

Some Reflections Provoked by the Current Pandemic

By Harry Oldmeadow

Since the 18th century and the so-called Enlightenment the European world, including its extensions in many parts of the globe, has been tyrannized by an outlook which germinated in the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century, bringing in its wake the destruction of those traditional beliefs and values which had nourished medieval Christendom. This modern worldview — boastfully rationalistic, utilitarian, materialistic, scientific, technocratic — has by now spread to all parts of the globe. Like a runaway juggernaut, it has obliterated traditional cultures and peoples everywhere, vandalized the natural order and corrupted our very way of seeing and being in the world (this latter diminution being the necessary antecedent of environmental pollution). One of its shibboleths is the idea of “Progress” and its attendant belief that through reason and modern science man can fashion the world to his own ends, seizing his destiny in his own hands. The Enlightenment champions of Progress assured us that a new and better order was at hand (as their epigones are still doing today). The religious beliefs and values vouchsafed by tradition — in contemporary idiom, “the superstitions of the past” — could simply be consigned to the rubbish bin of history. After the blood-stained barbarisms and ecological catastrophes of the 20th century, largely fuelled by an obsessive pursuit of economic “growth”, one would hardly have thought that such arrogant and naïve ideas could survive but, in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, they have proved remarkably tenacious. The pandemic, whatever its material and auxiliary causes might be, serves

to remind us again that a Promethean hubris must bring consequences in its trail. As Wendell Berry has presciently observed, “Whether we and our politicians know it or not, Nature is party to all our deals and decisions, and she has more votes, a longer memory, and a sterner sense of justice than we do” (from his endorsement for the book *The Dying of the Trees*, by Charles Little, 1997).

Traditional teachings insist that the world and humankind have a divine origin and purpose. Man can only fulfil his vocation by recognizing the Absolute (in Christian terms, God, but elsewhere known by many names) and the imperatives that this entails, including a life of prayer which is our safest refuge and surest hope. Further, we live in a necessarily imperfect world, one in which suffering is inherent; our dealings with each other and with the natural world of which we are a part must be informed by humility, generosity and compassion. Tradition also teaches us that without a sense of the transcendent, a sense of the sacred, no civilization is worth the name. To imagine that the pandemic is unrelated to our wilful turning away from these perennial truths is, to say the least, foolish and presumptuous. Neither a “humanism” which answers to nothing outside the human order, nor a profane empirical science, nor a rapacious economic system can provide the remedy for the deep-rooted spiritual crisis of which these are actually both symptom and cause. We cannot too often be reminded that, “The state of the outer world does not merely correspond to the general state of men’s souls; it also in some sense depends on that state, since man himself is the pontiff of the outer world. Thus the corruption of man must necessarily affect the whole” (Abu Bakr Siraj Ed-Din, 1974, *The Book of Certainty*, 33).

In the circumstances in which we find ourselves we would do well also to heed these words from Frithjof Schuon: “The discomforts or misfortunes which come to man always have three causes — man himself, the world and God. We may, according to the point of view adopted, take into consideration one or other of these causes, but we cannot deny any one of them. Man is the author of his misfortune in so far as it is experienced as suffering; the world is its author in so far as the misfortune seeks to keep man in the cosmic illusion; God is the Author inasmuch as the misfortune comes to man as a sanction, though also as a purification and so as a test” (*Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1969, 129-130). Do we have the wise humility to ask ourselves,

in a spirit of severe seriousness, for what transgressions our current sufferings might be a sanction, and to ponder deeply how we might best meet this test and thereby undergo purification, not only of ourselves but of our darkened world? Without an unsparing self-examination of this kind we may, in one way or another, be doomed.