

Crisis

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THE TERM IN THE title is used with an increasing frequency, and we risk getting accustomed to it, living with it. This is inevitable as our public, or rather civilizational mood becomes similar to that of all decadent ages. And the similarity does not stop there: like the contemporaries of other ends-of-times (see Romano Guardini's title some thirty years ago), we too deny what is around us and what we may expect. Jacques Bainville wrote that the majority of men never have the imagination to conceive other roads than the familiarly trod one; crises confront us head-on, bringing tragedy but no awareness.

Nonetheless, the elite somehow feel that our world is collapsing, and they respond to this perspective in a variety of ways. My purpose here is not to argue whether the collapse is near or far or what forms it might take; it is to examine these responses, at least some of them. A further restriction: not the response of the official elite: government, world bodies, the leading media, and the bureaucracies—which generally affirm that the prospects are encouraging, the GNP is rising, more raw material will be found (on the ocean bed and in space) for greater material progress, and more educational television programs will be broadcast for the culturization of all. The elite's responses I plan to review here are derived from serious minds—writers, thinkers, scholars, prophets, psychologists, priests.

The crisis, as these men see it, affects the two oldest public institutions, Church and State. Contrary to constitutional provisos and the theories of modern politologists, the two cannot be separated; their cleavage marks the first step in the crisis. Jean Hani, in *La Royauté sacrée* (Paris,

1984), argues that natural inequality requires a hierarchical structure through which inequality is socially integrated. Otherwise, disorder ensues, the material which holds society together becomes porous, brittle, and the body politic falls apart. In this analysis, the king or emperor (in Egypt, Persia, Judea, China, Japan, medieval states, etc.) holds the edifice together as representative of the divinity, yet subject to some form of popular investiture, less by vote than by acclamation.¹

Leaving the institution of kingship aside, young sociologist Jean-Pierre Dupuy from the Ecole Polytechnique presents (in *Ordres et desordres*, Paris, 1982) a complementary thesis. Modern society's crisis should be explained by the fact that it recognizes no reference-system beyond and above itself, so that the citizen acknowledges no transcendental source of authority or ordering principle. Everybody being equal like gas molecules in a container, the constant agitation appears to be the only "law," motivating each molecule to rise to the top. This is what classical authors used to call "anarchy," the end-product of democracy's inherent logic.

To a question at a recent lecture at the Sorbonne (on "legitimacy"), I suggested that the two just-mentioned analyses are borne out by the respective state of some continental nations over against the United States. The former (France is the paradigm) had undergone a radical revolution, a symbolic decapitation of the rule of the sacred reference, affecting both State and Church. The popular sovereignty that followed conforms indeed to Dupuy's thesis since the citizens have doubt about the validity of their own "sovereignty," when in practice their

elected representatives behave in the manner of an oligarchic class, involved full-time with their own interests (accumulation of power, re-election, enrichment), and only part-time with the interests of those whom they represent. They put on a mask (the *persona* of Hellenic tragedy) which allows them to play two roles. In opposition to nations which have "killed their God and king," I then pursued: the United States has not gone through this inverted metanoia, has not separated itself from the ancestral (English) constitution, from the Bible, from a superior reference-network. Practically the entire citizenry, in spite of the anarchy of American civil society, holds on to the belief of "standing under God" and a system of government not unlike the early Puritans' town meeting, thus a semi-religious institution. Perhaps half of America's population is by now atheistic and immoral, cynical, and disaffected; yet the public discourse has not separated itself from its origin in God's will.

With such considerations, however, we do not close the debate; we merely gain a vantage point from which the crisis makes sense. For situations are not static, they follow a trend, as is obvious when we observe the alienation of huge blocks of people, also in the United States, from national ideals, morality, legal system, religion, institutions—and even from the very concept of popular sovereignty. After all, an alienation whose habitual form is now increasingly violent—from strikes to terrorism to child-abuse to legalized abortion—cannot be a simple problem of statistics, better playgrounds—or further psycho-sociological research. Disaffection seems to be built into the routinized life in mass-industrial societies. Remove the routine and the prosperity that sustains it, and the bottom of the abyss could not even be perceived.

Hence, other diagnosticians of the crisis descend beyond the social and political platform of observation. The one immediately below, the deeper root of the crisis, is our psychological vision. At mid-century, we still called it depth-psychol-

ogy, theorizing that the general malaise is engendered by the clash of the individual libido as its drives are thwarted by the real world. Freud's illusion (the exact opposite of what he suggested in *The Future of an Illusion*, namely religion) was that man could be emancipated from the stormy impulses of his psyche (first step), and (second step) that a world of psychoanalyzed individuals would create a state of affairs without conflict, a liberated humanity.

With Jung and his followers the scene shifted from the individual's mini-drama to the collective historical dimension, to the archetypes from which we borrow our psychic structure. Religion, for Freud, was a vast network of illusions; for Jung, the denial of religion and of strata yet deeper was the real source of psychic phenomena observed in the modern patient and generally in modern man. The "crisis" received thus a new face: it became civilizational, and more, eventually cyclical, perhaps cosmic. At any rate, an entirely new "depth" became vaguely visible in the psyche, in behavior, in man's historical existence, a depth probed by the structuralists, the existentialists, the hermeneutes, the mythologues. Interestingly, this new depth has something in common with the latest in mathematics and nuclear physics: both areas, the psychological and the scientific, have given up their foundation in common sense, in rational judgment. Mathematics has become a game theory, its roots no longer in the observable world but in its own arbitrarily multiplied conventional signs; psychology, with its extension toward anthropology and culture-analysis, has left the field of the verifiably conscious, even of the conventional subconscious, surrendering to the collective myth that nobody is able to ascertain via introspection. Levi-Strauss writes: "Things happen as if society and culture emerged in response to the problem of death: society exists in order to prevent the animal's (man's) consciousness of death, and culture arises as man's reaction to the fact that he exists" (*Paroles données*, Sorbonne lectures, 1984). After this, how can one regard existence and culture

as anything but alienating?

Others could be quoted, the sum of whose work seems to be the outright debunking of man, consciousness, the content of this consciousness, of meaning, of aspirations, of civilization. Returning for a moment to Jean Hani and J.-P. Dupuy, it becomes evident that on such a theoretical infrastructure that Levi-Strauss and others present, no "sacred realm," not even a well-ordered political body can be erected. But let us tread the Jungian path. Jung's disciple James Hillman tries to "rehabilitate" the psyche as others, e.g., Saussure and Benjamin Whorf, have "rehabilitated" language. What do these endeavors aim at? They aim at the demonstration that the psyche (or language) is an independent phenomenon, having its own structure, without a substratum in consciousness and intelligence. Language, for Whorf, is a network of signs, so free from servitude to man's perceptions and the inner life which it is supposed to express according to old theories, that, in fact, it dictates through its own rules how we conceive things and make statements about them. In short, it is a self-contained system, a structure, which determines our thoughts and conduct. As Professor Jean Brun writes (*L'homme et le langage*, Paris, 1985), the divine and the human dimensions of language disappear in this theory, the modulation of words as they express poetry, mystery, love, and awe.

Similarly the psyche as it is interpreted by Hillman: it exists as bundles of pulsions, each with its own volition toward uninhibited self-expression. Pulsions and self-expressions were what the pagans (always the Greeks, who were "good pagans") called *gods*, thereby deifying instinctual life and emancipating it from under the public's and the authorities' moral tutelage.²

Christianity decisively interfered with the unobstructed life of pulsions; it turned them generally over to the devil's domain. Pulsions, in Hillman's, Foucault's and others' interpretation became *sins*, their psychic energy repressed. Two thousand years of Christianity has mutilated them,

and medical practice diagnosed them as *sickness*. Only a restored pagan view, "beyond good and evil," will be able to erase psychic "illnesses," by looking at the symptoms in a positive light.

WE HAVE THUS THE modern psychological view of man, linking up with, and to a large extent causing, the political malaise, what we called the first manifest face of the crisis. How are we to interpret their combined significance?

On the level of the community, the crisis can be said to be society's (nation's, family's) detachment from transcendence, its personifications and symbols. It is not impossible that at the present time, without our being aware of it, a new link is forged between the community and its providential agent. One question, which I am not trying to examine here, is precisely whether the de-sacralized, self-referential society is viable, whether we are entering a historical era of spiritually self-contained societies. For the time being, this is exactly what we would have to call totalitarian societies (described by A. Zinoviev in a frighteningly prosaic mode), omitting now the obligatory reference to Hitler and Stalin as if the phenomenon were not taking place elsewhere too, closer to home. As said before, it is not impossible that communities may live in a state of exile from God; the crisis may become institutionalized.

However, we approach a more complete elucidation of the crisis if we consider the level on which modern psychology operates.³ Society's separation from God (a historic first, reserved for our age) has its parallel in the individual psyche's separation from moral judgment. Society, so say our authors, cannot function without transcendence built into its structure; the soul is similarly stunted without a guiding education in virtue. Jung's, Hillman's, Foucault's and Levi-Strauss's presupposition is that (a) what we mean by virtue, morality, the distinction of good and evil is conditioned by the Christian view of God and man, and that (b) it is a superimposed, arbitrary blockage of other

views. The Christian view was vigorous enough to build a civilization on this presupposition, but now, in Hillman's words, "it is no longer an adequate civilizational vehicle." In sum, it now blocks the psyche's energy: it causes symptoms of psychic disorder and sickness. We must turn to the pre- or post-Christian understanding of human behavior and thus free the psyche from its Christian moral bonds.

Thus we reach the third component of the crisis, the plane of religion. The contemporary elite (philosophers, students of mysticism and myth, anthropologists, etc.) may be labelled "gnostics," but only if we do not mean by the term any particular sect of the first centuries, e.g., the Valentinians, the principal movement, but adopt Gilbert Durand's overall definitions: "Gnosis is the integrated and redeeming knowledge." In this sense, we do not have to meticulously examine the eastern Mediterranean area in the second and third centuries, but detect the human penchant for salvation through a secret doctrine in which one must be initiated in order to achieve effectiveness.

This doctrine (see details further on) is always popular in time of crisis,⁴ because it presents to erudite and probing minds the second-best option after a discredited Christian theology and dogmatics with which many people refuse to be associated or to which they claim to have found more persuasive alternatives. Thus, to return to our time, a kind of "new religion" has arisen, which is "that of the philosophers, not of Jesus Christ," as Pascal put it with great precision three centuries ago. It is an intellectual magisterium, equidistant from the earlier decades' crude disbelief and from traditional monotheism. It finds expression in many places, in the study of esotericism, of oriental religions, in Eliade's work, in Islamology, and also in small groups of Western scholars.⁵

It is a syncretistic doctrine (as is usual in times of basic uncertainties), although its chief proponents formulate it as the most universal that may be found in mankind's history. René Guénon and his many

disciples—among whom F. Schuon, M. Eliade, and various students of alchemy, neo-Platonism, astrology, symbology—posit a Great Tradition, as old as mankind, which used to be omnipresent, but which has survived only in India, Tibet, and a few other places. It has also survived in old languages (Sanskrit, but also Greek, Latin, Aramaic, Persian, Celtic, etc.), old architectural designs, sacred rites and symbols, records of shamanism and prophecy. This is not one tradition among many, but the ever-pervasive documentation of man's first and primeval contact with reality, the *Ur-Erlebniss*, expressing that reality on every level of human/divine manifestation. Guénon's works, today immensely influential, satisfy the most meticulous scholarly criteria as he traces etymologies, institutions, symbols, and ceremonies to the presence of the Great Tradition and its everywhere similar interpretations.

The malaise that many, especially Christian, readers feel vis-à-vis Guénon and his school is the quasi-gnostic air that permeates their writings. At the same time, the salvational aspect attracts many readers. For, after all, what is the secret of all gnoses? They present an incomparable antiquity, next to which all other belief-systems are derivations, thus corrupted versions of the original dimmed lights, half-forgotten truths. The gnoses reach beyond history, to an ageless age when the numenon was directly experienced and its inspiration was immediately translated into communities and monuments capturing its spirit.

We live, in comparison, in a desacralized age, a prosaic cycle, the iron age of Hesiod and Ovid, a profanized history in which the central religion, Christianity, also shares in the dramatic falling-away from Reality. No question that our contemporaries feel this drying-up of the numenal; sects proliferate, their adepts seeking salvation elsewhere than in Christianity: in charismatic movements, freemasonry, ecumenical syncretism, neopaganism, occult teachings, Marxism. Proofs are supplied (by Guénon, J. Ellul, H.

Corbin, J. Campbell, C. G. Jung—and I am listing only the respectable sources) that Christianity, like monotheism in general, has been a deviation from the Other Tradition, a process of corrupting the Unspeakable Knowledge until it has been reduced to science, social engineering, the predominance of material concerns, secularization. The present state of Christianity and the civilization it has co-sponsored with Greeks, Romans, and others—that is the “crisis”—is seen as proof of the inexorability of the last cycle having descended on us, the (Hinduist) Kali-Yuga, after which the Great Tradition will be restored, but unrecognizably to our perception and to the presuppositions of our obscured comprehension.

In short, in the eyes of these thinkers, our age had rigidified the ancient corpus of beliefs into an idolatry, with God in exile—a fundamental gnostic tenet. The crisis is then self-perpetuating; in fact it deepens as the age of technology and of superficial social systems forces the permanent symbols of the human race into oblivion. Nothing has a reference any more; the microcosm has been detached from the macrocosm, literature from myth, art from symbolization, science (gnosis) from sacred knowledge, astrology, alchemy. At this point we may correctly evaluate Jung's theory of the archetypes, which correspond to Guénon's forgotten world-symbols, such as the wheel and its spokes, the flower (rose, lotus, lily), the concentric circles, the sacred mountain (pyramid, ziggurat, temples like the Javan Borobudur), the caves, labyrinths, the dome, the tree of life, the *axis mundi*, and many more. We now acquire a better understanding of the gnosis as a total and salvational knowledge, immeasurably older than the “upstart” religions operating in daylight and jeopardizing the believer's integration with God and the cosmos. As Guénon writes, “Rationalism reduces the individual to his own dimensions and deprives him of his faculties through which he would communicate with the transcendence. And the two forerunners were protestantism and humanism.”⁶ In another work:

“We are witnessing the increase of distance from the basic principles, a process of degeneracy, a falling away from eastern wisdom.”⁷ In reality, it is a wisdom that ancient mankind possessed; its distilled essence is the conformity of the human order to the cosmic order that everything human must reflect. “The notion that mankind's history is isolated from universal harmony is exclusively modern; it is in opposition to all the traditional concepts which assert the constant and necessary correlation between the cosmic and the human order.”⁸ Jung, Jean Hani, Dupuy, Eliade, etc. speak basically the same language.

What has been said of the Great Tradition, of the archetypes, of the cyclical mutations of the spirit, and of harmonies once known but now lost, suggests that not everybody suffers from the crisis I have been trying to delineate. Many regard Christianity as already thrown on the rubbish heap of cosmic metamorphoses; others deny its civilizational relevance; yet others, who claim to wish to reform it and save it from its own inherent temptations, push it into the arms of alien and devastating super-doctrines. At any rate, we have understood that a new, yet very ancient belief-system is making conquests among elite intellects. No more concrete proof of this is needed than the confluence of today's master-disciplines, formulating the “new creed” and surrounding it with the prestige of both secrecy and depth. A very influential series of volumes, by Joseph Campbell,⁹ brings further confirmation. In his *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Bollingen Series, Princeton, 1949), Campbell states, after so many precursors, that “when a civilization begins to reinterpret its mythology, the life goes out of it, temples become museums.” Precisely; by equating Christianity with a mythology, Campbell not only sees it as lifeless, but also contributes to its desiccation and demise. The thesis of his monumental work is that there is a vast unity of mythical searches for God, Whom we perceive through many and varied “faces” or “masks.” But the final

conclusion is that there *is no* God, only masks, and that they are equivalent, in fact the same. The unity of all religions makes Christianity just another imitator and replayer of older myths. In *Occidental Mythology* (vol. 3), hundreds of pages demonstrate the near-identity of Persian, Indian, Egyptian descriptions of how the God/prophet (Osiris, Zoroaster, Moses, Romulus, Oedipus, Buddha, Jesus)¹⁰ was born under non-clarifiable circumstances, how he was in all the legends hidden, found, secretly brought up, returned among men, murdered, come back in glory. True, Campbell makes an exception for Jesus and Christianity as the only one of all religious heroes and religions that enter history concretely, spreading a personal and social message. This, however, if we consider Corbin's judgment, is not necessarily an advantage: the turn from the esoteric and otherworldly to the exoteric contains the danger of secularization, of absorption in mundane concerns—the case finally and irreversibly of Catholicism, too, according to this great student of Persian Islam.

Campbell documents on every point (something that Voltaire's and Lessing's generation did not have at their disposal) the exact analogy of all the world religions/myths, even though he operates some cleavages, for example the East and the West, the demarcation line being Iran. The point is that he thus contributes to the fleshing out of the "elite religion" I have tried to identify in the foregoing. A characteristic passage, showing this investigative elite's rise above religion-as-truth, is the following: "In Mesopotamia, c. 2500, a psychology of mythic dissociation broke the old spell of the identity of man and the divine, which division was inherited by the later mythic systems of the West" (*Oriental Mythology*, p. 500). And earlier: "People sought to represent their intuitions of the Absolute beyond terms: in the West, we personify it as God, in the East it is depersonified as Being or as Non-Being" (*Idem*, p. 313).

One must say, at the risk of angering the Voegelinians, that their mentor would

have agreed: Voegelin spoke of the "divine ground of being," a vague expression which does not explain (this is perhaps impossible) the "psychology of mythic dissociation," the "breakdown of the old spell of the identity of man and the divine." Behind the scholarly terms, this view points, for both Voegelin and Campbell, to an evolution from an original myth to a new psychology, that is, to a gradual interiorization of what was once believed to be the real.

IS THERE A CRISIS of our civilization? There is. We have attempted to trace its origin (the Germans have a better word for it: *Entstehung*) from the political to the psychological to the religious levels. The main point is not whether the crisis is a decadence or whether, if so, it is reversible. As a historical phenomenon, it is evident that the crisis is felt on the level of the people and of the elite. It percolates down from the latter to the former, and as such it may be diagnosed as the subjectivization of all dimensions of reality. But is the soul of man—and his community—when unsupported from outside, from beyond, strong enough to carry this burden?

¹A recent case illuminates it. When in 1970 the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima committed hari-kari at the head of his private patriotic militia, he became a great embarrassment to modern, democratic, industrial Japan. The crisis for the young Mishima had come in 1946 when, on MacArthur's urging, the Emperor declared in public that he was not a divine person, but a mere human. This brutal de-mythification remained Mishima's obsession, and his hari-kari became a national atonement. ²We see at once the reason for the modern dismissal of Plato and the preference given to Dionysos and the initiation mysteries. ³Needless to say, we must acknowledge the existence of a variety of psychological approaches. It seems, however, that the one proceeding from Jung and his school is the most influential, perhaps because it claims historical, philosophical, and religious dimensions. ⁴As it was in the second century, when St. Irenaeus wrote his standard work on the subject he observed first-hand, the *Adversus Haereses*. ⁵Since the publication of Raymond Ruyer's *La Gnose de Princeton*, the group therein studied has become a kind of model for such groups of erudite

scientists. ⁶*Le Règne de la quantité et les signes des temps* (Paris, 1945), p. 258. ⁷*La Crise du monde moderne* (Paris, 1946), p. 18. ⁸*Formes traditionnelles et cycles cosmiques* (Paris, 1970), p. 14. If I quote Guénon more than once, it is because he is practically unknown in the United States, where his name is

pronounced, if at all, almost in an embarrassed whisper. ⁹*The Masks of God*, four volumes (New York, 1959-68). ¹⁰One irresistibly thinks of another eclectic age, Rome's third century, when in his private chapel the emperor Alexander Severus worshiped Abraham, Zoroaster, Jesus, Osiris, etc.