

Despair as the Spiritual Condition of Humankind at the Outset of the Twenty-First Century

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The Question

The only fundamental reason for articulating Christian mission as hope in action is that we discern in our field of mission--today's global society--a pervasive loss, diminution, or distortion of hope. Were we to read the signs of our times in other ways (for example as manifesting rampant chaos, or debilitating guilt, or crippling fear), we would have to express our mission as Christians in different terms (providential order, divine forgiveness, trust). Whatever has the prospect of becoming gospel must address the reality of the *negating* condition lying at the heart of the situation concerned. Gospel is *good* news because and as it engages, challenges, resolves, or ameliorates the bad news actually present in the sphere of missiological concern. A gospel that spoke to the human anxiety of "guilt and condemnation" when the dominant anxiety of its context is more nearly "meaninglessness and despair" (Tillich) would not be gospel; indeed, it would probably function repressively to distract the attention of its hearers away from their existential anxiety.

In one way or another, all of our discussions in the seminar have mentioned--and some of us have accentuated--the deprivation of hope as the spiritual hallmark of the present and impending global future. Such an analysis is corroborated by the reflections of many observers of our era, including the Roman Catholic thinker, Raimon Panikkar, who in a recent article proposed an interfaith council to address the "crisis of humanity":

The crisis today is not that of one country, one model, one regime; it is a crisis of humanity Three quarters of the world's population live under inhuman conditions. Humanity is in such great distress and insecurity that its leaders believe they must keep 30 million men in arms! The church cannot be a stranger to such distress, to such institutionalized injustice. It cannot remain deaf to the cries of the people, especially of the humble and the poor. The council I would propose would certainly not be exclusively Christian but ecumenical, in the sense that it would give a hearing to other cosmologies and religions. Its purpose would be determine how the Spirit is inspiring humanity to live in peace, and to bear the *joyous news of hope*.¹

Another recent article brings the discussion nearer home:

Our hopes are a measure of our greatness. When they shrink, we ourselves are diminished. The story of American hope over the past two centuries is

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one of increasing narrowing . . . the horizon of hope has shrunk to “the scale of self-pampering.”²

Innumerable other testimonies to the loss of hope could be cited—some religious, some secular. We may count, therefore, on a great deal of backing when we make this approach our own.

But words are important, and the question I want to address is whether *despair* is an appropriate category into which to translate the diminishment or distortion of hope that we sense. I alluded earlier to two of the three “dominant forms of anxiety” identified by Paul Tillich as being characteristic of human existence under the conditions of the Fall. Tillich believed that all three types (“fate and death,” dominant in the classical period; “guilt and condemnation,” dominant in the Medieval period, and “meaninglessness and despair”) are always present, but that historical epochs manifest the predominance of one type. Overwhelmingly, he insisted, the dominant anxiety of our present age is the third type. Along with many others, I have pursued that same analysis in my own work. For the most part, however, Christians in the West are still drawing upon the medieval and Reformation assumption that the human predicament is one of “guilt and condemnation.” The prevailing soteriologies of Western Christendom, both Catholic and Protestant, continue to rely heavily on Anselm’s satisfaction theory of atonement, which is addressed precisely to that anxiety. That this is so relates to the earlier observation that religion frequently represses the disturbing consciousness of present reality by concentrating on the reality of the past—which in any case is always easier to deal with! Failure to address the anxiety of “meaninglessness and despair” is also, and more deeply, due to the fact that of all the forms of human anxiety it is the most excruciating to contemplate, and the most difficult to engage from the side of gospel.

There is still another reason why, in “developed” societies especially, the judgement that the human condition is one of “meaninglessness and despair” is difficult to entertain. Successful peoples are likely to find such language exaggerated. They may be willing to have it applied to individuals, or to specific groupings (“the urban poor,” “racial minorities,” “the young”), but as a characterization of the spiritual condition of their culture at large (as in the second quotation, above), such bleak language seems inappropriate, if not ridiculous.

If, therefore, we intend such a reading of our planetary context to be heard also (perhaps even especially!) in such societies, we shall have to parse the term *despair* in a very careful and sensitive manner. To suggest that the entire world is wrapped in a garment of deep and obvious gloom would be to invite ridicule. There are happy and cheerful persons everywhere, and only a confirmed pessimist could fail to admit the reality of ordinary human expectancy that shines through in the public arena, despite the horrors and negativities held up to us hourly by the news industry. Our discussion of the global context in terms of *despair* will be credible only if we can delve more deeply into its reality as a *spiritual condition* informing planetary existence in ways not easily discerned or immediately visible.

Overt and Covert Despair

The word *despair* means literally the negation of hope (*de* + *sperare*, fr. *spes* [hope]) Because life itself depends upon the will to face the future with some degree

of sustained expectancy, the medieval categorization of sin made hope's annulment, despair, one of the "deadly" sins--literally, a sin driving toward death, whether spiritual death or actual suicide. Of all the cardinal sins, despair has been considered by the hamartiological tradition the most fearful; thus in *Inferno* Dante saw written over the portals of hell, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here." Hell in most Christian literature is eternal separation from God, ergo a sphere of unrelieved despair.

Examining the statistics of mental health, substance abuse, violence, crime, suicide, and the like pertaining even (and perhaps especially) in affluent contemporary societies, one could be tempted to resort directly to the language of despair, but that would be a mistake and a gross simplification of this profound category of Christian hamartiological tradition. Despair may *inform* destructive behavior, but it is not to be equated with the behaviour as such, for it is a posture of the *psyche* (soul, mind), a spiritual condition. Destructive behavior is, in fact, usually a way of *avoiding* the truth of the soul. Very few indeed are the human beings who, despairing, have the courage, will, and imagination to face it openly, let alone give voice to it. The messages that suicidal persons leave for their relatives usually fail to name the depths of their dereliction and frequently constitute the ultimate denial of their despair by blaming their problems on others. Albert Camus, who in the twentieth century came closest, perhaps, to articulating despair, and who regarded suicide as the only truly serious philosophical question, probably did not act on his conclusions: his death was likely accidental.

But despair need not be total to be real, nor does it have to be overt. Even household dictionaries recognize this truth: "Despair: utter loss of hope, complete domination by feelings of hopelessness, futility or defeat, wildly and bitterly expressed or *quietly and pervasively dominant*."³

Apart from particular instances, I would argue, if despair is said to be the spiritual condition of the twenty-first century, it is the latter and not the former variety that must be stressed. It is covert and not overt despair with which we must concern ourselves.

Covert despair--repressed hopelessness--is, however, by far the more insidious of the two types. For it is well able to masquerade under a guise of well-being so persuasive as to deceive the wearers of the mask themselves. It can readily sublimate itself through the pursuit of activities that seem to emanate from highly positive attitudes towards life and the future. Human beings cannot live with a conscious, unrelieved sense of the "vanity" (Kohemoth) of their lives and endeavors. If their gods die, if their optimism is dashed by events, if the habit of hope languishes in them, they will likely construct bogus hopes out of thin air and sheer determination. "If the world's a wilderness, go, build houses in it!"

At one level, all thoughtful people should be very grateful for such persistent if repressive determination; without it, the world would dissolve into nihilism and chaos. Ernest Becker rightly claimed that repression is to the human what instinct is to other animals.⁴ The human spirit knows, at a level deeper than conscious thought, that survival depends upon hope; therefore, incipient despair is nipped in the bud before it reaches the level of consciousness. Life must go on, and so a sustained awareness of negation *must* be subverted. Christians may even want to consider such repression a form of "common grace"!

There is, however, a fine line between "necessary," life-preserving repression and the kind of repressive posture that must lie to itself so consistently that it ends in

destructive behavior more devastating than the negating realities it fears to acknowledge. Such behavior is not necessarily or ostensibly destructive of the repressing *self*; more frequently, its victims are those round about: spouses, children, friends, coworkers, and others, whose very existence must be lashed out against because it is too transparent of the delusions the despairing subject has determined to maintain. This psychic phenomenon is famously illustrated in the lives of prominent historical figures (Nero, Caligula, Richard III, for example), and it is never very far away from the deathbeds of individuals denying the possibility of their own demise (see in particular Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Illych*).

The Social Applications of Covert Despair

Covert despair, the despair that relieves itself at the expense of those in its environs, is not just a condition of individuals; it pertains also to entire societies and even whole civilizations. As many, perhaps beginning with Augustine, have shown, Rome in its decline was far more destructive than it was in its ascendancy. The ravages of its rise to imperial status were inspired by a genuine (if, from a biblical point of view, demonic) expectancy: the early Caesars believed themselves to be building a humane, ordered, and civil ecumenical society. In its decay, however, Rome's idealism gave way to cynicism in the intelligentsia, and heroics to brute force and militarism. Now Rome was attempting to sustain its illusions of greatness by embracing an assumed eternity (the "divinity" of the emperor was not emphasized earlier). It strove to account for its failures by locating their cause in "the enemy," especially allegedly internal enemies. The periods of serious Christian persecution, to mention only one such "enemy," correspond with the increase of repressed anxiety--the anxiety that can be viewed still today in the sculpted faces of the patrician classes of the period. One must at least ask (and many commentators on the decline of "the West" and its successive empires *have* asked) whether this phenomenon inheres in the logic of empire.

Covert Despair as the Absence of Operative Systems of Meaning

The anatomy of despair, particularly as it applies to societies, must seek the sources of this anxiety, not so much in positive and obvious evils and wickedness (such as terrorism, warfare, financial catastrophe) as in the absence of that which gives meaning to experience, including very negative experiences. It is in the absence of the good rather than the presence of evil that despair has its genesis. Tillich insightfully named this third anxiety "meaninglessness and despair;" for it is through the loss of meaning that humankind finds itself driven to despair. Even systems of meaning that, from a Christian perspective, must be regarded as questionable can be recognized as effectual in sustaining the esprit de corps of a people so long as they are credible to many or most citizens. This could be illustrated even by the early histories of Nazi Germany or Lenin's Russia. Pervasive hopelessness sets in--whether "wildly" or "quietly"--only when a system of meaning becomes threadbare and, finally, incredible.

Just at that point, however, a new danger emerges: the forcible maintenance of "the system" (as in both Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia), or, more subtly, the elevation to prominence of the bureaucratic, economic, and technical accoutrements of the disappearing world view or ideology.

It is in the latter sense, I think, that we should understand the demise of modernity. The modern vision, with its roots in the seventeenth century, its elaboration in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and its activation in nineteenth-century industrialism, began visibly to wind down in the latter part of the nineteenth century; its "death," many believe, was announced by the guns of August in 1914. But it is too easy to speak as if modernity is over and done with, let alone hail the postmodern epoch as its clear successor. In history, significant change takes time: the mechanism of the clock may stop, but the pendulum may continue to swing of its own momentum for a very long time!

Although the utopian dreams of modernity have failed, some of them conspicuously, the accoutrements of those dreams have by no means disappeared. They have risen, rather, to the surface, filling the vacuum left by the effective demise of the system of meaning that spawned them. By accoutrements I mean such factors as these: (1) a technicized rationalism, rationality deprived of depth and lacking its critical dimension; (2) unchecked capitalism, capitalism minus the "invisible hand" and shorn of the philanthropic obligations felt by earlier capitalists; (3) crass and ever crasser forms of consumerism; (4) unlimited exploitation of the natural order. Of all these, as of other tendencies that could be named, one can say that they are means no longer answerable to operative ends. The ends to which they were in some real way accountable have quietly disappeared with the system of meaning of which they were constituents.

By comparison with the present, modernity's conception of the human (*imago hominis*) must be regarded as a "high" anthropology. It was certainly anthropocentric, and theocentric religion always had a quarrel with it for that reason; yet, partly due to its Judeo-Christian antecedents, the Modern vision at its height retained an image of man [*sic*] that was able, while it was operative, to reject certain conceptions of human life and to limit the expressions of human desire that seemed incompatible with that image. Again, modernity embraced what was for serious Christians an impossibly idealistic conception of the capacity of human reason--almost a deification! Yet the Enlightenment and, in a different way, the romantic movement were both able to hold technique accountable to higher dimensions of human thought. With the demise of the modern vision as a viable system of meaning, however, man was reduced to will and reason to "technical reason" (Tillich), or "calculative thought [*rechnendes Denken*]" (Heidegger); technique was no longer answerable to anything beyond its own dynamism and the whims of its high priests and beneficiaries. One could not count any longer on reason (represented by the universities, for instance) to call halt to any given project. Modernity's elevation of man, now deprived of romanticism's belief in *homo sapiens* as nature's child and preserver, was reduced to nature's master and, indeed, its sworn enemy, who would use it without reverence for his own purposes, no questions asked! It is not, finally, the limitations and failures of modernity as such that Christians should lament, but the (perhaps inevitable) reduction of the modern vision to truncated versions of its own principal themes. The grave instabilities unleashed by the effective death of the modern system of meaning and the takeover of its accoutrements constitute the daily bread of our despair.

The despair as such, however, is profoundly hidden--especially from those who benefit most from the (temporary!) economic and cultural "success" made possible by means no longer answerable to just ends. To confront our despair, in such societies, requires a courage and truth orientation that few discover within themselves. It would

in fact require embracing another system of meaning, an alternative vision of the good with which to fill the emptiness that is left by this ending. Only such a new system of meaning could provide the permission that is needed to name and attempt to alter the bogus goals and cheap hopes that are the residue of modern Prometheanism, for false and unworthy as they are, those goals and hopes are all that is left of the bright visions of the architects of modernity. We fear to lose them and, besides, they are very firmly entrenched. Meaning has departed; the system remains.

The Victims of Covert Despair

Covert despair applies most directly and obviously to the materially successful peoples of our planet, peoples whose collective spiritual poverty is most conspicuous in their attempts to find meaning in materiality (consumerism, the cult of the body, the quest for status and permanence through ownership, etc.). It is of course a *human* response to the vulnerability of creaturehood when people repress their deepest fears, and as such it may be found everywhere--among the have-not as well as the have peoples. But as a broad pattern of social behavior, such unacknowledged anxiety typifies the possessing more immediately than it does the dispossessed. Possession itself, including the power that attends it, cushions the shock of the abyss of meaning over which it is built. North Americans' present comforts and diversions shield them from the need to come to terms with the future that is begged by their assumed nonchalance.

It is not so with the dispossessed. To be poor, hungry, ill-clad, inadequately sheltered, or in other ways physically deprived; to be at the mercy of gross economic injustice, ethnic violence, or political chaos; to be rejected or marginalized on account of race, gender, class, ethnicity, or sexual orientation—such conditions not only leave little space for the luxury of repression but also represent an actualization here and now of the “shock” that possessing peoples are able to relegate to an indefinite future. The despair felt by “the rich” as an unwelcome presence at the back of their minds is for “the poor” an unavoidable reality. Paradoxically, it is perhaps just because the poor cannot avoid confrontation with the pathos of their human condition that remarkable expressions of hope are frequently found among them, thus demonstrating the biblical dialectic of hope and despair, namely, that hope, when it is authentic, arises out of the crucible of hopelessness--that it is always in some sense “hope against hope” (Romans 4: 18).

We must distinguish, then, between the despair of the possessing peoples, which is characteristically covert, and that of the dispossessed, which is more often overt. But in the reality of planetary life today, the two despairs are complexly interwoven. While the ultimate cause of all human anxiety must be located by Christians in the mystery that is signified by the word *sin*, at least in the realm of the penultimate it is necessary to posit a clear causative relation between the covert despair of the possessing peoples and the perennial hopelessness of the dispossessed. For in their refusal, or their inability, to confront openly the reality of their hidden despair and the loss of meaning in which it is grounded, the possessing peoples of Earth perpetuate--and in their most powerful institutions *foster!*--the status quo of the two-thirds world. Despite the altruistic intentions of the have nations, despite the genuine goodwill and charity of many organizations (including churches) within those nations, and despite the nervous duplicity of many of us who, our rhetoric notwithstanding, participate in the prosperity

of those who possess, it is as hard for the rich to achieve solidarity with the poor as it is for them to enter the kingdom of God--which, for all practical purposes, may be the same thing! And the reason for this difficulty should not be located in some vulgar accusation of mere selfishness! To make a real step toward such solidarity, the possessing peoples of the planet would have to engage in a process of *self-knowledge* that very few of us can manage, and perhaps none of us implement.

To be concrete: Bill Rees, a population ecologist at the University of British Columbia, using the best and most objective data available, has concluded that "in order to bring everyone on the planet to the same general level of consumption and well-being as the average Canadian, we would need four or five more Earths--right now!"⁵ The only conclusions that can be drawn from such statistics (and the same basic data can be gleaned from many sources) are that either the present imbalance of human consumption will continue or Canadians and other overconsumers will have to lessen drastically their demands upon the planet's resources. I would suggest that this kind of knowledge or pre-knowledge has been in the public consciousness of the affluent nations of the West for a very long time, and in the past two or three decades, with the growth of ecological sensitivity, it has been nearly unavoidable. But in order to act upon it in any significant manner, ordinary citizens would have to become extraordinarily willing to examine and critique the very way of life that the entire modern experiment has conditioned them to expect, and governments, responding to such grassroots awareness, would have to be ready--readier than any Western governments have so far been!--to stand in opposition to the corporate world that never ceases to entice the citizenry of developed nations to become even more devoted to the lifestyle of consumption and acquisition. One can only conclude, in the light of events and attitudes, that the possessing peoples of the planet are prepared to see the two-thirds world sink into oblivion before they will undertake any serious examination of their own expectations and the unlikely assumptions upon which those expectations are based. Of course, this is a purely temporary posture, as gross acts of repression always are. Sooner or later (sooner, if most ecologists are right) the possessing peoples, too, will be brought up short against the limitations of earth's bounty and the seeming resilience of the natural order. Then, however, it may be too late.

The Challenge

There is, I think, no easy answer to the problem with which this type of analysis leaves us, for human despair is notoriously hard to counter--especially when it is a despair whose whole energy is concentrated upon denying its own reality! According to Christian faith, it has taken the entire wisdom and generosity of God to begin--even to begin!--to transform the soul of restless, alienated humankind. Utopian solutions, even when they are clothed in the language of the sacred, are therefore to be avoided. Hope remains hope, not "sight" (Hebrews 11), and Christian hope remains hope "against hope"--against all final solutions.

Given that eschatological caveat, however, it is not so hard to discern at least the kind of *challenge* to which the foregoing reflections must lead: human despair can be obviated only by a renewal of genuine hope, and *repressed* human despair can be prepared to hope again only if it is first enabled to admit itself and to face the impossibility of the artifice by which it thinks to survive the consequences of its loss of meaning. Those who despair, if they are not given some cause to think that the

admission of their despair could be a means to its overcoming, will resist the confession of it so long as their material and psychic circumstances insulate them from the cold shock of reality. To repeat, only a new system of meaning can provide the permission that repressed despair needs if it is to name and attempt to replace the bogus goals and cheap hopes that are the residue of modern Prometheanism. False and unworthy as they are, those goals and hopes are all that is left of the bright visions of the architects of modernity. We fear to lose them and, besides, they are firmly entrenched. Meaning has departed; the system remains.

The question for serious Christians is this: Can Christian faith, especially in its Protestant mode, sufficiently *extricate itself* from modernity to enucleate such an alternative system of meaning? Can the Christian movement distinguish itself from Christendom with enough imagination and daring to help humanity find a way into the future beyond the demise of the modern vision and the spent imperialism of the “Christian” West?

Notes

¹ Raimon Panikkar, *Christian Century*, August 16-23, 2000, 836; my emphasis.

² Miroslav Volf (commenting on Andrew Delbanco’s *The Real American Dream*), *Christian Century*, August 16-23, 2000, 837.

³ *Webster’s Third International Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1966); my emphasis.

⁴ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith Publishing, 1998).

⁵ David Suzuki and Holly Dressel, *From Naked Ape to Superspecies* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1999), 421.