

The Transcendent Connection and the Problem of Loneliness

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Again I saw something meaningless under the sun. There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth...

Ecclesiastes 4:7-8

Introduction

Modernity is lonely. By any measure, loneliness is now in epidemic proportions in modern societies and is one of the states most characteristic of the modern condition. Modern man may enjoy a prosperity and so-called "standard of living" vastly better than his ancestors, but inside him there is an emptiness that renders all his achievements null and void. Loneliness is the "new poverty". It is the hunger of well-fed men. It is the crucial factor in all the social ills of the contemporary era, from alcoholism and eating disorders to drug abuse, teenage shooting rampages, porn addiction and suicide. The atomized, nuclear family is a lonely place, and when the nuclear family fails the modern individual is often left completely disconnected and alienated. Similarly, the pace of change of modern societies creates alienation and estrangement and a lack of social cohesion such that individuals feel themselves to be living in a strange, unrecognizable world, as if they are uncomprehending foreigners in what was only yesterday their own land. Such feelings and problems are so common that we hardly need to describe the pathology here - every modern man knows what loneliness is - yet very little of any penetrating insight on these issues is ever heard in public fora.

Even less do we try to understand loneliness as a spiritual problem and to place it in a context beyond profane theories and the fad-ridden, quantitative "research" of sociologists. Modernity likes to flatter itself with the notion that all is "new" and so the

past is "irrelevant" and "out-of-date". But this prevents us from seeing our woes in the broader context of the whole life of humanity and the cycles of cosmic dimension in which that life takes place. The plight of loneliness makes no sense if we cling to an ideology of "progress". How can the best-fed, finest clothed, most literate, and scientifically nurtured people in history be so miserable?

Traditional perspectives such as those recorded in the great scriptures of the world, on the other hand, assume an inevitable decline from the Principle and speak very plainly of our times as days of estrangement and discord. In traditional reckonings the process of cyclic decline of which the modern condition is a culmination is essentially a process of human *self-emptying* by which primal man loses his microcosmic integrity and empties himself, so to speak, into the macrocosm. The inner self-sufficiency of primal man is replaced by a dependency on what is external to himself. This is obvious in physical terms. There comes a time, for example, when the natural, inner immunity of man to disease fails and thus he sets out on the path to an *industrial* medicine in which his inner immunity is forsaken for an array of external devices, vaccines and the like, designed to cocoon his increasingly frail constitution in a sterilized bubble. The notion that human beings are themselves getting better is quite obviously wrong. The quality of human beings is declining, even while the web of man's infrastructure grows around him. Modern man is a Wizard of Oz, a shrunken soul in a mighty machine. Thus modern man has multiplied his means of communication with mobile phones, satellites, email, SMS - a whole array of devices - but then finds he has nothing to say or no one to whom to say it. He has a diminishing capacity to make any real contacts. He has prolific external means but no inner reality to share. Ours is the age of the space tourist: truly awesome technology devoted to truly trivial human beings.

This is the wider context in which we must locate the problem of loneliness in our times. Modern man buries himself in an avalanche of inane stimuli but still languishes in *ennui*. Above all, he has lost his primordial "centre", an axial sense of his own being - in fact, the psychic correlate to the upright stance of his body - and since the human

predicament is (always was and always will be) a subject/object paradox, when man loses his 'centre' that subject/object pathology we call loneliness will surely follow.

Horizontal and Vertical

Moreover, since it is an "axial" problem, it will manifest in two ways, or on two planes: vertically and, by reflection, horizontally. In traditional anthropologies man is a creature with both a vertical and a horizontal life.³³⁰ In Islam - where the symbolism of two axes is made explicit in the movements of prayer - man is both '*abd*' (servant) and '*khalifa*' (deputy), while in Christianity - where the symbolism of the two axes makes the sign of the Cross - Christ said that there are two commandments - to love one's neighbor as oneself and to love God with all one's heart. There are several manifestations of loneliness and it is important, if we are to conduct any meaningful discussion of the problem, to make the proper distinctions between the various types from the outset. The horizontal dimension of the problem takes the form of common biosocial loneliness, feeling disconnected from one's fellow human beings. The vertical dimension, however, takes the form of existential or spiritual loneliness, a profound sense of being spiritually adrift and unconnected in a meaningless life in a meaningless universe. Biosocial loneliness is the loneliness of the unloved. It is the anguished separateness of the person who has failed to make real connections with others. Existential loneliness, on the other hand, deals with the fact that we are, existentially (but not biosocially), monads. We are born our own birth, live our own life and die our own death, and no one else can do it for us. This is an immutable fact of our condition. The religions and philosophies of the world all address this particular predicament.

Biosocial (or 'horizontal') loneliness is the most common form of the malady. It is no exaggeration to say that it is rife. Our swarming cities consist of atomized individuals who have few and only superficial connections with others. The money nexus that drives the modern swarm cheapens all relationships. At work we are wage-slaves and at home

³³⁰ This is a far more useful model than Maslow's hierarchy.

our mortgage is more meaningful than our marriage. When calamity strikes in life we have no extended networks of close relations to gather around and so we turn to "counselors", people we pay by the hour to be our friends, just as - in what is, in fact, the paradigmatic modern relationship - we pay a whore by the hour to pretend they are our beloved. Modernity, stripped of all deep and formal relationships, such as all forms of bonded service, becomes a "whore culture" where casual trade is the prevailing nexus between most people at most times. An aggravated existential loneliness is also characteristic of our era. The old religious frameworks and certainties of the past have been diminished or destroyed by the ideologies and pretensions of modernity. We are not raised in a framework of metaphysical certainties any more. We stand on quicksand. Descartes was right: the modern condition is one of doubt. Do I exist? The fact that there is someone who asked the question is cold comfort, a cause for despair, not celebration. We are locked in our own fetid egos seeking solace in the novelty of our desires and fulfillment in shoddy consumer goods. Meanwhile, everything around us says that God is impossible.

Of the two types, biosocial (horizontal) loneliness is the easier to remedy. It will usually abate if one expands one's circle of friends, meets a partner, gets a job, joins a club, raises a family, returns to study, moves into a commune, and so on. There is still the problem of the impermanence and shallowness of the connections made, but in the first instance biosocial loneliness is susceptible to biosocial solutions. Spiritual loneliness is a more difficult problem. No extension of our social networks will ameliorate a sense of existential or spiritual loneliness. There are people who have friends, family, career - a rich social life - and are happy in those things, yet still feel a deep, inner emptiness that they cannot seem to fill. Indeed, there are those who will throw away friends, family, career, to suddenly run off to Nepal to become a Buddhist monk. They will throw away their biosocial connections to try to fulfill their spiritual yearning. It is a deeper yearning than the hunger for human company. It is a yearning that oppresses the soul, is felt as a sickness in the bones, and from which no bar or night-club, strip-joint, speak-easy or coffee-lounge in the land is refuge. It is possible for one to be at peace with God but still long for human company, but more commonly, though we have our share of human

entanglements, we find they do not answer our spiritual needs and leave us empty inside. This is a loneliness inherent in the human circumstance. It is the loneliness of the separateness of the creature. It has no cause other than the fact of creatureliness and the creature's longing for the Creator.

Paradoxically, most religious and spiritual systems tell us that the cure for existential loneliness is to be alone with oneself in meditation and prayer. The monk seeks a cure for spiritual loneliness in solitude. The cure for biosocial loneliness is to extend beyond ourselves - to "go out and meet people". But with existential loneliness the connection we yearn is inner. One cannot find it in connections with someone else. The only connection that will help is, by definition, transcendent, beyond the social. Different religions have different emphases, though. The three monotheisms, in particular, express a certain range of responses to these matters typical of their roles and postures within the single framework of semitic monotheism. Judaism, for example, is a religion constructed around biosocial connections. The family, the tribe, the nation - biosocial connectedness - is emphasized. Thus is God anthropomorphized as a transcendent "Father", thus is marriage the arena for the transcendent connection (and thus too is seeking God in a woman's love a distinctly Jewish neurosis). Classical Christianity, on the other hand, (not the modern versions of the faith) has the monastery at its heart and, like Buddhism, places an emphasis on solitary contemplation rather than the social virtues. Celibacy is the ideal and marriage is a concession to nature. Love of one's neighbor is only "as oneself" while love of God is with all one's heart and soul, so Christianity (in its classical forms) tends to sacrifice all for love of God.

Islam claims a position between these two extremes. Islam adheres to an ideal of "married monks". The prophet said, "Marriage is one half of religion" ... but only one half. Islam strives for a contemplative spirit held in balance within a highly social "horizontal" order. More to the point, in Islam all of creation longs for Allah "for whose self-same beauty," as the poet sings, "the nightingale laments."³³¹ And "Listen!," sings Rumi, alluding to the mournful solitude of the reed flute (ney) "Listen to the reed forlorn,

³³¹From the exordium to Attar's *Conference of the Birds*.

torn from its bed..." A homesickness for Paradise is the great theme - the tone - of Islamic spiritual life. Spiritual loneliness, in the form of a soul-felt longing for God, is made a positive theme and regarded as a virtue. About the lonely soul of man, torn by its separation from God, the Koran says, "If Allah afflicts you with some hurt, there is none who can remove it except Him."³³² As the last of religions Islam responds to modern man's sense of remoteness from the divine by transmuting his loneliness into a proper yearning of the soul. It does this by preserving the solitary and primal spirituality of the nomad alone in the timeless emptiness of the desert and transposes it into an era when men feel minuscule and lost in the vast, barren emptiness of the galaxies, the deserts of astronomical space.

Primary Attachments

One of the more useful notions in modern psychology, though hardly an astounding "discovery", is the idea of a 'primary attachment'. Biosocially, human beings function best with a 'primary attachment'. For a newborn child, this is usually their mother. For adults, it is a partner or a close companion or a trusted friend.³³³ "And God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone...'"³³⁴ Human beings need and seek not only wide social contacts but deep and special ones as well. This is true - on the vertical level - for the spiritual seeker too. It is even true of the monk. A monk does not live alone, strictly speaking, but in a *controlled aloneness* created by the monastic community. True hermits are rare, even in strongly ascetic traditions. Rather, every renunciate has a 'primary attachment' - their teacher, confessor, guide, guru - who looks after their progress and nurture. Most religious systems insist that it is difficult (or even dangerous) to undertake the inner journey/confrontation without supervision by one who has been there, and in most systems the student/teacher relationship is a very close and especially sacred one.

³³²*Holy Quran*, 10: 107.

³³³Increasingly in Western societies, for the young and the old, it is an animal kept as a pet rather than another human being.

³³⁴*Gen. 2:18*.

The inner journey may consist of *the One alone, all alone, seeking the One alone*, but since the quest, as far as man is concerned, takes the form of a subject/object paradox it is rare that a man can dispense altogether with a guide external (objective) to himself. The nature of the quest demands an "other", but not for any biosocial reason. The object of the teacher/student relationship is not to amend biosocial loneliness - the guru does not drop over to play scrabble in the evenings. His purpose is only to lead the student through the subject/object maze and guide him or her to make the *inner* connection at the centre and solution of the labyrinth.

In much religious literature and praxis metaphors of biosocial connections are employed to describe this inner connection, though, more correctly, it is the horizontal that reflects the vertical: the biosocial relationships are reflections of the archetypal ones. Thus in Sufism, for instance, God is sometimes called the Friend. Sometimes - even in the strongly patriarchal religions - God is called the Lover (feminine), and longing for Him/Her is analogized to the longing one feels for a human lover. Implicit in such parallels is the idea that we can learn about the existential problem from the biosocial manifestations, and vice versa. Our need for friends is a reflection of our need for the Friend. Our need for a lover is a reflection of our need for the Lover. And so on. The teacher or guru is neither friend nor lover but guides the pupil to the Friend, the Lover within (and beyond). It is common, of course, for a man or woman to seek the Lover in lovers and the Friend in friendships, and to never find satisfaction even in a profusion of connections. This is a confusion of horizontal and vertical planes, an error of mistaken reflections. This is precisely the type of error that an external authority - a guide - can correct. It is also common, however, for the same modern man who complains of being lost and lonely to insist that he does not need anyone to guide him.

Therapy

It is important not to confuse the spiritual journey with the similar processes used in psychoanalysis, where the analyst/therapist - through a long process of discussion and talking - helps a patient form an internalized, secure emotional base, usually by trying to rebuild the mother-infant primary attachment from the ground up. This is a biosocial therapy (of questionable value), not a cure for the human condition. Such therapies may alleviate chronic states of emotional insecurity (created by biosocial factors) but even the most emotionally secure person can feel a chill of spiritual insecurity, existential loneliness, when they stop to contemplate their mortality in the universe. Therapy and the analyst/patient relationship is about one's relationship with others (especially one's mother in the case of Freudian-based therapies). Spiritual disciplines, and the teacher/student relationship, on the other hand, are about one's relationship with one's Maker (and by extension one's Self, the authentic Self, and not the imposter of one's vain thinking.) To express loneliness as a spiritual problem, let us say that the lonely person must learn to forsake the "one" and realize the "One". It is finally just a tiny shift in awareness, but it changes everything. God is not lonely in his Oneness. His self-sufficiency is joyous and overflowing. It is the self-loving gaze of the ego, the *nafs*, the *false self* - the thought of oneself that wrongly boasts of being Real - that is lonely.

It is questionable whether biosocial loneliness (and the unhappiness it causes) should ever be treated as a medical matter - medication always tends to mask symptoms and create new problems when the real problems are social and environmental in nature - but it is certain that medical therapies offer nothing to fulfill genuine spiritual yearning. No mode of therapy can ever help spiritually. Is there any therapy - other than Socrates' hemlock - that can cure one's creatureliness? Should a psychiatrist treat the yearning homesickness of the spiritual man? There was a time when *iatros* meant priest and healer of souls, but the profane medicine of modern times is entirely carnal. We can hardly expect a science that denies the existence of the soul to be able to sooth the soul of man.

In fact, some types of modern therapy can do great damage. Contemporary medical theories concerning brain chemistry and accompanying modes of chemical therapy are dehumanizing and destructive. It is arguable that some so-called "mental diseases" such as schizophrenia are actually spiritual in nature and, further, that the whole "science" of psychiatry - a science whose macabre history has been populated by an equal number of fools and ghouls, it must be said - serves to mask modern society's social and spiritual deterioration. A psychiatrist is not a healer of the soul. Existential loneliness - deep spiritual longing from metaphysical disconnectedness - is never a disease (except that "salvation" is its cure) and should never be treated as one.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the contemporary West is its increasing tendency to regard spiritual yearning, spiritual disquiet, as a disease, a malfunction of the brain. In Australia recently there was serious discussion in the psychiatric fraternity about classifying religious belief as a mental disorder. As one newspaper correspondent put it, it is only the out-moded convention called "religion" that prevents "people who speak to invisible friends in the sky" from being treated as mentally ill. The truth behind such thoughts is that a man with genuine spiritual aspirations is increasingly a danger to the soporific hedonism that is these days shamelessly promoted as the *summum bonum* of human life and the fulfillment of human history. The purpose of much psychological counseling is to dissuade the unhappy of ever extending themselves beyond the most pedestrian forms of contentment. It is true: a man with no dreams can never be disappointed. But that is to deny that there is a vertical dimension to the human state and to suppose that man can live by bread - and mindless entertainment - alone. The modern world is a denial of the depth of man and so a self-betrayal and a travesty. Ten minutes of contemporary television is enough to demonstrate that the first rule of modernity is that shallowness is so pervasive as to be compulsory. Any aspiration outside the consumerist stupor is a threat. The medication of the discontent, the pathologizing of normal human states (we are no longer "sad", we are "depressed") and the collapsing together of the roles 'citizen' and 'patient' - is an integral part of the modern programme to build a "horizontal" utopia. The suppression and containment of the religious instinct is a necessary part of the secular project. "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a

heaven for?" wrote Browning. In the modern technological paradise-on-earth there is no heaven and any man whose reach exceeds his grasp will be viewed as deluded and defective.

Confusions

Many problems, let it be observed, can be caused by seeking spiritual answers to biosocial problems, or vice versa. There are many people, for example, who are just biosocially lonely and disconnected but who seek happiness in a spiritual path. They will usually drop out from the chosen spiritual path after a while because they have miscalculated the cause of their discontent. On the other hand, joining a religious group does enhance one's biosocial connections because one is among like-minded people gathering in a common cause. But then the spiritual commitment may be shallow. In contrast to the monasteries that maintained a culture of perpetual contemplation at the core of classical Christianity, many modern Christian churches are merely social clubs on a Christian theme and no longer address the eternal problems of the soul. Anyone with an authentic sense of the spiritual and a compelling sense of existential longing is likely to find their dilemmas untended in such congregations. At worse, such churches are little more than dating pools. There are people who are lonely, become very religious, join a church, meet a partner in the church scene, leave the church and go back to being not very religious at all. ("His wife still goes to church but he doesn't feel it is relevant to him anymore...")

Commonly, too, people will seek existential solutions in biosocial relations - as if marriage and children will provide one with the meaning of life. And some people clearly do not know what their problem is or on what level or plane their problem lies. They try social solutions, build families, explore sex, take drugs, live in the fast lane, and then veer to spiritual solutions, suddenly shaving their heads and cutting off from friends to become obsessed with yoga and vegetarian food. And soon they lapse back into social bingeing. And so on. Spiritual teachers, gurus and guides see an endless parade of fickle and

oscillating souls among modern seekers. Biosocial connections will make life rich and enjoyable but will not reveal the meaning of life. Rather, sound biosocial relations should be a platform from which to address spiritual things. This is why religions in general stress marriage and family. The rabid pursuit of biosocial connections can fill up one's life and deflect one from addressing the need for deeper connections. Religions usually stress conservative biosocial relations with a view to creating a very secure, stable biosocial framework in which, ideally, deeper spiritual pursuits can be nurtured.

In so-called "progressive" social thinking there is an "emotional authenticity" to be found in "liberating" all human relations from the yoke of traditional patterns. Life becomes a pursuit of this authenticity through a succession of love affairs, infidelities, casual flings, bisexual experiments, breakdowns, crises and turning-points. This is the humanist authenticity of Hamlet's "to thine own self be true", but it should not be mistaken for a spiritual ideal. It makes no reference to a transcendent connection, and Hamlet, in any case, is hardly a worthy spiritual model. In traditional societies it is understood that existential loneliness is best addressed from within a secure biosocial framework. Many traditional spiritual disciplines require students to be over thirty-five years old, with a career and family intact, before tackling the problems of a deeper connectedness. In any full religious perspective, marriage and family and social bonds are not ends in themselves but are supposed to create the conditions for a deeper spiritual life. The weakening of marriage and family as institutions and the increasingly superficial nature of those institutions in modern conditions aggravates biosocial loneliness in a direct way but also deprives many people of the secure social framework in which an atmosphere of spiritual nurture can develop. People who busy their lives dealing with social dislocation have little time for meditation.

It is conspicuous that family life has been sentimentalized and commercialized in the modern West where, in the strange realm of delusions that is advertising, it is conceived of as an end in itself, not as a platform for higher aspirations. This is why the modern home can be such a pressure-pot. Much of the anguish of the common man is caused by the steady realization that the television ideal of family life as an absolute, as

ultimately fulfilling, is just a highly polished lie. No matter how much we inflate the value of the nuclear family with sentiment, it cannot satisfy the need for a transcendent connection. Existential loneliness is nagging and persistent and it does not matter how happy you are with your spouse, how beautiful your children, how rewarding your job, how shiny the car in your garage, how hefty your retirement pay-out, how "emotionally authentic" your love affairs, nothing will help. There are values beyond family. Christ said that we must love him even more than we love our mothers and fathers. Our social connections become idols if they prevent us from aspiring to the blessed (and not merely the comfortable) life.

Conclusion

Utopians estimate that if the world economy continues to expand at a rate of around 3% per year for the next fifty years, as it has throughout the 'Long Boom', then it is possible for every person on the Earth to enjoy what is today a middle-class American "standard of living". Modernity, as Marx realized, is defined by the unprecedented, exponential unleashing of the "forces of production", a revolution in the productive (and destructive) capacity of mankind. Utopians speak of abolishing poverty, vanquishing disease, extending life expectancy, universal literacy, free cable TV to every home on the planet with a thousand channels at the fingertips of every man, woman and child.

But what, we should ask, happens then? There is overwhelming evidence that these things alone do not, will not, cannot bring human beings deep and lasting satisfaction. It is self-evident that we have an innate longing for a transcendent connectedness that a materialist utopia will never cure. And it is glaringly self-evident that middle-class Americans are far from being the most fulfilled beings in the world. They complain of acute biosocial loneliness, and all the associated social ills, and increasingly of existential misery. When their music video idols have exhausted sex, cocaine and serial divorce traumas they turn to Scientology, UFO cults and pop Kabbalah. The loneliness of modernity is a spiritual problem that no measure of affluence

can remedy. On the contrary, the great productive surge of the modern revolution inevitably involves the further deterioration of man's primal integrity - machines exteriorize human faculties, technological man is hell-bent on a strangely misconceived quest to make himself redundant, thinking that this somehow fulfils all human dreams. But "transhuman" is really *sub*-human. "Robo-buddies" are the proposed solution to the biosocial loneliness of an advanced, atomized ultra-selfish society, but there is no technological solution yet - other than sedatives - for metaphysical longing.

We are very rapidly moving into a world in which our problems are quite nakedly spiritual rather than material in character. Let us be optimistic and suppose that the material infrastructure of the planet is indeed to be transformed in the next fifty years, and the great devils of the past - famine, plague - have all been defeated. Let us suppose that technological man can conquer want. Then the great problems of the spiritual life of man cannot be ignored or discounted any longer, and first amongst them is the problem of the loneliness that bedevils modern man. After the revolution comes the time to take stock of what has been lost in the madness of the rush. Modernity is lonely, both in the horizontal and the vertical sense, both biosocially and existentially. Man is diminished, overshadowed by his own inventions. Very soon loneliness will need to be acknowledged as a scourge of our times and we will need to consider the problem in an expanded context and finally address many of the issues sketched in outline in the notes above.