on what the word "culture" means, what it includes and what it does not. It is by no means impossible that a culture should be marked by an excess, a luxury and a futility no less harmful than an excessive material luxury and no less seductive. How does our contemporary culture stand up to examination in the light of that possibility?

The culture of today—using the word inclusively, as one must in this connection, and not limiting it to the more specialised or exclusive branches of the arts—is marked chiefly by a search for the sensational, amounting to little less than an enslavement to sensation; this search justifies experiment in any direction whatsoever. Sensation is not enduring, it cannot satisfy for long; it demands constant renewal and, being satiating rather than satisfying, it demands both intensification and variety. The arts are not exempt; but in that connection we often prefer the word "aesthetic" to the word "sensational", though they mean much the same thing. The result is chaotic, for a true culture is above all disciplined, restrained, selective and intellectual (in the sense of being concerned primarily with the understanding and only secondarily with the emotions). A true culture does not scorn sensation, far from it; its purpose is precisely to canalise sensation in the direction of the edification and purification of the soul. Our culture being what it is, perhaps we ought not therefore to be surprised at the development of "sub-cultures" founded on drugs, on sexual license, on quasi-religious fantasies, or even on violence, usually in the name of a so-called "freedom" which is in reality nothing else but the very same enslavement to sensation as that which marks our culture. All this is fostered and encouraged by a deafening flood of propaganda and distraction poured out almost without pause by press and radio, diluted with miscellaneous information on almost every conceivable subject. The sheer weight of the whole is overwhelming; its co-ordination and direction is beyond the power of most mortals. It contradicts everything that is simple, calm, gentle, enduring or profound. Moreover, since our outlook is predominantly scientific, and our outlook is reflected in our culture, it may be permissible

to suggest that science itself is suffering from a comparable plethora in its own field, a huge and rapidly swelling mass of information, more and more specialised and indigestible; while at the same time the main preoccupation of science is to increase the mass as quickly as possible by more research, as if such research did not in fact usually raise more problems than it solves. The full answer is always as it were round the corner; a "further advance" is always necessary if complete success is to be achieved. Our science and our culture are alike both in their experimental approach and in their lack of finality. This fact is not without significance.

Surely we are suffering in the cultural field from a quantitative over-development and a qualitative deterioration—that is to say a pollution—parallel to those occurring in the material field, and demanding at least as comprehensive a reversal of trends as does the latter. One can at least assert that a culture which could be regarded as a hopeful source of compensations for material losses can hardly be expected to arise out of our contemporary culture.

All these phenomena, whatever the category in which they may be placed, are in fact aspects of a single phenomenon, simply because a civilisation, if it means anything, is a single whole; it has an economic aspect and a cultural aspect which cannot be dissociated, any more than body and soul can be dissociated in the human beings who constitute it. These two aspects, which could equally well be called the corporeal and the psychic respectively, are not however the whole of a man or of a society. In both there is something that has usually been called "spirit", and we have no better word for it, despite the many senses in which the word is commonly used. If indeed, as so often seems to be assumed today, there is no reality outside the corporeal and the psychic domains, then the conception of spirit is really superfluous, because the word represents no more than a conventional expression covering phenomena confined to one or the other domain, or to both. The word is used here in a very different sense. It represents that which transcends both the corporeal and the psychic, and is principal with respect to both. It is the divine *afflatus*, the "wind" that "bloweth where it listeth", animating all changeable forms, and manifested through them without itself undergoing change. It is therefore essentially mysterious, and cannot be defined unequivocally or exhaustively; yet we try to ignore it at our peril, since its ubiquity renders it inescapable. By its very nature it demands an approach totally different from the scientific approach, since the latter is undertaken exclusively by way of the observation of the apparent and by deduction from that observation; the scientific approach is always indirect, whereas the spiritual as such can only be approached directly, it can only be so to speak "seen" or "not seen" as the case may be.

The approach of religion to the realities and problems of human life differs in principle from the approach of science because the special and indispensable function of religion is to cultivate and to preserve a conscious apprehension or "vision" of the spiritual and to communicate it to the people in a form adapted to their various needs and capacities. Religion constitutes in principle the visible spiritual centre of a civilization: the spiritual is nevertheless manifested in everything, and not least in virgin Nature, either positively or negatively, by way of a relative affirmation or denial, a relative

conformity or non-conformity to its all-embracing essentiality. Nothing is independent of it; the possibility of a conscious apprehension of it is however peculiar to man alone; that human apprehension would not be conscious in the absence of the possibility of its contrary in the form of a rejection of the spiritual. This last possibility is therefore also peculiar to man. It is these two contrary possibilities that together constitute the essential distinction between man and the whole non-human world; all other distinctions are accidental, they are distinctions of degree or of kind rather than of essentiality. We shall return to this point which is crucial. Meanwhile we can legitimately treat the spiritual as a third "aspect" of civilisation, provided that we recognise that it and the material and the cultural aspects are so interlocked as to be in principle inseparable. Since a distinction between them is possible, a relative priority can in practice be accorded to any one of them in thought and action. Some degree of priority is in fact normally accorded to one or the other; not only by specialists—for example by technologists, psychologists or theologians—but by most people in their daily lives. Moreover it seems that the emphasis accorded to each varies in different periods of history. It is at least impossible to deny the predominance of the economic aspect, the subservience of the cultural and the obscuration of the spiritual in the present age; always remembering however that the spiritual "as it is in itself" is not an "aspect", it is unaffected by anything and is present in everything; it is only the human consciousness of its presence that can be obscured. It seems often to be assumed that the cultural as such is inherently "more spiritual" than is the economic; in fact it may be or it may not; everything depends on the quality of the human consciousness that animates it. This truth is very relevant to the pretensions of certain protagonists of culture today, and more generally to the situation of the arts in our civilisation. Correspondingly, and perhaps surprisingly to some people, the material domain as well as the cultural can be a medium for the manifestation or obscuration of the spiritual. Let us therefore not be afraid to return for a moment to the material aspect of things.

We have seen that some of the repercussions of the "gospel of getting on" have begun to give cause for alarm, sufficiently at least to persuade many responsible people, including many scientists, that the situation demands close examination—in other words, more research—and that some modification of the economic framework may need to be undertaken rather urgently, perhaps even before the results of that research are sufficiently well established. The driving force behind any action that may be taken will be mainly the powerful but unconstructive impulse of fear, the fear of a loss of advantages gained; being what it is, that impulse is likely to lead to uncoordinated and ill-directed action. The means available will be precisely those that have brought about the present situation and are likely to show a strong resistance to modification. Well, it will be said, the people must be educated so that they can think clearly and vote wisely in all these matters. The question then is—by whom are they to be educated and in what sense? And even more urgently—is there time even to try to educate the people? Whatever expedient we adopt, we are in grave danger of being overtaken by events, if indeed that is not exactly what is happening now.

So let us move a little further back in order to look at an assumption that seems to be

fundamental to the philosophy of industrialism. It is to the effect that an all-round increase in material wealth will automatically generate the virtues on which the harmony and stability of a civilisation depend. If ever an assumption has been conclusively proved by experience to be false, surely it is this one; yet it remains implicit in most of what we plan and do, and in most public statements related to economics or politics, as well as in many that claim a religious origin. We cannot examine this assumption without considering what virtues must be taken into account. We need not expect to find anything new, nor must we be afraid of taking into account virtues which have in the past been regarded as important for the preservation of human society in its more stable and coherent forms. It may be worth while to try to enumerate some that seem to be particularly relevant to the present discussion, and at the same time to glance at some of the vices with which they are incompatible.

Humility is one of them. It consists in a consciousness of the limitations inherent in the human state as such as well as in one's own individuality, manifested first in the relationship of man to God, and then of man to man and man to Nature. Humility is the reverse of self-assertion in all its forms, including ambition, the cult of "personality" and all notions that imply what has been called a "conquest" of Nature. Closely related to humility is the renunciation of worldly superfluities and the acceptance of one's situation in life and of life's accidents with equanimity and patience, while performing the tasks that fall to one's lot to the best of one's abilities, with the excellence of the product in view rather than the material reward the work may bring. Also related to humility is simplicity, the child-like virtue, gentle, free from pretence, trustful and whole-hearted; and it is perhaps relevant to present considerations to recall that the reward of the "meek" is specifically and rather surprisingly that they will "inherit the earth". Then there are the dynamic or "noble" virtues, with all the obligations nobility implies: generosity and self-sacrifice, courage and devotion, together with dignity, not of rank but of soul, unmoved either by calumny or by praise, free from both arrogance and false humility, knowing its place and seeking no other. And one cannot omit, as a foundation for all, faith and fear: faith in an all-wise Creator, and fear of a just Judge, not of loss nor of suffering nor of death.

Among the vices incompatible with these and other virtues it seems appropriate to mention particularly the following: lust, currently accepted and encouraged in most of its many forms; envy, which appears often to be taught as a virtue or as a duty in the name of equality; avarice, stimulated by the advertising industry with its scientific psychological backing designed to make people want what they did not know they wanted, as well as by such things as the stock market and the pools; and, most comprehensive and fatal of all, pride: the presumption that makes man the measure of all things, the disposer of all things and the being to whom all service is due; the arrogance that sets itself up against God himself, while all other vices seek to hide themselves from Him.

It is of course beyond question that very many individuals practice virtues and shun vices such as these, but there is plenty of justification for the view that they are doing so in the face of an increasing pressure which assails them from all sides, and is generated in

the first instance by the motives that govern our technological-industrial civilisation, in which the first priority is the pursuit of wealth rather than the pursuit of virtue, on the false assumption that the former generates the latter. That an inversion of these priorities would bring about a better world is an assumption of which nobody need be ashamed; but it is very difficult to see how such an inversion could be effected and it is impossible to foresee what the resulting world would be like, if only because of the comprehensiveness of the changes involved, amounting to nothing less than a complete and universal change of heart. That is something that planning, however intelligent and well-intentioned, cannot even attempt to bring about. It is evident that, in this connection at least, the situation has passed beyond deliberate human control. We must therefore again move back in order if possible to obtain a more comprehensive view.

A situation in which anxiety and fear prevail is bound to produce reactions against itself, and many such are in evidence today, some more intelligent, some less. They have little cohesion or unanimity and are mostly concerned with finding palliatives to particular aspects of the situation considered more or less in isolation, with more concern for symptoms than for causes. In total they are much more likely to be adding to confusion than alleviating it. Among the more intelligent may be mentioned those movements that are concerned with the conservation of natural resources, with pollution, and with agriculture in relation to health. In so far as these or any other movements tend towards a re-orientation of the aims of civilisation, away from an unrestrained pursuit of wealth towards a less greedy, more restrained and even more humble and "neighbourly" attitude, not only between man and man, but also between man and Nature (for Nature, considered as the source from which we obtain what we need, is indeed our "neighbour" in exactly the sense of the definition of the word that follows the parable of the good Samaritan)—to that extent the movements in question, or some of them, are favourable to the attainment of virtue. On the other hand, to the extent that their real aim, professed or otherwise, is a resumption of the present course of civilisation after a pause necessary for the removal of some unexpected obstacles, they will accomplish nothing towards the removal of the causes of present discontents. They will only deceive their adherents into supposing that they are doing something useful. In almost all these movements there is one thing that remains no less axiomatic than it is in the civilisation that has produced them. It is an assumption to the effect that the physical survival of mankind as the dominant inhabitant of this planet is, and must ever be, the first concern of humanity as a whole. Is it possible that this assumption is not fully justified, or is justified only conditionally? This question leads to our final point, which is either the key to the situation or is the most pathetic of delusions. The reader who has got so far must make his choice; for it must be one or the other; he must at the same time be prepared to accept that the truth is the only thing that counts in the end, even though it may not at first sight seem to point to any particular immediate course of action, for the truth alone is practical, since, in the nature of things, it must prevail in the end.

The instinct for the preservation of the species is universal among the animals, and man is, physiologically speaking, an animal. Is he then no more than an animal with exceptionally highly developed mental powers by which alone he has achieved his

present dominance, and on which alone he must rely for his preservation? Such is precisely the view implicit in the outlook of modern civilisation; it is implicit in almost everything we do whatever we may profess to think. We behave as if man were self-sufficient and existed in his own right, and as if the fulfilment of his destiny depended primarily on the improvement of the environmental conditions under which he lives. We call that improvement "progress", and hope that we can ensure its continuance by increasing our knowledge of our environment with a view to a more complete control of it. This behaviour implies, among other things, that our vision of the destiny of mankind is limited to the creation of a terrestrial utopia, peopled perhaps by supermen who, with all their desires fulfilled and freed from the anxieties that plague us, can devote themselves to the enjoyment of their situation.

All such views of our situation and destiny are relatively new; they are incompatible with an alternative view that will be recognised as being anything but new. The latter has however become so unfashionable that its first principle must be restated in its essentials as briefly as possible. It is to the effect that the destiny of man is spiritual and not terrestrial, eternal and not temporal, paradisal (or infernal) and not utopian (or cataclysmic); also that this is true despite the fact that the goal is inevitably beyond the scope of an imagination derived wholly from terrestrial experience, and is *a fortiori* inaccessible to scientific investigation or proof. Let us follow up this proposition, for if it is substantially true, our situation cannot be correctly envisaged unless it is taken fully into account, since all our motives must be conditioned by it, and it is they that dictate what we do, just as our motives today are conditioned by the view we now take of our situation. If our present view is false we can hardly expect our best intentions to be realised effectively, and there is no occasion to be surprised at the occurrence of exceptional difficulties in our civilisation.

Even the practice of the behavioural virtues could become of no effect if it were undertaken with a terrestrial and not a celestial end in view, for the function of the virtues in the fulfilment of the destiny of man is primarily the purification of souls so that the light of the spirit may enter into them. Purification is indispensable, but it is not everything. The virtues cannot by themselves supply the impulse that sets men on the way, nor the guiding light that keeps them on it. In that sense, indispensable though they be, the function of the behavioural virtues is as it were not directly productive, so that they are not by themselves sufficient; the positive and decisive factor that makes them spiritually fruitful is of a purely spiritual nature, and it cannot therefore be objectified; its presence in an individual implies an orientation of the whole being—not a mere desire—directed towards the absolute, the infinite, the eternal, towards that which is "not of this world"; an orientation manifested in a love of God—much more than a mere belief—that secretly permeates every thought and every act and makes it fruitful, so that it can play its part in the fulfilment of man's true destiny. If the souls of men are orientated in that sense, so also will be their civilisation considered as an entity. This kind of fulfilment of his destiny is the true function of man; it alone is the justification of his life and the glorification of his death. But more than that: man is not alone in the world; he cannot exist apart from it, nor can it exist apart from him, for he occupies a "central" position in

it, man is a "microcosm" a "little universe"; all the possibilities of the universe are reflected and "concentrated" in the human state. His collective function is that of "mediator" between God and the universe, between the spiritual and the physical. The manner in which he carries out that function necessarily affects not only himself but all creatures, whether living or non-living, whom he represents before God. Hence, for instance, the "dominion" accorded to him in Genesis 1.26; or his specific appointment as God's "representative" (Khalif) in the Koran; or, in Buddhism, the vow of Amida "not himself to enter Paradise until the last blade of grass should have been saved". Conversely, the abandonment or weakening of the exercise of the true function of mankind involves, not humanity alone, but also the whole world, living and non-living, in disturbances of equilibrium of many different kinds. They puzzle us simply because their prime cause, namely, our failure to fulfil our spiritual function, does not enter into our calculations, or if it does, it is only as if it were but one of a vast complex of factors, economic, psychological, political and so on, and one of the least calculable of those factors. It is of course inevitable that most of our problems should have to be tackled singly by people who are specialists in one way or another, but a piecemeal approach, however inevitable, well-intentioned and well-contrived it may be, can only be effective if society as a whole is unified and stabilised by a single ultimate aim that takes full account of the supremacy of the spiritual principle that is the origin, sustainer and end of the universe and all that it contains. The beginning of trouble, lies in the natural incapacity of humanity to live fully in accordance with the nature of that principle, and trouble reaches a maximum when manifestations of the principle are mistaken for the principle itself, or in other words, when the appearance is mistaken for the reality, the accidental for the essential, the perishable for the eternal.

At present, for the lack of a right aim, the energies and the goodwill of mankind, both of which are available in abundance, have become dispersed and frustrated. We do not know where to look for guidance —as if the guidance offered by earlier self-revelations of the changeless spirit had itself changed! What has changed is only some of the interpretations put upon the scriptures and traditions associated with those revelations by modernisers in absurd attempts to "bring them up to date", that is to say, to bring them into conformity with the blatantly anti-religious and anti-traditional tendencies of the times; the essentials remain what they always have been. The door will be opened, as it always has been and always will be, to one who knocks; nevertheless he will for the present be acting very much on his own, since he will get little help from his surroundings. In accepting the guidance of a revealed religion he must not gloss over its aspect of severity; he must accept the implications of the universal scriptural and traditional prophecies concerning the inevitability of an end to be followed by a new beginning; he will understand that a direct intervention by the changeless spirit alone can restore all things, and that this implies that whatever is incompatible with the presence of the spirit must first be destroyed. Meanwhile, he will be ready. That is all that is possible for him, and that is all that is expected of him.

Our powers are much less than we seem to think. We cannot become other than what we are; we cannot shift the "here and now" in which we find ourselves; we cannot

predict, and still less can we contrive, the future. We cannot conserve what is by nature perishable for more than a very short time, and both our civilisation and we ourselves are by nature perishable. There is one thing in particular we can by no means do, try as we may, and that is to escape from or to destroy the spirit which alone is imperishable.

In exalting our own powers over Nature we diminish ourselves, for the realisation of our full potentiality does not depend on the development and exercise of those powers for our own terrestrial advantage; it depends entirely on the fulfilment by us of our spiritual function; for that alone can keep us in touch with the imperishable and finally bring us into union with it. Such is our appointed destiny, and only to the extent that we follow it for its own sake and without ulterior motive can harmony between man and man and between man and Nature become a reality, and with that harmony a civilisation that is worthy of the name, and is at the same time as fully protected from corruption and dissolution as any collective human organisation can ever be.