

Contemporary Man, between the Rim and the Axis¹

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*Come you lost Atoms to your Centre draw,
And be the Eternal Mirror that you saw :
Rays that have wander'd into Darkness wide
Return, and back into your Sun subside.*

(Farīd al-Din 'Attār)

"My Guru did not teach me but one precept. He told me. 'From the outward enter unto the most inward part of thy being'. That has become for me a rule".

(Lallā, the Female Saint of Kashmir, Lalla Vakyani, 94).

THE confrontation between man's own inventions and manipulations in the form of technology and human culture as well as the violent effect of the application of man's acquired knowledge of nature to the destruction of the natural environment have reached such proportions that many people in the modern world are at last beginning to question the validity of the conception of man held in the West since the rise of modern civilization. But to discuss such a vast problem in a meaningful and constructive way one cannot but begin by clearing the ground of the obstacles which usually prevent the

¹ This essay was written to serve as the basis for a lecture delivered at M.I.T. in Cambridge, Mass, in April 1972, in connection with the seminar on technology and culture entitled "Images of Man". Certain questions were posed by the organizers of the seminar on the nature of man which this essay has sought to answer.

profoundest questions involved from being discussed. Modern man has burned his hands in the fire which he himself has kindled by allowing himself to forget who he is. Having sold his soul, in the manner of Faust, in order to gain dominion over the natural environment, he has created a situation in which the very control of the environment is turning into its strangulation, bringing in its wake not only ecocide but also ultimately suicide. The danger is now evident enough not to need repetition. Whereas only two decades ago everyone spoke of man's unlimited possibility for development, understood in a physical and materialistic sense, today one speaks of "limits to growth"—a title well-known to many people in the West today—or even of an imminent apocalypse. But the concepts and factors according to which the crisis is analyzed, the solutions sought after and even the colours with which the image of an impending doom are depicted are all in terms of the very elements that have brought the crisis of modern man into being. The world is still seen as devoid of a spiritual horizon, not because there is no such horizon present but because the subject who views the contemporary landscape is most often the type of man who lives at the rim of the circle of existence and therefore views all things from the periphery. He remains indifferent to the spokes and completely oblivious to the axis or the Centre which remains ever accessible to him through the spokes of the wheel of existence.

The problem of the devastation brought upon the environment by technology, the ecological crisis and the like all issue from the malady of *amnesia* or forgetfulness from which modern man suffers. Modern man has simply forgotten who he is. Living on the periphery of his own circle of existence he has been able to gain a qualitatively superficial but quantitatively staggering knowledge of the world. He has projected the externalized and superficial image of himself upon the world.² And then, having come to

² It must be remembered that, in the West, first man rebelled against Heaven with the humanism of the Renaissance and only later did the modern sciences come into being. The humanistic anthropology of the Renaissance was a necessary background for the scientific revolution of the 17th century and the creation of a science which although in one sense non-human is in another sense the most anthropomorphic form of knowledge possible, for it makes human reason and the empirical data based upon the human senses the sole criteria for the validity of all knowledge.

Concerning the gradual disfiguration of the image of man in the West see G. Durand, "Défiguration

know the world in such externalized terms he has sought to reconstruct an image of himself based upon this external knowledge. There has been a series of "falls" by means of which man has oscillated in a descending scale between an ever more externalized image of himself and of the world surrounding him, moving ever further from the Centre of both himself and of his cosmic environment. The inner history of the so-called development of modern man from his historic background as traditional man, who is at once his ancestor in time and his centre in space, is a gradual alienation from the centre and the axis through the spokes of the wheel of existence to the rim wherein resides modern man. But just as every rim presupposes spokes which connect it to the axis of the wheel, so does the very fact of human existence imply the presence of the centre and the axis and hence an inevitable connection of men of all ages with Man as such, with the *anthropos*, or *al-insân al-kamil* of Sufism, as he has been, is and will continue to be, above all outward changes and transformations.³

Nowhere is the attempt to solve the problems caused by the various activities of modern man by refusing to consider the negative nature of the very factors that have caused these problems more evident than in the field of the humanities in general and the sciences dealing specifically with man, which are supposed to provide an insight into human nature in particular. Modern man, having rebelled against heaven, created a science based not on the light of the intellect but on the powers of human reason sifting the data of the senses. But the success of this science was so great in its own domain that soon all the other sciences began to ape it, leading to the crass positivism of the past century which has caused philosophy as perennially understood to become confused with logical analysis, mental acrobatics or even mere information theory, and the classical fields of the humanities to become converted into quantified social sciences which make even the intuitions of literature about the nature of man inaccessible to many students and

philosophique et figure traditionnelle de l'homme en Occident," *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, XXXVIII, 1969, pp. 45-93.

³ If such a relation did not exist, it would not even be possible for man to identify himself with other periods of human history, much less for the permanent aspects of human nature to manifest themselves even in the modern world as they have in the past and continue to do so today.

seekers today. A number of scientists are in fact among those most critical of the pseudo-humanities being taught in many universities in an atmosphere of a psychological and mental inferiority complex *vis-à-vis* the sciences of nature and mathematics, a "humanities" which tries desperately to become "scientific", only to fall into a state of superficiality, not to say triviality.⁴ The decadence of the humanities in modern times is caused by the loss of the knowledge that man has always had directly of himself and also of his Self, and by reliance upon an externalized, indirect knowledge which modern man seeks to gain of himself from the outside, a literally "superficial" knowledge that is from the rim and is devoid of an awareness of the axis of the wheel and the spokes which stand always before man and connect him like a ray of light to the supernal sun.

It is with consideration of this background that certain specific questions which come to mind must be analyzed and answered. The first query concerns the relation of small pieces of scientific evidence about human behaviour to "human nature". In order to answer this question it is essential to remember that the reality of the human state cannot be exhausted by any of its outward projections. A particular human action or behaviour always reflects a state of being, and its study can lead to a certain kind of knowledge of the state of being of the agent, provided there is already an awareness of the whole to which the fragment can be related. Fragmented knowledge of human behaviour is related to human nature in the same way that waves of the sea are related to the sea. There is certainly a relationship between them that is both causal and substantial. But unless one has had a vision of the sea in its vastness and illimitable horizons, which reflect the Infinite and its inimitable peace and calm, one cannot gain an essential knowledge of the sea through the study of the waves. Fragmented knowledge can be related to the whole only when there is already an intellectual vision of the whole.

The careful "scientific" study of fragmented human behaviour is incapable of revealing the profounder aspect of human nature precisely because of an *a priori*

⁴ Certain American scholars such as William Arrowsmith have already criticized what could be called the "pollution of the 'humanities'", but the tendency here as in the pollution of the environment is mostly to try to remove the ill effects without curing the underlying causes.

limitation that so much of modern behaviouristic studies of man, a veritable conglomerate of pseudo-sciences if there ever was one,⁵ has placed on the meaning of the human state itself. There has never been as little knowledge of man, of the *anthropos*, in different human cultures as one finds among most modern anthropologists today. The medicine men of Africa have had a deeper insight into human nature than the modern behaviourists and their flock, because the former have been concerned with the essential and the latter with accidentals. Now, accidents do possess a reality, but they have a meaning only in relation to the substance which supports them ontologically. Otherwise one could collect accidents and external facts indefinitely without ever reaching the substance or what is essential. The classical error of modern civilization to mistake the quantitative accumulation of information for qualitative penetration into the inner meaning of things applies here as elsewhere. The study of fragmented behaviour without a vision of the human nature which is the cause of this behaviour cannot itself lead to a knowledge of human nature. It can go around the rim of the wheel indefinitely without even entering upon the spoke to approach the proximity of the axis and the Centre. But if the vision is already present, the gaining of knowledge of external human behaviour can always be an occasion for re-collection and a return to the cause by means of the external effect.

In Islamic metaphysics, four basic qualities are attributed to Ultimate Reality, based directly on the Quranic verse, "He is the First and the Last, the Outward and the Inward" (LVII, 3). This attribution, besides other levels of meaning, also possesses a meaning that is directly pertinent to the present argument. God, the Ultimate Reality, is both the Inward (*al-bâtin*) and the Outward (*al-zâhir*), the Centre and the Circumference. The religious man sees God as the Inward; the profane man who has become completely oblivious to the world of the Spirit sees only the Outward, but precisely because of his ignorance of the centre does not realize that even the Outward is a manifestation of the

⁵ In modern times the occult sciences, whose metaphysical principles have been forgotten, have become known as the pseudo-sciences, while in reality they contain a profound doctrine concerning the nature of man and the cosmos. Much of the social and human sciences today on the contrary veil and hide a total ignorance of human nature with a scientific garb and are in a sense the reverse of the occult sciences.

Centre or of the Divine. Hence his fragmented knowledge remains incapable of seizing the whole of the rim or circumference and therefore by anticipation the Centre. A segment of the rim remains nothing more than a figure without a point of reference or Centre, but the whole rim cannot but reflect the Centre. Finally the sage sees God as both the Inward and the Outward. He is able to relate the fragmented external knowledge to the Centre and see in the rim a reflection of the Centre. But this he is able to do only because of his *a priori* awareness of the Centre. Before being able to see the external world—be it the physical world about us or the outer crust of the human psyche—as a manifestation of the Inward, one must already have become attached to the Inward through faith and knowledge.⁶ Applying this principle, a sage could thus relate fragmented knowledge to the deeper layers of human nature, but for one who has yet to become aware of the Inward dimension within himself and the Universe about him, fragmented knowledge cannot but remain fragmentary, especially if the fragmentary knowledge of human behaviour is based upon observation of the behaviour of a human collectivity most of whose members themselves live only on the most outward layers of their being and whose behaviour only rarely reflects the deeper dimension of their own being.

This last point leads to an observation that complements the discussion of principles already stated. Modern man lives for the most part in a world in which he encounters few people who live on the higher planes of consciousness or the deeper layers of their being.

He therefore is for the most part aware of only certain types of human behaviour. Fragmented knowledge of human behaviour, even if based on external observation, could be an aid for modern man to become at least indirectly aware of other dimensions of

⁶ This theme is thoroughly analyzed by F. Schuon in his *Dimensions of Islam* trans. by P. Townsend, London, 1970, chapter 2. Concerning the sage or the Sufi he writes, "The Sufi lives under the gaze of al-Awwal (the first), al-Akhir (the last), az-Zahir (the Outward) and al-Bajin (the Inward). He lives concretely in these metaphysical dimensions. as ordinary creatures move in space and time, and as he himself moves in so far as he is a mortal creature. He is consciously the point of intersection where the Divine dimensions meet; unequivocally engaged in the universal drama, he suffers no illusion about impossible avenues of escape, and he never situates himself in 'the fallacious `extra-territoriality' of the profane, who imagine that they can live outside spiritual Reality, the only reality there is." pp. 36-37.

human nature, provided a study is made of the behaviour of traditional man, of the man who lives in a world with a Centre. The behaviour of traditional men of different societies, especially at the highest level of the saints and sages, be they from the Chinese or the Islamic or the North American Indian or any other traditional background, in the face of great trials, before death, in presence of the beauty of virgin nature and sacred art, or in the throes of love both human and divine, can certainly provide indications of aspects of human nature for the modern observer. Such behaviour can reveal a constancy and permanence of human nature that is truly astonishing and can also be instrumental in depicting the grandeur of human nature, which has become largely forgotten in a world where man has become a prisoner of the pettiness of his own trivial creations and inventions. Seen in this light a fragmented knowledge of human behaviour can aid in gaining a knowledge of certain aspects of human nature. But in any case a total knowledge of human nature cannot but be achieved through a knowledge of the Centre of the axis, which also "contains" the spokes and the rim. A famous saying of the Prophet of Islam states, "He who knows himself knows his Lord". But precisely because "himself" implies the Self which resides at the Centre of man's being, from another point of view this statement can also be reversed and it can be stated that man can know himself completely only in the light of God, for the relative cannot be known save with respect to the Absolute.

The second query to which we must address ourselves concerns the relationship of scientific "objectivity" and its findings to the criteria of "the universal and the unchanging" implied by the phrase "human nature". To answer this query it is necessary before all else to define once again what is meant by scientific "objectivity", especially when it concerns the study of man. It has become common-place, at least for non-specialists in the philosophy of science, to attribute objectivity to modern science almost as if the one implied the other. No doubt modern science possesses a limited form of "objectivity" in its study of the physical world, but even in this domain this "objectivity" is encompassed by the collective subjectivity of a particular humanity at a certain moment of its historical existence when the symbolist spirit has become atrophied and the

gift of seeing the world of the spirit through and beyond the physical world has been nearly completely lost. Even in the physical world all that cannot be caught in the net of modern science, to quote the well-known image of A. Eddington, is collectively neglected, and its non-existence vowed for "objectively". It is as if an audience of deaf people testified together that they did not hear any music from musicians playing before them and considered the unanimity of their opinion as a proof of its objectivity.

Now if in the domain of the physical world itself the concept of the so-called "objectivity" of modern science must be employed with great prudence and the qualitative and symbolic aspects of nature not neglected because of their lying outside the "objectively" defined world view of modern science, so much more does this "objectivity" need to be re-considered in the field of the study of man. The aping of the methods of the physical sciences in the study of man have enabled scientists to gather a great deal of information about men of all ages and climes but little about man himself, for the simple reasons that the philosophical background of modern science, which goes back ultimately to Cartesianism, is incapable of providing the necessary background for the study of man. Already in the 17th century the body-mind dualism of Descartes perverted in the European mind the image of the much more profound tripartite division of the being of man consisting of *corpus*, *anima* and *spiritus* expounded so fully in the Hermetic tradition. To this error a worse illusion was added in the 19th century which prevented even the collecting of facts about men of different ages from becoming a way of reaching at least some form of knowledge of man himself.

This illusion is that of evolution as it is usually understood today. Evolution is no more than a scientific hypothesis that has been parading around for the past century as a scientific fact, despite the lack of the least amount of proof of its having taken place in the biological plane and despite its being usually taught in schools as proven fact. The present discussion does not allow our entering into debates about biological evolution, although writings by biologists and geologists against it, especially works written during

recent years, are far from being few in number.⁷ But as far as the study of man is concerned, it is precisely the intrusion of the idea of evolution into anthropology that has made the positive relation which scientifically accumulated facts could have had to an understanding of the universal and unchanging aspect of "human nature" well nigh impossible. Scientists and scholars in the fields of anthropology, the social sciences and even the humanities are trained almost completely to study only change. Any alteration, no matter how trivial, is more often than not considered as a significant change, while the immutable is almost unconsciously identified with the unimportant or the dead. It is as if man were trained to study only the movement of clouds and to remain completely oblivious of the sky with its immutable and infinite expanses which provides the matrix for the observations of the cloud movements. No wonder that so much of the study of man provided by modern disciplines is really no more than a study of triviality producing most often petty results and failing at almost every step to predict anything of significance in the social order. Many a simple traditional folk tale reveals more about man than thick tomes provided with pages of statistics on what is usually described as "vital changes". In fact the only vital change that is occurring today is the ever greater alienation of man from his own permanent nature and a forgetfulness of this nature, a forgetfulness which cannot but be ephemeral and is bound to have catastrophic effects upon that type of man who has chosen to forget who he is. But this is precisely the one change which "objective" scientific methods are incapable of studying.

Yet, in principle, there is no necessary contradiction between scientific facts accumulated objectively and the concept of "human nature" with its permanent and universal implications. Were the impediments of that mental deformation called evolutionary thinking, which is neither "objective" nor scientific, to be removed, the accumulation of facts about man would display in a blindingly evident fashion the extra-spatial and extra-temporal character of man, if not beyond history—for this would lie

⁷ See for example, L. Bounoure, *Déterminisme et finalité, double loi de la vie*, Paris, 1957; his *Recherche d'une doctrine de la vie*, Paris, 1964; and D. Dewar, *The Transformist Illusion*, Murfreesboro, 1957. See also S. H. Nasr, *The Encounter of Man and Nature, The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, London, 1968, pp. 124ff. where works and views opposed to evolution are discussed.

beyond the reach of facts—at least in periods of history and in various regions of the world. Such an exercise would depict human nature as something constant and permanent, from which at certain moments of history and among certain peoples there have been deviations and departures that have soon been removed by tragedies or catastrophes leading to a re-establishment of the norm. The sacred books such as the Quran contain, besides other levels of meaning, a "history" of the human soul which emphasize in a majestic fashion this conception of human nature.⁸ That is why the goal that is placed before man in all sacred books is to know and to return to the norm, to man's permanent and original nature, the *fitrah* of the Quran. As the *Tao-te Ching* (XIX) states, "Realize thy Simple Self. Embrace thy Original Nature". For the goal of man cannot be but the knowledge of himself, of who he is.

He who knows others is wise;
He who knows himself is enlightened
(*Tao-Te Ching*, XXXIII).

Or to quote a western contemplative,

If the mind would fain ascend to the height of science, let its
first and principal study be to know itself.

Richard of St. Victor

In the light of the understanding which both revelation and intellectual vision have provided over the ages concerning the nature of man, the answer to the oft posed question "Can we know that any scientific knowledge we may gain captures something essential about man ?" can only be the following : We cannot gain an *essential* knowledge of man through any method that is based on an externalization of man's inner being and then the placing of this externalized man, of the man who stands at the rim of the wheel of existence, as the subject that knows. If *essential* has any meaning at all it must be related

⁸ For the episodes of the Quran considered as events of the human soul and its inner "history" see F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, trans. by D. M. Matheson, London, 1963 and Baltimore (Penguin Metaphysical Series), 1972, chapter two.

to the *essence*, to the centre or axis which generates at once the spokes and the rim. Only the higher can comprehend the lower, for to *comprehend* means literally to encompass, and only that which stands on a higher level of existence can encompass that which lies below it. Man is composed of body, psyche and intellect, the latter being at once above man and at the centre of his being. The essence of man; that which is *essential* to human nature, can be understood only by the intellect, through the "Eye of the heart" as traditionally understood, the intellect which is at once at the centre of man's being and encompasses all of his other levels of existence. Once the eye of the heart becomes closed and the faculty of intellection, in its original sense, atrophied, it is not possible to gain an essential knowledge of man. The reflection of the intellect upon the plane of the psyche and the mind, which is reason, can never reach the essence of man or for that matter the essence of anything else, no matter how much it concerns itself with experiment and observation or how far it carries out its proper function of division and analysis, the legitimate and rightful function of *ratio*. It can gain peripheral knowledge of accidents, of effects, of external behaviour, but not of the essence. Reason, once divorced from the guiding light of the intellect, can at best confirm the existence of the *noumena*, of the essences of things, as we see in the philosophy of Kant, but it cannot know that essence. The knowledge that is essential is one that is ultimately based on the identity of the knower and the known, on being consumed by the fire of knowledge itself. Man is at a particular vantage point to know one thing in essence, and that is himself, were he only to overcome the illusion of taking, to use Vedantic terms, the externalized and objectivized image of himself for his real Self, the Self which cannot be externalized because of its very nature. Scientific knowledge, like any other form of knowledge which is based by definition on the distinction between a subject that knows and an object that is known, must of necessity remain content with a knowledge that is peripheral and not essential.

One is naturally led to ask what is the relationship of particular scientific research to the quest for other kinds of knowledge about mankind in general. A relation of a legitimate and meaningful kind can exist provided the correct proportion and relation between ways of knowing is kept in mind. And that is possible only if a knowledge that

transcends science, as currently understood, is accepted. The rim can serve as a point of access to the axis and the Centre only if it is taken for what it really is, namely the rim. Once the fact that the rim is the periphery is forgotten the centre also ceases to possess meaning and becomes inaccessible. Were a true metaphysics, *a scientia sacra*, to be once again a living reality in the West, knowledge gained of man through scientific research could be integrated into a pattern which would also embrace other forms of knowledge ranging from the purely metaphysical to those derived from traditional schools of psychology and cosmology. But in the field of the sciences of man, as in that of the sciences of nature, the great impediment is precisely the monolithic and monopolistic character which modern Western science has displayed since the 17th century. Putting aside the great deal of pseudo-science and simply erroneous theories prevalent in the modern sciences of man such as anthropology and psychology, the elements that are based on careful observation of human behaviour or the human psyche under different circumstances could be related, without any logical contradictions, to what traditional schools of psychology such as those found in Sufism, or Yoga or Zen, have also discovered about the human psyche, and especially certain aspects of it of which most modern men remain totally unaware.⁹ But this is possible only if the concept of man in his totality as the "universal *man*" (*al-insan al-kâmil*) of Islamic esotericism and as expounded in traditional metaphysics is accepted, for as mentioned already only the greater can embrace the lesser. But to claim to know the human psyche without the aid of the Spirit (or the Intellect) and to claim a finality for this knowledge as a "truly scientific knowledge" that is independent of any other form of knowledge cannot but result in the impasse with which the modern world is faced today. It can only end in a truncated and incomplete, not to say outright erroneous, "science of man," which is asked to play a role for which it has no competence and which is most often more dangerous than ignorance

⁹ Unfortunately very few serious studies based on the traditional point of view, which alone matters, have been made as yet of the traditional psychological sciences of the various Oriental traditions, sciences which can be understood only in the light of metaphysical principles and can be practiced only with the aid of the spiritual grace present in a living tradition. See A. K. Coomaraswamy, "On the Indian and Traditional Psychology, or rather Pneumatology", in Selected Writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, ed. by R. Lipsey, Princeton, (in press).

pure and simple, for there is nothing more dangerous than simple ignorance except an ignorance which has pretensions of being knowledge and wisdom. Scientific research into the nature of man can possess a constructive relationship to the universal and perennial ways of knowing man only if it realizes its own limitations and does not seek to transgress the limits inherent in its approach. It can be legitimate only if it is able to overcome the "totalitarian rationalism" inherent in modern science¹⁰—although not accepted by many scientists—and accept to become what it really is, namely a limited and particular way of knowing things through the observation of their external aspects, of *phenomena*, and of ratiocination based upon this empirical contact with things; a way that would be acceptable if taken for what it is, because things do also possess a face turned toward the external and the exteriorized.

The answer to the question of what is the worth of scientific research as a source of universal or essential knowledge about man must then be that it is worthless if considered as a source. How can a knowledge which negates the universal order in the metaphysical sense and denies the possibility of essential knowledge serve as a source of knowledge that is essential and universal? Scientific research can become a source of essential knowledge provided it becomes a form of *scientia sacra*, as already mentioned, provided "scientific" is understood in the traditional sense of a knowledge that issues from and leads to the centre or the principal order.

There is, however, one way in which scientific research can aid in gaining an awareness of something essential about the present predicament of man, if not of man's eternal nature. This is to make use of the method that science employs in carrying out experiments to study modern scientific and industrial civilization itself. In science whenever an experiment does not succeed, it is discontinued no matter how much effort has been put into the experiment, and an attempt is made to learn from the errors which were responsible for the lack of success of the experiment.

Modern civilization as it has developed in the West since the Renaissance is an

¹⁰ F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, trans. by Lord Northbourne, London, 1965, p. 117.

experiment ¹¹ that has failed and in fact failed in such an abysmal fashion as to put into doubt the possibility of a future for man to seek other ways. It would be most "unscientific" today to consider this civilization with all the presumptions about the nature of man and the Universe which lie at its basis as anything other than an experiment that has failed. And in fact "scientific" research if not atrophied by that totalitarian reign of rationalism and empiricism alluded to above should be the easiest way of enabling contemporary man to realize that modern civilization has failed precisely because the premises upon which it has been based were false, because this civilization has been based on a concept of man which excludes what is most essential to the human state.

Paradoxically enough, the awareness of the shortcomings of modern civilization has dawned upon the general Western public—not upon the small intellectual elite who spoke of the crisis facing the modern world as far back as over half a century ago ¹² —not because of a sudden realization of man's forgotten nature but because of the rapid decay of the natural environment. It is a symptom of the mentality of modern man that the deep spiritual crisis which has been making the very roots of his soul gradually wither away had to come to his attention through a crisis within the physical environment.

During the past few years so much has been written about the environmental and ecological crisis that there is no need here to emphasize the dimension of the problems involved. The famous study that has emanated from M.I.T., namely *Limits to Growth*, has sought to apply the very methods of modern science to a study of the effects of the

¹¹ "But, properly, urban industrialism must be regarded as an experiment. And if the scientific spirit has taught us anything of value, it is that honest experiments may well fail. When they do, there must be a radical reconsideration, one which does not flinch even at the prospect of abandoning the project. Surely as of the mid-twentieth century, urban-industrialism is proving to be such a failed experiment, bringing in its wake every evil that progress was meant to vanquish". T. Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends, Politics and Transcendence in Post-industrial Society*, Garden City, New York, 1973, p. XXIV of introduction.

¹² Such men as R. Guénon in his *Crisis of the Modern World*, trans. by M. Pallis, and R. Nicholson, London, 1962, whose original French edition first appeared in 1927, followed by other traditional authors especially F. Schuon and A. K. Coomaraswamy, have written extensively during the past few decades on the crisis of the West on the basis of the application of perennial metaphysical criteria to the contemporary situation. But their writings were ignored in academic circles for a long time and continue to be so to a large extent even today. The crisis had to appear on the physical level in order to bring the dangerous tendencies of modern civilization before the eyes of modern men.

application of this science in the future, and the authors of that work as well as many others seriously concerned with the ecological crisis have proposed a change in man's concept of growth, a return to non-material pursuits, a satisfaction with fewer material objects and many other well-meaning changes. But very few have realized that the pollution of the environment is no more than the after-effect of a pollution of the human soul which came into being the moment Western man decided to play the role of the Divinity upon the surface of the Earth and chose to exclude the transcendent dimension from his life.¹³

In this late hour of human history there are two tragedies we observe, one in the West and the other in the East. In the Occident where the crisis of modern civilization which is after all the product of the West, is most fully felt, since it is related usually to the environmental crisis, solutions are proposed which contain the very factors that led to the crisis in the first place. Men are asked to discipline their passions, to be rational humanists, to be considerate to their neighbours, both human and non-human. But few realize that these injunctions are impossible to carry out as long as there is no spiritual power to curb the infernal and passionate tendencies of the human soul. It is the very humanist conception of man that has dragged him to the infra-human. It is as a result of an ignorance of what man is, of the possibilities of the depths of darkness as well as the heights of illumination that he carries within himself, that such facile solutions are proposed. For millenia religions have taught men to avoid evil and to cultivate virtue. Modern man sought to destroy first the power of religion over his soul and then to question even the meaning of evil and sin. Now many propose as a solution to the environmental crisis a return to traditional virtues, although usually they do not describe them in such terms, because most of them remain secular and propose that the life of men should continue to be divorced from the sacred. It might be said that the environmental

¹³ We have dealt with this theme extensively in our *The Encounter of Man and Nature, the Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*.

"What, after all, is the ecological crisis that now captures so much belated attention but the inevitable extroversion of a blighted psyche? Like inside, like outside. In the eleventh hour, the very physical environment suddenly looms up before us as the outward mirror of our inner condition, for many the first discernible symptom of advanced disease within". T. Roszak, op. cit., p. XVII of introduction.

crisis, as well as the psychological unbalance of so many men and women, the ugliness of the urban environment and the like, are the results of the attempt of man to live by bread alone, to "kill all the gods" and announce his independence of heaven. But man cannot escape the effect of his actions, which are themselves the fruit of his present state of being. His only hope is to cease to be the rebellious creature he has become, to make peace with both heaven and earth and to submit himself to the Divine. This itself would be tantamount to ceasing to be modern as this term is usually understood, to a death and a re-birth. That is why this dimension of the problem is rarely considered in general discussions of the environmental crisis. The missing dimension of the ecological debate is the role and nature of man himself and the spiritual transformation he must undergo if he is to solve the crisis he himself has precipitated.

The second tragedy, which is that occurring in the East, or more generally in the non-Western world, is that that world for the most part is repeating the very errors which have led to the failure of urban-industrial society and modern civilization that has produced it, whereas its attitude towards the West should be to view it as a case study to learn from rather than a model to emulate blindly. Of course the politico-economic and military pressures from the industrialized world upon the non-Western world are so great as to make many decisions impossible and many choices well nigh excluded. But there is no excuse for committing certain acts whose negative results are obvious and in having no more reason for undertaking this or that project than the fact that it has been carried out in the West. The earth cannot support the mistakes committed by Western civilization again, and it is most unfortunate that no present day power on earth has a wide enough perspective as to have the well-being of the whole earth and its inhabitants in mind.

Of these two tragedies, certainly the first overshadows the second, for it is action carried out in the modernized, industrialized world that affects more directly the rest of the globe. For example were the ecological crisis really to be taken seriously by any of the major industrial powers in their economic and technological policies it would have an immeasurable influence upon those who of necessity emulate these powers in such fields. How different would the future of man be if the West were to remember again who man

is before the East forgets the knowledge it has preserved over the ages about the real nature of man!

What contemporary man needs, amidst this morass of confusion and disorder of both a mental and physical order which surrounds him, is first and foremost a message as to who man is, but a message that comes from the Centre and defines the rim *vis-à-vis* the Centre. This message is still available in a living form in the Eastern traditions and can be resuscitated within the Western tradition. But wherever this message be found, whether in the East or the West, if it issues from the Centre, it is always a call for man who lives on the periphery and the rim of the wheel of existence to follow the spokes to the axis or Centre which is at once the Origin of himself and of all things. It is a call for man to realize who he is and to become aware of that spark of eternity which he contains within himself. "There is in every man an incorruptible star, a substance called upon to become crystallized in Immortality; it is eternally prefigured in the luminous proximity of the Self. Man disengages this star from its temporal entanglements in truth, in prayer and in virtue, and in them alone." ¹⁴ He who has crystalized this star is at peace with both himself and the world. Only in seeking to transcend the world and to become a star in the spiritual firmament is man able to live in harmony with the world and to solve the problems that terrestrial existence by its very nature imposes upon him during this fleeting journey in the temporal which comprises his life on earth.

14 F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p. 117.