

# THE SPIRITUAL SITUATION TODAY

AN ESSAY BY  
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The political, economic and social problems are all important today, but I propose to concentrate on the spiritual situation which I believe is at the base of everything. My remarks will apply for the most part to the Western world.

A multiplicity of outlooks has arisen in the realm of freedom. When this reaches even the deepest things, a great scandal is born. Genuine freedom cannot mean endless fragmentation even in fundamentals. Some ultimate unity of the spirit is absolutely required today. Perhaps the present common danger will force the Western world, or those who are ultimately responsible for its thought and spirit, to the rediscovery and reaffirmation of its fundamental unity. When this happens on a deep enough plane, I believe only good can result to the West and to the rest of the world. Some Eastern thinkers rejoice in Western spiritual disunity, affecting to see therein an opportunity for the assertion of their own spirit. No fallacy can be more pernicious, particularly to the East. The greatest evils, for East and West alike, have arisen from the tormented and divided spirit; and let the spirit but find its way back, or forward, to its original unity, and no one need then fear anything.

There is an objective order of values. One aspect of the present spiritual situation is that many people fail to perceive or to respect this order. There is thus a widespread rebellion against what is right and true by nature. The lower, the elemental, the dark have overwhelmed that which is full of light and joy and being. The conditions of a perfection are worshipped instead of the perfection itself; the products of the creative mind instead of the creator itself. Thus it is that people seek refuge in instincts and dreams and sensations and external material things; and imagine that it is from these that the unity and perfection of man are derived. The doctrines of creative or emergent or gradual evolution are among the great fallacies of the age.

But the lower can never give rise to the higher; elements by themselves can never constitute a whole; a man who is not initially in touch with intellectual and moral virtue can never achieve the fullest dignity of his nature from the mere possession and enjoyment of material things. And a nation which gropes after perfection without knowing it in advance is only groping in the dark. Perfection must be at least intellectually given before one can seek it. If only the West knew how much the world craves for the knowledge of perfection<sup>1</sup> At least the Western world owes it to itself and to the rest of the world to tell us the perfections it already knows.

People don't know their place. Whole cultures don't know their place. You tell them—God Himself tells them—”Be yourselves to the utmost!”; but in the flush of their response to this command they try not only to be themselves, but to become everything and everybody. How can there be peace when everybody absolutizes himself? The condition of the possibility of peace, individual as well as social and international, is that there be right order; namely, that people know and keep their place, that they honestly accept limitations upon their will and desire, that they curb their natural inclination to rebel; and that they do this keeping and accepting and curbing precisely because there is a right by nature, and a wrong by nature. This can come about externally by the rule of law and internally when then are touched by the vision of the perfect. The compulsion of law is necessary because man is imperfect; but unless his heart is also transformed by some objective perfection, his obedience will not come from within, and one day he will rebel.

One basic issue of this age is how to restore the right order of values, how to demonstrate the givenness and objectivity of this order, how to quell justly the spirit of rebellion which has broken loose all over the world, how to induce people to obey the truth—to obey from within.

It is not clear what the Western world really believes in. The political and economic forms are well known, but it is the ultimate things that are in question. The dissolution of these ultimate things into pure economic and political determination is what causes many a thinker in the East and in the West to shudder. Communism, however it arose and however it entrenched itself, presents a clear-cut system of ideas concerning matter, man, mind, society, history, and ultimate reality. That this system is utterly ridiculous and inconsistent does not matter; for Communism is “beyond” both consistency and good and evil. Despite the fact that its God is matter and force dialectically conceived, it hit in its inconsistency (perhaps this is part of the dialectic) upon the happy determination to appeal to men's minds. It takes ideas concerning the final things most seriously. And when men become fanatical Communists, it is not at all because of the material bliss they are granted or even promised, but because their mind in its absolute thirst for truth has been satisfied—to be sure, falsely, spuriously, down the road to destruction—but all the same, somehow satisfied.

The Western world can refute, theoretically and practically, the faith of Communism. Nothing is more worthwhile than to show, by a systematic study of the writings and pronouncements of the masters of Communism, the utter crudities and stupidities of this doctrine. This is a task absolutely demanded by the spiritual situation of the moment. It is equally essential for the Western world to invalidate in practice all the wishful forebodings of the Marxists; to prove that it will not fall out with itself, that it fully understands the character of the challenge, that it can develop as a whole without crashes and crises, and that

it is not at all bankrupt as to ideas and policies when it comes to dealing creatively with the rising peoples of Asia and Africa.

But all of this is not enough. Van cannot live by merely refuting error. In fact he cannot refute error at all except from the standpoint of the truth. The Western world must articulate its living and life-giving truth, and embody it in words, deeds, institutions, works of art, and bold plans that will sweep men off their feet. This is the greatest need of the moment.

Not flux and relativity, but objective, given, immutable norms. Not nihilistic rebellion against the past, but the humble and thankful acceptance of the wonderful cumulative riches of the Western positive tradition. Not the darkness of emotions and dreams, but the blazing and peaceful and certain light of reason. Not anarchic freedom whereby each individual arrogates to himself the "right" to think and act "freely" as he pleases, but the joyous freedom of the spirit when one, through discipline, suffering and absolute responsibility, knows and rests in the truth. Not adjustment and accommodation at all cost, just to avoid trouble and to get along, but being faithful to what is right and true regardless of all cost. Not abstract and more or less arbitrary systems, whether political, social or intellectual, to which the individual is made wholly subservient, but the conception of the existing suffering, human person as an end in himself whom everything else must subserve, in accordance with right order. Not blind chance extending its dominion over everything, but the sure providence of a living and righteous God who has spoken. Not an endless division of the good and true according to race, culture and nationality, but the truthful affirmation of what is right and good and necessary for all men everywhere.

On the intellectual and spiritual plane nothing is more important today than that this complex truth be brought out, elucidated and proclaimed. To be shy of one's own truth because there are other outlooks is to forfeit respect by these outlooks themselves: to have in fact already surrendered to them. The great modern scientific advances in the dissemination of ideas and attitudes, whether through the press, or the radio, or television, or the cinema, or the school system, or the plastic arts, have not been sufficiently put to the service of the truth. If only the spirit of charity and genuine care and humble fear of God can use these things as vehicles for the expression of the deepest truth of the West, the truth by which the great heroes of the mind and spirit lived and conquered, think what wonders of understanding and joy and peace and conviction can then be achieved.

There is a hopeful sign at present. More and more people are becoming dissatisfied with the clever answers, and are more and more sincerely seeking the deeper things. The Churches are bestirring themselves to great efforts to meet the tremendous demands upon them. More and more people are called to the ministry or to join orders of contemplation, and the

quality of their calling is amazingly serious. The wistfulness of university youth in wanting to fill the emptiness of their life with something real, genuine, wonderful, contrasts sharply with the prevailing temper only a decade ago. Without displacing the positive sciences, the universities are more and more clamoring for the humanities, the liberal arts, the inculcation of some appreciation of the great intellectual and spiritual heritage. Even the reading taste of the public is undergoing a change in the direction of the religious, the philosophical, the tragic. People are simply craving for meaning, for certainty, for absolute truth. Ah how plenteous indeed is the harvest today if only there are labourers to reap! We may therefore be at the beginning of a mighty spiritual awakening concerning which all we can say at present is that everything in its unfolding depends upon the quality of love, care and prayer with which it will be tended.

The problem of the age is how much people can really believe: believe not in themselves, not in their government, not in man and man-made things, not in science and culture, but believe in God. This is the real problem: how much God is really real. All other problems are by comparison childish. Our trial is thus God. Is the dimension of transcendence open, does the mystery of transcendence press closely upon our heart? What is there beyond nature, man, history, reason, all the excitement and cleverness of life? Do you say nothing?! - Ah, but that is the question. The trial of faith is whether we know and therefore believe that there is a God beyond all existence, a God not only on whom all existence depends, but who simply created it all out of nothing. But to know and believe all this, God Himself must have authentically spoken. Thus the trial of faith is in the end whether we know that God has spoken, and whether we know what He has said. Beyond and above every requirement in the world today stands the absolute necessity of deepening and enlarging the realm of faith: of making known far and wide what God has actually said.