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Spirituality in a Cyber World

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Spirituality in a Cyber World

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*“We no longer have the luxury of tradition;
But before we change the world,
we need to change the way we think.”¹*

The paper scopes the context for humanity, in a period of momentous and fundamental change, with wondrous developments in science and technology, rapidly advancing on a global scale. Historically, four industrial revolutions formed a continuum in which technology advanced on an iterative and progressive basis, generating a digital world and cyber space. We are witnessing the inevitable conclusion of this process as the emergence of an amorphous, parallel, embryonic and autonomous *cyber universe* inevitably raising alarm bells about the scale of the challenges arising because of its virtually limitless potential to control society, in many cases, to the detriment of individual freedom. This is happening worldwide, and the nature and all-pervasive reach of cyber technology means that it recognises no geopolitical borders and is outside the capacity of control of sovereign civil authority, requiring the establishment of *global* civil governance structures. While the innate capacity for knowledge is God-given, the cyber world is a human construct. For balance, as every person is a unity

1 R. Bland, *New Statesman* – Politics – 24 October 2013.

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of body and spirit, the paper traces developments in spirituality and religion, and emphasises concepts such as that expressed by Martin Luther King, Jr. that the Church is the conscience of the State. The cyber world presents a major challenge for religion, globally, to establish and promulgate norms of human behaviour now that technological innovations are beyond the governance reach of the State on any current geo-politically structured basis. The challenge of the cyber world, therefore, calls for an agreed moral and ethical approach by all religions and by those with no religious affiliation, to mirror the call for global civil governance structures and protocols. This universality of approach, furthermore, goes beyond the reach of religion: “All humans are constrained by bounded moral rationality ... [which] means that even rational persons knowledgeable about ethical theory cannot always divine good answers to moral problems without being acquainted with community-specific norms.”² In this context, the Covid-19 Pandemic has emerged as a new imponderable in 2020, impacting worldwide. How will government-imposed societal management during the pandemic and the ensuing recovery phase either accelerate or radically alter the direction of the changes imposed by the cyber world?

ALL CHANGE!

Currently, global change is on a staggering scale, even within the span of an individual’s lifetime. Change appears to be the only constant, and it has ever been inherently difficult for societies to cope with, all the more so when the complexities involved in its implementation are poorly understood. What has not changed, however, is the inevitable threat of the age-old tendency by the few to centralize power at the expense of the many, rather than ‘putting people first, empowering them and constantly reminding ourselves that all of these new technologies are first and foremost tools made by people for people.’³ The fundamentals that shaped social and civic behaviour in the past, while not rejected in their entirety, are in need of radical reformation, particularly when emerging technologies increasingly have universal application: innovation is now international and tradeable, with the power to maximize competitive advantage.⁴ A review of past experience is a

2 T. Donaldson and T. W. Dunfee, *Précis for: Ties that Bind, Business & Society Review*, Volume 105, Issue 4, 2000.

3 K. Schwab, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*, Penguin Random House, Jan, 2017.

4 U. Colombo, ‘Technological innovation: new forms and dimensions, new geographical balances’, in *Europe/Japan: Futures in Science, Technology and Democracy*, V.J. McBrierty (ed.), Butterworth Scientific, Guildford, Surrey, England. 1986. p. 24.

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useful first step, and following a discussion on the creation of new knowledge as the foremost driver of change, the role of spirituality, or the absence of it, in this new cyber-driven world is singled out for special mention, mindful of Koji Fushimi's assertion in 1985: 'Humankind now has God's skills but not God's wisdom; herein lies the problem.'⁵

THE EVOLVING PARALLEL CYBER UNIVERSE

Recently, Schwab, Chairman of the World Economic Forum, focussed on the way in which change across a wide spectrum of activity, involving a staggering confluence of emerging technology breakthroughs, has spawned unprecedented paradigm shifts in the economy, business, society, and individually, resulting in the transformation of entire systems, across, and within countries, companies, industries and society as a whole.⁶ His timely focus on the potential peril as well as the beneficial impact on humanity raises alarm bells as to the scale of the challenges to be addressed.

ADDRESSING THE CURRENT CHALLENGES

A number of core issues arise: (i) Global problems arising out of current discoveries require global solutions,⁷ in contrast to movements towards narrower nationalism in countries such as the USA, the UK, and Spain; (ii) The need radically to reshape traditional approaches to employment, commerce and financial transactions as well as personal identities and personal autonomy that are progressively compromised, almost to the point of obliteration; (iii) The need to circumvent the historical tendency of overreach and the centralization of power at the expense of the citizen through greed propagated in many cases by a 'herd mentality',⁸ (iv) The need for a major overhaul of the education system and pedagogical methodology which is increasingly driven by the perceived short-term requirements of a technologically-driven society, at the expense of the arts, humanities and the classics which, over millennia, have critically underpinned the essential attributes of societal ethics, morality and spirituality;⁹ The Covid-19 pandemic has dealt a further blow to acceptable pedagogical methodologies. (v) The need to assess, and react to,

5 K. Fushimi, *ibid*, p. 70.

6 K. Schwab, *Fourth Industrial Revolution*.

7 *Caritas in Veritate*, Charity in Truth, Encyclical by Pope Benedict XVI, 2009.

8 P. Nyberg, 'Misjudging Risk: Causes of the Systematic Banking Crisis in Ireland', Report of the Commission of Investigation of Banking in Ireland, March, 2011.

9 Y.N. Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, Jonathan Cape, Penguin, Random House, U.K., 2018, pp. 34, 60, 261-266.

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the impact of the progressive secularisation of societies and the suppression of spirituality that often featured prominently in the formation of societal governance throughout history.

RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality featured centrally in ancient civilizations, as far back as 4,500BC.¹⁰ Paradoxically, improved societal material wellbeing, based on new discovery, has been paralleled by a decline in spiritual beliefs and values through progressive secularisation.¹¹ One of the main outcomes of Vatican II was a recognition of the societal centrality of the role of lay people – ‘The laity must take up the renewal of the temporal order as their own special obligation. Led by the light of the Gospel and the mind of the Church and motivated by Christian charity, they must act directly and in a definite way in the temporal sphere.’¹²

Developments in the religious sphere should recognise, and respond to, developments in those temporal spheres of God-given intellectual activity. Composers, poets, dramatists and writers often resorted to spirituality and faith when addressing questions that defied human logic, whereas the scientific community remains trenchantly divided on the relationship between spirituality, religion and science. Martin Luther King Jr., more than half a century ago, identified the synergism between science and religion with remarkable insight:

‘Science investigates, religion interprets; Science gives man knowledge, which is power, religion gives man wisdom, which is control; Science deals mainly with facts, religion deals mainly with values; Science keeps religion from sinking into the valley of crippling irrationalism and paralyzing obscurantism, Religion prevents science from falling into the marsh of obsolete materialism and moral nihilism; The two are not rivals.’¹³

He also predicted the present dilemma, alluded to by Fushimi,¹⁴ in noting that ‘Our scientific power has outrun our Spiritual power; we have guided missiles and misguided men.’ Furthermore, Ninian Smart asserted that ‘we all belong to a cross-cultural world,’ in which we are forced to think globally in virtually every sphere of human activity.¹⁵ With regard to the broader impact on society,

10 S.N. Kramer, *The Sumerians, their History, Culture and Character*, The University of Chicago Press, 1963.

11 S. Nilssen, ‘Science, technology and society’, in reference number 4, p.33.

12 Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity - *Apostolicam Actuositatem* - Solemnly promulgated by His Holiness, Pope Paul VI on November 18, 1965. Par. 7.

13 H. Hutyra, <https://www.keepinspiring.me/martin-luther-king-jr-quotes/>.

14 Y. Fushimi, as in reference number 5.

15 N. Smart, *World Philosophies* (1999), revised second edition, Ed. O. Leaman, Routledge, London and New York, 2008.

the encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII (1810-1903) on the relationship between religious practice and civil governance, which was based upon personal experience, are still relevant today.¹⁶

THE WAY FORWARD

Meyer argued that faith is a response, not an initiative, and that ‘faith becomes in time a heritage, and the inheriting of faith is a subtle process. The heirs are inevitably set the task of discriminating between the inalienable and the irrelevant, between fidelity and bias. This need to discriminate defines the root problem of the contemporary theology of the Church.’¹⁷ Within the Church, the tools of discrimination are in disrepair at a time when new knowledge, not yet fully understood, is clouding the fundamentals of Christian dogma. Meyer suggested that the question ‘What is true?’, tends towards, ‘What am I to believe?’ ‘To become an instrument of theological discrimination, principles of knowing must be transposed to the realm of faith, and here we meet an impasse, for faith is confessional: It lives in mystery. The Christian now, already shaping the things that are to be, is itself contoured by a long, complex, mysterious, and illuminating past.’ Vatican II provided a timely benchmark for urgent renewal, but what was the outcome?¹⁸ Corkery cited the words of one theologian, ‘We felt as if we were on the threshold of great possibilities for faith and church.’ He saw the church as being in touch with the world again, and in touch with Christians of other churches. He felt, today, that we had been robbed of the bright future that was on offer at that time.¹⁹ He pointed out that ‘the post Vatican II dispute is about *continuity* and *discontinuity* and ... is about how the church is to be shaped today for tomorrow.’ These internal institutional misgivings should not overshadow remarkable progress in the Church’s activities without. *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World – Gaudium et Spes (Glory and Hope)* – was one of the Council’s major achievements, advocating in its social teaching a more inclusive methodology and dialogue with the world and addressing global deprivation and injustice.²⁰

16 C J O’Malley, *The Great White Shepherd of Christendom: His Holiness Pope Leo XIII: His life, poems, encyclicals, and public documents*, J S Hyland & Company, Chicago, 1903.

17 B.F. Meyer, *The Church in Three Tenses*, Doubleday and Company Inc., New York, 1971.

18 G. O’Hanlon, in *Reaping the Harvest: Fifty Years after Vatican II*, S Mulligan (ed.), The Columba Press, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, 2012, p.63.

19 J. Corkery, *ibid.* pp. 18, 27.

20 *Gaudium et Spes*, *Glory and Hope*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, promulgated by Pope Paul VI, 1965.

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SPIRITUALITY AND THE CYBER UNIVERSE

In considering the relationship between spirituality, religion and the State, Martin Luther King, Jr., again argued that ‘the church must be reminded that it is not the master nor the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority’.²¹ The current dilemma is twofold: *First*, the moral and spiritual authority of the Church must be reasserted. *Second*, with regard to civil governance, how can cyber ethics be defined in an ethereal world controlled by the parallel cyber universe? A new, more sophisticated, form of centralised power has been created, shrouded in mystery for all but the few, and for which a seamless transition from the past is clearly ruled out. Where does the answer lie? Adam Smith (1723-1790) argued that individuals self-regulate and that prudence moderates excess. Empathy tempers the harm we might do others through an innate sense of morality and justice that instinctively approves and rewards acts that benefit society. Freedom and self-interest do not, therefore, produce chaos, but order and concord.²²

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The advent of Covid-19 brought a number of fundamental perspectives sharply into focus. The virus revealed the fragility and vulnerability of our threatened world, which was brought to a virtual standstill. Safeguarding life, livelihoods, and economies presents a truly formidable challenge. While technology has never been a more essential and utilised resource, it has revealed a widespread digital poverty regarding the exploitation of its benefits through lack of internet facilities, equipment and skills. The developing pattern of working at home is comparably compromised. The age-old approach to the provision of education at all levels has been fundamentally undermined. There are induced health issues such as mental anguish, caused by prolonged isolation, exacerbated by denying public access to religious services and the sacraments during shut-down. Public health is safeguarded and access to hospitals is assured by government-imposed restrictions, but sustenance for the soul in places of public worship has no place in those restrictions, thus highlighting the need for a formal spiritual input into the advice given to Government. That said, the new

21 H. Hutyrá, as at reference 13.

22 D. Frisby, ‘A beginner’s guide to Adam Smith, “a Wealth of Nations”, Moneyweek, 2019.

scenario revealed an outpouring of communal generosity and underlined the central importance of communal justice and peace. Clearly, a top-down approach will be incapable of addressing the complexities involved. The alternative is to return to the fundamental question of ethics and morality as determined by the two invariants, namely human instinct and truth.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Gaudium et Spes stresses that ‘The person is not a commodity subordinated to economic goals; rather, the economy should be at the service of the person. Economic activity is to be carried out in accordance with techniques and methods belonging in moral order.’²³

Paul VI’s encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, reaffirmed development to be holistic and integral and not limited to mere economic growth; for it to be authentic, it must be complete, integral.²⁴ Furthermore, the tenets of Catholic Social Doctrine, developed from the papacy of Leo XIII, are echoed by Benedict XVI in *Caritas in Veritate* when he speaks about interpersonal relations - ‘It is not by isolation that man establishes his worth, but by placing himself in relation with others and with God. Hence, these relations take on a fundamental importance.’²⁵ Pope Francis continues to urge that a religious voice be heard in the building of a better world. His Encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, states: ‘It is wrong when the only voices to be heard in public debate are those of the powerful and “experts”. Room needs to be made for reflections born of religious traditions that are a repository of centuries of experience and wisdom.’²⁶

We have in common the instinct that is distinctly human, the instinct of inner self – call it conscience – which, beyond religious conviction and cultural presupposition, fits us to work together in mutual understanding and peaceful co-operation. *Gaudium et Spes* provided a most wholesome understanding of ‘conscience’: ‘In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the

23 *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, promulgated by Pope Paul VI, 1965, Pars. 64,65.

24 *Populorum Progressio*, On the Development of Peoples, Encyclical by Pope Paul VI.

25 *Caritas in Veritate*, Par.53.

26 *Fratelli Tutti*, On fraternity and social friendship, Encyclical by Pope Francis, 2020, Par. 275.

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very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths. ... Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships.²⁷

In summary, everything depends on our ability, as one human family, to see the need for a change of heart, of attitudes, and lifestyles. Our inherent *spirituality* is crucial for the enlightened guidance of humanity's future. The decline of Christianity and the rise in secularism has contributed to changes in the meaning of life, and a crisis in culture affecting not just religions but the whole world. This has substituted a purely human spirituality, individualistic in nature, not guided by Christian faith but by reason only, with a belief confined to the possibilities of human progress.

The current state of humanity necessitates an urgent global response from world governments to develop supranational structures that can be supported, as principles of the global Common Good, to benefit true harmony in the key interests of the peoples of the world. For the Christian, it is within such a spiritual vision that the journey of humanity could capture that profound hope within the meaning of the great prophecy of Isaiah that "ploughshares and pruning forks" replace our weapons of mass destruction. At this point in humanity's journey, Pope Francis, in *Fratelli Tutti*, sees this possibility: 'For a real and lasting peace will only be possible based on a global ethic of solidarity and cooperation in the service of a future shaped by interdependence and shared responsibility in the whole human family.'²⁸

27 *Gaudium et Spes*, Par. 16.

28 *Fratelli Tutti*, Par. 127.

Tender Hearts. So how do we do it? How do we remain tender-hearted? Essentially it is a matter of remaining open to Christ, for that is to be open to all since "without him was not anything made that was made". We can begin anywhere. It is not even necessary to start with a religious impulse. Any positive regard for another opens the heart, so makes a space for Christ, so a space for all.

– LUKE BELL, OSB, *Staying Tender, contemplation, pathway to compassion*. (New York: Angelico Press) p.49.