

DECLINE OF CULTURE OR SETTING OUT TOWARD A MORE HUMANE WORLD?

by

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1 Introduction

Nowadays, in Europe as well as all over the world, we are experiencing a radical change of existence and consciousness reaching down to the roots. Pessimists are afraid of a ruin assuming global dimensions which concerns culture or even life, while optimists believe in the rise of a new, more humane world. The developments in the fields of scientific learning and of technological conquest and manipulation have made our relation to nature plunge into a crisis so abysmal that the very survival of mankind is endangered. The traditional ideological sense-providing interpretations delivered by religious and philosophical systems seem to reach their limits; the contrary structures of consciousness and cultures of Europe, North and South America, Asia and Africa begin to confront one another; political and social upheavals of global proportions are shaking mankind. We are facing a provoking challenge of history never known before. The present "cosmic consciousness of crisis" - if one may express it this way - is nourished by the accumulation of natural disasters; it is interpreted and further determined by prophetic visions of catastrophes and of the end of history. Even events in the area of Christianity tend in this direction: Think of the Virgin Mary appearing in France, Spain and Jugoslavya. Astrology, which is again being taken more and more seriously, tells us that an old age is coming to its end while a new one is beginning which is marked by the zodiacal sign of Aquarius and which is said to involve a totally new Being and consciousness:¹

The present cultural crisis of mankind, which has been outlined, with its vague moods of doom, its real experiences and observations, its rational argumentations, with all these elements penetrating one another, means a challenge to us: a challenge provoking critical analysis and, maybe, a thorough reorientation. We are to face this task during the following philosophical considerations. These considerations are divided into three sections: In the first

section, a deep-rooted concept common to all mankind is traced through Christian-theological, non-christian-mythological and occidental-rational sense-searching interpretations of world history: the concept of culture perishing and starting anew in a periodical manner. Against this background we want to work out typical symptoms of our present global crisis of consciousness in the second section. A third section tries to develop an analysis from the viewpoint of philosophy of history and ethics, ie, a theoretical orientation and interpretation which might induce impulses for practical action. Here we are guided not so much by historical, socio-psychological or even educational interpretations. Our perspective is to be understood rather as a genuinely philosophical one, for, in the final analysis, we are interested in the interpretation of the sense of our existence. This interpretation is to be attempted by means of disclosing an explorative thinking proceeding from common experience - a task which is surely unlimited, but which probably can be fulfilled by us at least to a limited extent.

2. The Ruin of Culture and a new Interpretation of World History

According to the conception of Judeo-Christian belief and its theological interpretation, world history, as it seems, is proceeding by the sequence of perishing and starting anew; so to speak, the principle of "Die and become" is engraved into world history as its "rhythmic basic structure". The earlier "little end of the (medieval) world" was followed by the birth of modern scientific-technological culture - and maybe today a new ending is impending - the even more comprehensive end of our modern culture, which implies the hope for the birth of a future integral structure of mankind embracing all humanity, the hope for a world that is more "humane" in the universal sense of this word.

Of course, according to the Christian conception there is no anonymous lay of the world which reaches the aim quasi-automatically. On the contrary, as for example told by the biblical accounts of the primeval Flood, the ruin of a culture, its destruction by divine judgement is always and exclusively caused by preceding human failures, by vice and decline of morals. The "account of the Flood" in the Old Testament's book "Genesis", for example,

describes how God created the world and subsequently tried to enter a community of life with man. But because mankind rejected the love offered by its Creator and, implicated in sacrilegious self-enjoyment and idolatry, was repulsive to God, it separated itself from its Divine ground of existence; therefore mankind caused its own ruin. The chapters beginning from 6 to 8 of "Genesis" tell us how God inspired the one and only man whom he could find as righteous to build a saving "Ark" following completely determined proportions and to assemble it just in time for his family together with representatives of the other living beings. Then God made it rain for 40 days and 40 nights so that all beings outside the Ark were destroyed by the Flood. Once the Flood had receded, the human beings were able to leave their shelter and to dare a new life on earth. They made an offering of thanks to their Creator who sealed the peace by the rainbow sign through which earth was reconnected with heaven.

In this context, history is conceived as a basically personal and dialogical event between Creator and creature. Mankind faces the personal challenging and demanding call of its Creator, a call to be recognized through the historical conditions; and everything depends on the way mankind answers this call - whether man acts responsibly and obeys his vocation or whether he blocks himself in an autocratical manner. Along these lines man always is the shaper of his own fate. A special concern of the occidental culture which depends on Judeo - Christian belief is elaborating this personal-dialogical conception of Deity and of the history of mankind. In recourse to Augustine², modern times tried to work more intensively on this task, especially within the so-called philosophy of existence and encounter, represented by e.g. Sören Kierkegaard³, Martin Duber⁴ and Peter Wust.⁵

As it seems, the archetype conveyed by the narrative of a cosmic Flood - the world ending and being born again - belongs to the fundamental cultural heritage of mankind and is to be found even in myths beyond the Judean and Christian and the European cultural complex. Take, for example, an ancient East Indian tradition: While Manu, the father of mankind, has his morning wash, he gets hold of a little fish which implores him impressively to spare it and to take care of it. As Manu does so, the thankful

fish prophesizes the arrival of a Flood. Thanks to this warning, Manu succeeds in escaping the pluvial disaster with the help of a saving vehicle, an Ark. In a similar way American, Mesopotamian and ancient Babylonian accounts also tell us about pluvial catastrophes; the following works contain accounts of a Flood which are especially worthy of note: the epic of Gilgamesh in the 12th century BC, the epic of Atrachasis in the 16th century BC and the Sumerian myth of the Flood in the 19/18th century BC. These myths agree with one another and with the biblical account, as far as essential features are concerned. A few chosen human beings are warned of an impending world-wide Flood; there is the order to build an Ark; and there are more invariable details of mankind's rescue. As distinguished from the biblical account in the Old Testament, however, in the Mesopotamian tradition the disaster is based not upon the decline of mankind's morals, but upon conflicts or tempers of the gods; man has no responsibility for the pluvial disaster; man isn't seen within a dialogical I-Thou relationship to Deity; rather we face a cosmic event following natural laws.

The concept of a cyclical-dialectical movement of reality is to be found as well in European-Occidental philosophy, from antiquity up to the modern era and right up to the present. According to Plato, all events within the material world of space and time are the manifestation of eternal Divine ideas and therefore have their origin in these ideas; temporal-spatial processes are tending to a reminiscence of this origin. Thereby a reflection takes place, i.e. mind turns back and returns to its origin. This turning back and returning does not necessarily mean vanishing and being destroyed, but rather an essential transformation and renewal by the breaking through of Divine truth.

During the European Middle Ages, as represented by Augustine and Joachim de Fiori⁶, the emergence of the world is based upon the free creative word of the personal God, and the return to the origin in history is framed as a dialogue between the addressing God and the responding mankind. In the European modern era, this free personal dialogue changes extensively into an impersonal dialectic following the laws of Being. Thus, according to Hegel⁷, the Divine primordial Being necessarily streams out of itself and

passes over to the material world; in order to conceive itself in its unlimited Divinity, it faces itself in a limited world which is related to its Divine ground as its necessary anti-thesis. In the course of the subsequent necessary synthesis, God returns to himself by attracting the limited world and by suspending its limitedness. Thus, reality is nothing else but a process of stepping out to the limit and of returning and vanishing toward the unlimited. It is a necessary dialectical movement from thesis via antithesis to synthesis which repeats itself in history progressively by small and big steps. Thus the fixing and removing of limits may assume the nature of catastrophes, of violent ruin and of the break-down of the prevailing limited way of life in favour of a setting out to a less limited and better way of life. In Marx and Engels⁸ the Divine spiritual primordial Being is replaced by an unlimited material origin of life which, by the dialectical leaps of natural development and by the revolutionary blows and breakthroughs of society and history, proceeds and actualizes itself.

This survey of mythological narratives sensibly representing meaning and of philosophical efforts intellectually reflecting meaning is admittedly quite cursory. Nevertheless, it suggests that there is a primordial knowledge, common to mankind, of the sense structure of historical reality. According to this knowledge historical reality, due to its basic disposition, runs through crises, radical changes and even catastrophes in order to reach its aim, a purified humanity which is as unlimited as possible and which thereby participates vitally in the Divine⁹. With this background we want to try to determine some symptoms of our present epochal crisis of culture.

3. Indications of today's global crisis of consciousness

It seems that a thorough change of the relation of man toward nature, man and the Divine is about to begin; therefore we arrange our following analysis according to these three substantial aspects of the relationship. In the European Occidental culture, since the beginning of the modern era, **the relation toward nature** is determined by a technologically orientated concept of science. By means of logical concepts, man tries to comprehend reality rationally and to master it theoretically in order to subdue it, and also practically to have control over it. This happens in the following way. On all levels of matter, life and consciousness, the

sense structures of reality, given by experience, are analytically dissected into their elements and elementary functions in order to produce from them new structures synthetically according to mathematical possibilities. Thus, by developing mathematical physics, nuclear power plants and the nuclear bomb emerged from the materials and energies given by nature; by developing chemistry and biology, which work analytically as well as synthetically, genetic engineering came into being which, through technical manipulation of the chromosomes, wants to produce new kinds of life, life out of the test-tube so to speak. In a similar way, psycho-analysis and psycho-synthesis are, by means of a psycho- and socio-technology, making it possible to restructure the psychic life of the individual as well as of human society. In a word: the occidental spirit of the modern era tries to face nature in all of these realms - lifeless matter, living organisms and unconscious mental beings - as a mere object, to restructure them according to its own aims and, by so doing, to produce itself as an omni-potent, freely controlling and creative subject¹⁰.

Nowadays, however, it becomes clear that the objectification and instrumentalization of nature, motivated in such a manner, and such a theoretical distancing dissociation and emancipation from nature create not only the possibility of domination and freedom, but also the danger of alienation and destruction. Apocalyptic nightmares are arising: a possible disturbance of the cosmic equilibrium by the disordered releasing of nuclear energies; the total destruction of all forms of life by unintended secondary effects of radioactivity; the evocation of biological monstrosities or even devastating epidemics by genetic engineering which is never absolutely controllable; and, finally, an ever more spreading neurotization of mankind as the result of a psycho-manipulation conforming only to superficial success.

These threats radically set limits to the claim of scientific-technological domination and make us face the question of survival. As it seems, survival is possible only if we are ready to recognize and to respect nature not merely as "value useful for man", but fundamentally as "value sense-full in itself". That means: the logic of mere domination and control has to be abandoned in order to replace it by a logic of correspondence and

responsibility. The "logos of history" is able to actualize itself only by an appreciative "dialogue of man and nature". In the course of this dialogue man comprehends nature not only inspired by a conceptual will to seize power but with an open attitude in order to appreciate nature's sense through his reason and to answer from his heart.¹¹

Hence it follows that the demand for a spiritual reorientation is inevitable and that this aims at our basic attitude toward reality. This demand refers to the relation not only toward nature but also toward our fellow human being, ie, to **the social and political area**. Nowadays the traditional relationship between the sexes has started to change in a revolutionary way. All over the world the woman is heading for an uprising, emancipating herself from the domination of the man, facing him as an equal partner. The classical patriarchal order, e.g. in the Roman-Catholic church and in Judaism, and even in other religions and cultures, is hit at its roots and seems to be doomed. In an ever more successful way, the youth are fighting against the authoritarian systems of the older generation which they regard as repressive. The traditional established structures of society work loose and become permeable in every direction. The hardened differences between social positions and classes are about to become relativized: e.g. the differences between capitalistic-exploitive entrepreneurship and wage-dependent proletariat, and those between the ideological principles of liberal market economy and socialist planned economy. An international solidarity between the peoples replaces, it seems, the "balance of terror" between the old ideological-political blocks of the East and the West. It may be an indication of this development that the understanding of the Hegelian-Marxist formula "dialectical unity of the contradictions" is changing toward new aspects. Hitherto the relation of contradiction was conceived as an opposition of elements excluding each other so that the better part had to beat and destroy the worse part. Now particular stress is laid on the unity of the whole in which the members of the contradiction are to complement each other by peaceful conflict; the dominant aspect is offered no more by the antagonism in togetherness, but rather by the togetherness in antagonism.¹²

It becomes apparent that the obsolete stiff social and political hierarchies, with their claims for the absoluteness of abstract preeminence and subordination are challenged by the elemental longing for animated communication and interaction. It is convenient with this development that the different ethnic groups and cultures of mankind enforce mutual penetration and fecundation which is made possible by modern science and technology.

However, the claim for intellectual leadership, laid by the culture which came from Europe and by its technological logic of conquest and control which was developed in the modern era, is criticized vehemently, and, as a complementing corrective, a more sense-conceiving and intuitive-aesthetic reason is called for which is in harmony with nature. The Asiatic and African cultures are probably more gifted for this capacity¹³. But to say this is to exaggerate. The analytic eye of the European and the listening ear of the Asiatic and the African are deeply rooted in the rhythm of Being, and are, it seems, related to each other from their very origin. These theses suggested by the modern philosopher of religion and culture, Levinas¹⁴, for instance, are nowadays more and more taken notice of in the "philosophy and theology of liberation", e.g. by Enrique Dussel,¹⁵ and are developed further in an effective way.

Today's crisis of culture, which at its heart turns out to be a crisis of human consciousness, manifests itself in a radical change of the complete relationship toward reality, i.e. at first toward nature and to fellow human beings, but in utmost depth even toward **the absolute and the Divine**. Especially out of the encounter and mutual influence between Western-European, Eastern-Asiatic and Southern-African cultures a revolution of the "transcendental consciousness" seems to be about to begin. For astrology, this process of transformation is linked to the transition from the age of the "Pisces" to the age of "Aquarius". The traditional, rationally ordered and controllable religious institutions and churches with their conceptual-abstract dogmas lose their power of persuasion and believing supporters; personal religious experience is being searched for. Analytical and conceptual thinking, restricted to the world of sensual knowledge,

is to be transcended in a mystic, intuitive and auditive experience, by the human mind's conceiving the pretersensual and the Divine through the sensual and by its self-transferring devotion to the Divine. This search for a transparence of the visible and palpable physical world toward an invisible and impalpable metaphysical-spiritual world becomes obvious by an interest flaring up everywhere. For example, the interest in parapsychological and paraphysical phenomena as telepathy, clairvoyance, faith healing and spiritual surgery, an interest even in occult practices which are of a dubious religious and humane value. Doing without sober rational thinking may also lead to dangerous aberrations. The modern secular culture, dominated by the one-dimensional means-ends-perspective and by a superficial technological will to control, seems to vanish, and a post-modern age which tends to a symbol-related multi-dimensional comprehension and establishes a "non-perspectivistic world", as Jean Gebser¹⁶ says, seems to begin. Scientific observers, analysts and prophets as Paul Feyerabend¹⁷ and Thomas Kuhn¹⁸ are talking about a "revolution of the concept of science" and of a "shift of paradigm", i.e. a fundamental alteration of the attitude toward knowledge. Marilyn Ferguson¹⁹ sees the beginning of a soft "Aquarian Conspiracy" of the representatives of new consciousness, united in an international fraternity as in a secret network. The physicist Fritjof Capra²⁰ diagnoses a "Turning Point" leading to a new, synoptic and holistic experience of reality. According to this, the mathematical formulas of Western physics are to the Tao of Eastern philosophy as rational outside view to the intuitive inner view of the very same object: of the logos of Being.

However, these and other announcers of the "New Age" are speaking of the vanishing of our modern culture which only in a very limited sense can be called "humane" and "befitting a human being". They also speak of the rising of a new post-modern culture of mankind which promises to embody a more integral and holistic humanity. But can such a positive evaluation of today's crisis of culture stand the test of a more detailed critical contemplation? This is the question the following section sets out to consider.

4. **A Critical Analysis from the Viewpoint of Philosophy of History and Ethics**

The present world-historical situation, some aspects of which we have tried to characterize, indicates that we are experiencing an overall radical change of culture. The modern secular scientific-technological culture, stemming from the world-grasping occidental rationality, seems to reach its end and to be interrupted, and a so-called post-modern super-rational and more holistic culture wherein oriental, ie, Asiatic and African powers are gaining greater importance, seems to be beginning or to be breaking through. Then, it seems, the vanishing of modern culture is inevitable, due to its destructive state, while the success of a post-modern culture is not yet ensured, in spite of many creative tendencies²¹.

But what are the conflicting spiritual powers? From the **occidental** hemisphere the special ability of rational differentiation did arise, i.e., the power to step out of the unity of the experienced reality and to confront it; this is precisely the potency of analytical and object-related consciousness, of liberation from pre-conscious structures and compulsions through technological conquest and domination. However, this ability, positive in itself, is extensively perverted to a negative state in which it does not any more respect the being as a senseful of value in itself and for its own sake but just as a value useful for man, thus alienating itself from basic reality.

From the **Eastern** hemisphere, on the other hand, comes the special ability tending toward the unity of Being, ie, the capacity for keeping or finding the centre and the harmony. And that's why, regarding the future, one can hope for special sources of integration from the East. For a certain task becomes manifest: after the preceding rational differentiation of areas (in order to overcome the alienation of the parts from one another and from the whole toward a more original unity) an integration in the direction of the centre has to take place. Of course there is a threatening danger. And this implies a possibility of failure. Turning away from an exaggerated rationalism need not be connected with rising to a super-rational consciousness which really embraces the logic of rational distinction and the ordering

that was elaborated during the history of occidental mind. Such a turning away from rationalism could, on the contrary, cause a fall into a blind irrationalism which would mean chaos and destruction. As outlined above, there already are alarming indications of this development.²²

According to Jean Gebser's philosophy of culture, mankind has to go through three stages of consciousness: at first a pre-rational, ie, archaic, magic and mythical stage, in which man to a great extent is to be characterized as "ego-less"; nowadays this stage can partially be found in Asia. It is followed by the mental-rational structure of consciousness which is proper to the "ego-bound" (and to a great extent "ego-tense") man - and which has become a determining moment for the history of Europe and a great part of today's world. The prospect for the future would be, as things now stand, a trans-rational and "ego-free" consciousness with which man neither falls back into the ego-less primitive state nor stays bound up with his singular ego but rather, in deep and comprehensive love, rises to a "being freed from the ego". Such an "integral consciousness" could emerge from a "Great Encounter" between Europe and Asia.

This concept of Jean Gebser is not contradictory to an old tradition of Chinese natural philosophy, according to which everything depends on a certain process. The extending power of the celestial principle "Yang" has to unite with the connecting power of the terrestrial principle "Yin" in a fertilizing manner - so to speak, like a masculine pole unites with the feminine one - in order to cause the integral wholeness of man and of human culture. The thesis of Gebser also corresponds with Hegel's occidental philosophy of history, according to which - after the necessary dialectical step of evolution of a consciousness that opposed itself in a manner antithetical to reality given by experience - the great synthesis and integration would have to take place, which would mean a new, complex and original spiritual vivacity. But can we really expect such an integrating step of mankind toward a fuller and more humane being? According to the philosophical tradition of Aristotle, the vanishing of one thing necessarily implies the origin of another thing, "corruptio unius est generatio alterius". On the contrary, however, according to

the pessimistic view of culture delivered by Oswald Spengler, the "decline of the West"²³ is an event of biological necessity, whereby one can in no way induce the birth of another, new culture from the mortification and death of an old culture. In this context, Spengler conceives cultures as singular isolated organisms which are subject to an anonymous inner law of "Die and become". In opposition to such a merely biological viewpoint Arnold Toynbee stresses the transcending spiritual character of every culture, thus respecting the dimension of historical dialogue and of man's responsible decision and self-determination. To Toynbee history is, so to speak, an interplay of question and answer. Each emergency represents a challenging question to mankind which has to give a responsive answer. Through this answer man himself determines his further survival²⁴.

Given these premises the concept of "historical crisis" gains new importance for us. The Greek term "crisis" stands for "di-voice", "dis-cord", "de-cision"; it draws the borderline between two states, while at first it is not decided whether the process tends toward improving or toward worsening. (Just think of fluctuations of economy or of life-crises during an illness.) In any case, an alert perception of the signs of the times is required, and a will to life which is not dogged but relaxed and trusting. But where could the transmitting impulse for life come from, an impulse toward which one could disclose oneself and to which one could commit oneself with daring decisiveness?

The evolution of the material cosmos, organic life and human consciousness happens by continuous differentiation and integration. It isn't possible at any time to deduce the emerging more comprehensive structures of wholeness completely from the preceding elements in comparison to which these structures are something qualitatively new, which did not exist before in this special way. Therefore one has to suppose that the process of evolution and of history is guided by 'a creative Divine principle working at all times and out of which a new, more comprehensive, and deeper form of Being streams into existence whenever the conditions of receptivity have been created. An "integral structure of consciousness" embracing, and at the same time surpassing the clarity of the rational could emerge only by a "creative leap"

of evolution (which is due in our times). Such a structure of consciousness is the basis of an open vivid world order and world culture without which mankind couldn't survive. Consequently a future-orientated responsible basic attitude is well-grounded, actively trusting in the permanently operating Divine primary source into whose service man takes himself in a cooperative manner.

Maybe the present sufferings of mankind are to be understood as "labour-pains" leading to an essentially new kind of being human, expressing more integration, humaneness and freedom. Indeed the birth could be abortive; the mother could die; the culture of mankind could vanish as in a cosmic pluvial disaster. But instead of pessimism and fatalism, co-provoked by its negative horizon of expectation what it is afraid of, and instead of an equally naive optimism regarding the future which believes in an automatic development tending to the better, an alternative offers itself namely: a hope reaching into a dimension which could be called "religious" in the sense outlined above; a hope which, given at least a minimum of insight into meaning, dares a maximum, personal stake. And maybe the people who recognize the call of the creative origin in the signs of the times and who answer to this call will then form the Ark which, as a new beginning, carries us toward the millennium to come.

[Translated by Uwe Voigt.]

FOOTNOTES

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