

Editorial: Ensconced In Seeming Knowledge

By M. Ali Lakhani

They say miracles are past; and we have our philosophical persons, to make modern and familiar, things supernatural and causeless. Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge, when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear.

(William Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*, II.iii)

No culture can appear or develop except in relation to a religion.

(T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*)

Among the issues engaged in the public debate between C.P. Snow and F.R. Leavis over “The Two Cultures” was whether there was a widening gulf—“a gulf of mutual incomprehension”, as Snow put it—between the cultural worlds of the physical sciences and of the literary humanities, and the extent to which there was a need to be concerned about (in Leavis’ words) “the cultural consequences of the technological revolution”. Now, at a distance of over half a century from that controversial debate (controversial in part due to the scathing *ad hominem* attacks by Leavis against Snow), and after the departure from the stage of its two main protagonists, the issues they raised have not become any the less relevant over time but have taken on a different hue while assuming a greater urgency. Modern technologies and scientific materialism have come to dominate culture, while the humanities are increasingly influenced by ideals of secularist humanism. Both Snow and

Leavis were right to be concerned about the trivialization of culture and the decline in standards of education, and though the pitting of science and the humanities against each other was perhaps unwarranted, and though the focus of the debate had an unseemly and petty side to it, the concerns that they (and other precursors such as Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, and William Morris in Britain, and conservative critics such as Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, and Richard Weaver in America) voiced have been largely justified. Their justifications are evident in the impact on modern societies of the mainstream media, the virtual media, social networking, entertainment technologies, and the prevalence of images and messages in modern life that reinforce the dominant ethos of materialism and consumerism, and that agitate and distract our souls while in fact seducing them. We have become (in T.S. Eliot's line from *Burnt Norton*) "distracted from distraction by distraction".

The roots of what Snow and Leavis were trying to address in their debate about the state of modern culture are deeper than the outer rift between the sciences and the humanities, or of the privileging of one culture over the other in schools and universities. They lie in culture's sapiential erosion within a modernity that has lost its principal bearings and fallen into idolatry. They lie in the modernist reduction of culture to largely utilitarian, sentimental, or hedonistic ends, divorced from either the refinement of character according to the norms of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, or the cultivation of a civilizational ethos that is founded in reconciling the primordial tensions between the One and the Many. They lie in the modernistic rift between man and nature, and in the sundering of the soul from her spiritual moorings. The cultural crisis of modernism is at its core a crisis of spiritual—and therefore moral—disorder.

Ironically, but not uncoincidentally, while our faith in modern science has increased with the marvels of technology, our faith in metaphysical realities—"things supernatural and causeless"—has declined. It has become easier than ever before to dismiss the miracle and wonder of existence in favor of a progressivist faith in science. The genie of modern science has emerged from its bottle, and its grip on life is unremitting and pervasive. While scientific knowledge is increasingly abstruse, dealing with complex matters such as 'superstring' theory or 'molecular modeling', understood only by its initiates and acolytes, its effects are commonplace; they are all around us, no longer hidden

from sight in textbooks and laboratories, and are radically transforming culture. At the level of the material world, science is now omnipresent in the everyday technologies we use, from the World Wide Web to cell phones, and is even tilting towards omniscience by delving into the far reaches of the universe (think of the Hubble telescope's images of distant galaxies or the discovery of cosmic hum of the Big Bang), into the interior of the atom (think of quarks and bosons, particularly the recent discovery of the Higgs boson, which some have presumed to call "the God particle"), and into the very heart of matter (think of dark matter and black holes). What we are gaining in outer knowledge, we are losing in inner knowledge, in faith and wonder. The modern world is increasingly a combination of (in Irving Babbitt's words) "spiritual anarchy with an ever-increasing material efficiency—power without wisdom". The modern sensibility inclines to the belief that what science cannot tell us today, it will reveal tomorrow. The universe cannot hold back forever its secrets from science and from the potentially omnipotent human mind. For some modern "intellectuals" such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and the recently deceased Christopher Hitchens, who place their faith in rational empiricism and positivism, it is indeed true that "miracles are past", replaced by scientific revelations. Such revelations, if not yet made known, will no doubt be revealed in some progressivist version of the future.

The origins of this kind of thinking can be traced back in the West to the beginnings of the Renaissance, and through the period of the so-called "Enlightenment" when modernist doctrines gained intellectual ascendancy. Cartesian epistemology severed knowledge from its ontological roots, while Kantian cognitive theories reduced knowledge and value to mere 'a priori' postulates, divorcing them from their spiritual nature. Eventually, even the Kantian categorical imperatives would not survive the nihilistically deconstructive tendencies of libertine rationalism found in post-modernism. Faith in eternal verities was replaced by faith in the ability of reason to reshape our material world, to substitute Utopia for Paradise. Hegelian doctrines provided a framework for progressivist utopianism that would later influence Nietzschean idealism and Marxism. Man became separated from the paradisaical world and from his Adamic nature by an inflated subjectivity and a correspondingly diminished spiritual inwardness, influences that

would later be emphasized in the nihilistic philosophies of Nietzsche and some of the existentialists. In the field of the empirical sciences, the Copernican and Galilean revolutions subverted the vertical ordering of traditional cosmology and its worldview of the Great Chain of Being, and replaced it with a universe ordered purely by physical laws discernible by science and reason, paving the way for the evolutionism of Darwinist ideologues such as T.H. Huxley, Dawkins, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

Modernism's denial of transcendence is an aspect of the subversive tendency of humanity. Rebellion against the higher orders is an age-old tale, told in Promethean myths and in Biblical narratives about the Fall or the Tower of Babel. There are strong depictions of Promethean subversion in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but their lessons (as for example, in William Blake's later allegories about the struggle between the forces of Newtonian reason and the poetic imagination, and in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*) are cautionary, serving to remind mankind of the dangers of hubris, of spiritual anarchy, of (as Shakespeare puts it in the epigraph from Lafeu) "enscencing ourselves into seeming knowledge" and making "trifles of terrors". Yet this is precisely our modern condition. Our faith in reason and science, while justified somewhat on a merely mundane level, can also overreach, creating in us the illusion that what is yet unknown will one day become known by human capability alone. Our faith in our own capability for knowledge can diminish our need for God. Indeed, some of our modern philosophers have reduced God to man precisely by elevating man to God. Even the prospect of death ceases to arouse in us an intuition of the supernatural in a world where nature itself is reduced to its outward aspects and where reverence for the numinous has eroded. While Hamlet, in his famous soliloquy, may have had reason to pause over making his quietus with a bare bodkin, an atheist on his deathbed today is far less likely to admit to doubts about a supernatural existence in the afterlife, let alone succumb to a deathbed conversion. And as for life without God, the world has seduced us from Heaven with its promises of a more tangible material paradise on earth. Modern man, in too much of a hurry to labor for a paradise postponed, and in too great a need to direct his own ends to await the benediction of grace, seeks his rewards more immediately. As the vision of the vertical

dimension of reality fades from our view, it opens up horizontal vistas that are increasingly reified, alluring, distracting, and difficult to resist, but which undermine the basis of all traditional culture and lead us ever closer to social, moral, and spiritual bankruptcy.

However, the denial of metaphysical realities and the evidence of things not seen is a delusion. The world does not vanish simply because we close our eyes—yet that is precisely what modern man, ensnared in seeming knowledge, deludedly believes. By closing himself off from the spiritual dimension of reality, man becomes alienated, unable to relate to the world profoundly—that is to say, participatively, compassionately, and sympathetically. Imprisoned within his own subjectivity (the artifice of the mind) or in objectified reality (the superficial or virtualized reality of the objectified world), he vacillates between inner hubris and outer nothingness. Something within us is amiss, something within the reductive landscape of the modernist outlook. By reifying the world into the “modern and familiar” and by reducing our consciousness to the mental processes of sensation and the psyche, we deny their spiritual foundations. By banishing the numinous, we diminish ourselves. When there is no mystery, we experience a loss of intimacy.

As the American thinker, Richard Weaver, has observed, “the road away from idolatry...lies in respect for the struggling dignity of man and for his orientation toward something higher than himself which he has not created.” It is by embracing our nothingness—not in a nihilistic sense, but in terms of our spiritual “poverty” and privation before God—that we can open ourselves up to Divine Grace. So it is that, in the words of Shakespeare which echo both the Book of Proverbs (1:7; 9:10) and the Psalms (111:10), “we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear”—to the numinous reality of what Rudolf Otto has called the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. We need desperately to rediscover a sense of the sacred in our lives, to realign ourselves with the heart or inner nature of things, to experience its beauty—to reinvigorate our spiritual culture. To do this, we need to reawaken our souls to the mystery of the universe, to seek its wellsprings within ourselves, to contemplate it in the replenishing theophanies that surround us, and within our innermost and primordial nature. For it is in the soil of our own true being that knowledge is seeded, not in mechanisms of the reasoning mind nor in the world that beguiles our senses.