

What is our age suffering from? The *Schweizer Illustrierte* interviews the well-known psychiatrist Prof. Dr C. G. Jung¹

(August 12, 1942)

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(Translated by Charles Boyd)

The ethical order is shattered

‘Where, in your opinion, do the deeper causes of the spiritual, moral, and social crisis of our age lie?’

‘In order to answer that question I will have to reach back into the past a little’, replied Professor Jung. ‘Before the First World War we all lived in a comparatively quiet, satisfied, one could perhaps even say happy time; then a tendency became noticeable and grew ever more powerful, which tore people out of the orderly world to which they were accustomed and which had stood the test of time, forcing them to reject the traditional healthy norms and rules of the bourgeois moral order. This tendency was a desperate cry for the unrestricted expression of instinct, for free love, and an irrepressible desire for the expression of an allegedly repressed will to power. Sigmund Freud became the spokesman, the mouthpiece of the upsurge of sexuality in that he reduced all the nervous disorders of mankind to the repression of the instinctual world. Alfred Adler emphasized the repressed will to power’.

‘There can be no doubt, however, that an instinctual world which no longer operates along ordered and regulated lines must inevitably lead to chaos. Even in primitive peoples the spiritual order of the father is opposed to the chaotic primal world of the mother, and there are specific regulations and rites according to which the instincts may be lived out. By and large, before the First World War we still possessed and adhered to standards of decency or, let us say, a ‘moral’ order. Our entire upbringing was based on this ethical and social codex, and it was good that it was. We had a belief in the Church and in Christianity, and our parents were religious, pious and upright and felt deeply obligated to the moral and social rules handed down to them. But as soon as we shattered this ethical order by the unrestrained and dissolute living out of

our primitive urges we exposed ourselves to a catastrophe of unforeseeable consequences. The unleashing of all instincts, the will to power, the greed for possessions and influence: the selection of means to reach these chosen goals became increasingly uninhibited. And so it finally came to the Second World War which, to the initiated, was hardly unexpected; it has dehumanized our times completely and drawn us into a maelstrom from which there appears to be no longer an escape’.

We are suffering from a European fever

‘But is not the fact that, just in these last ten years, so many statesmen have tried to give their people a new order – and indeed have succeeded in doing so – convincing proof of the existence of a newly awakened need for an ordered and regulated life?’ I dared to object.

‘Certainly’, answered Professor Jung. ‘Chaos always creates the need in man for a new order. Just observe history: after the Peloponnesian Wars came Alexander the Great, after the French Revolution came Napoleon. But in the long run they were unable to establish themselves because they were dictators. And all dictators, as children of revolution, have arisen from chaos’.

‘Undoubtedly there are in all their strivings and acts of reform the beginnings of a new order and, once in a while, and in a certain sense, they are able to transform their environment and their opponents and force their own methods on them. Nevertheless there remains a principle of war in them, they need war in order to overcome all resistance. They are themselves always unhappy, but live under the illusion that they have been called to make other people happy. It is like a fever, which does indeed fight and kill the bacteria in the organism, but in the course of this weakens and burns out the body. We are all suffering today from a terrible European fever’.

The authority of the Church is shaken

‘The corrosive process, which set in shortly before the First World War, has continued to make ever more threatening progress up until the present day. The authority of the Church and of Christianity has been shaken. Nietzsche had already preached to his contemporaries that Christianity carries all the guilt for modern Europe’s unrestrained egoism and for its domination by physical urges, as if we hadn’t had too little Christianity rather than too much! As a result we have lost all moral orientation. Spirit has lost its standing and its esteem where terror and machine guns rule. Crass and naked materialism has become the highest guiding principle of all our thoughts and actions. Free thought is pitilessly repressed, intelligence systematically eradicated. I do not believe, though, in the lasting persuasiveness of brutal violence’.

‘The Reformation is indeed the most decisive, the most fateful caesura in the later history of the western world, for it was the Reformation, or more

precisely Luther, that shattered the world order of the Middle Ages. The authority of medieval theocracy, which had been the most magnificent and imposing expression of a spiritual order, was undermined’.

Our culture hangs on a thin thread

‘Today we are experiencing something very similar, in that we think we have to do away with all those things that were handed down, or inherited, or are bound up with tradition. This can lead to quite disastrous results; we should realize that our substitute ‘spiritual’ values in no way suffice to allow us, with our proud and all too self-assured arrogance, to do without values created through centuries of persistent spiritual effort. On the contrary, it is the absolutely urgent need of the moment, and our most sacred obligation, resolutely to hold on to traditional values if all the products of art, science and morality are not to be washed away by floods of passion and waves of thoughtlessness. Western European culture is barely hanging on a thin thread because the element of disorder has been elevated to a principle; when a condition of lawfulness no longer reigns, laws are flouted or misused and despotism threatens to suffocate the spirit’.

I view politics with the eyes of a physician

‘Could this war have been avoided then?’

‘The war ... certainly not’, replied Professor Jung, ‘but the catastrophe which has descended on Western Europe could have been. In my opinion, it was a mistake that England and France tried to hinder Germany’s expansion towards the east. They should have – and I had already expressed this opinion before the outbreak of the war to a prominent journalist who interviewed me for an American magazine [interview with H. R. Knickerbocker in 1939 for *Cosmopolitan*] – stood with weapons at the ready and continued to arm themselves until they too were strong enough for a military confrontation. It would thus have been likely that a war between Germany and the two large western nations could have been avoided for a long time to come, because both sides would have realized that the forces would paralyse each other. I do not think in a political way, but merely as a physician who is always mindful of keeping the sum of forces in the human household in a reasonable and healthy balance’.

The feeling of total dependence provokes resistance

‘One-sided specialized development’, continued Professor Jung, ‘always and inevitably leads to a neurosis. All specialization is unhealthy and this applies to every aspect of human life, even for example, to technology and industry. The splitting up of collective work into countless singular and specialized processes increases the spiritual dependence of the individual on the collective. But in everyone the feeling of total dependence leads to inner resistance. It is

a law of nature. If a father wants his sons to remain faithfully by his side all their lives he must never let them feel their dependency. Resistance in occupied countries grows in intensity in proportion as the occupying forces tighten their reins. A statesman whose subjects are, for better or worse, at the mercy of his politics, increases and provokes a dangerous and threatening resistance which can ignite in deadly hate at any moment. A democratic form of government is much less exposed to such forces of resistance than an authoritarian one, because it not only recognizes the validity of opposition, but even from time to time – if only for the sake of appearances – artificially nurtures it; this means that a valve is left open, making it possible for the resistance to let off steam. The psychologically correct assessment of this law of nature was undoubtedly responsible for the success of British politics for centuries; the British always skilfully understood how not to let subordinated peoples feel their dependency. Indeed they took every opportunity to stress the indispensability of these peoples and the contribution they could make within their world empire and to portray them in a good light’.

Our idea of God has shifted

‘In the Middle Ages people lived in an almost carefree submissiveness to God and in the strong conviction that everything that happened was the consummation of God’s will and of his wise counsel. Supported by this belief, medieval man did not consider whether this was rational or consistent with the logic of his personal thinking. For him God was the all-loving, all-embracing, all-knowing father who guided him and by whom he joyfully and willingly let himself be led. But a transformation has taken place in the way we look at things now: we have made war the highest guiding principle, indeed in a certain sense we have even made a deity of it, and we seek God in catastrophe. Thus we are poised at a decisive moment in history’.

A look into the future

‘Is there still a chance to save ourselves from this spiritual decay?’

‘Yes – but a miracle will have to happen, and miracles only happen when one believes in miracles. Small islands, like mountain-tops, would have to grow out of the chaotic sludge, islands of contemplation and of the sense of justice; fortunately Switzerland is still one of those. Perhaps a new world with a new order could develop from those islands. For that reason I too believe that our country has a great and significant purpose to fulfil some day’.

Note

1 For lack of further documents regarding this interview (August 12, 1942) it was so far not possible to check and confirm beyond all doubt the authenticity of the wording of this interview.

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