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EXISTENTIAL VACUUM AND HOW TO OVERCOME IT
Problems of Modern Culture and Possible Ways Out:
At the Threshold of the Third Millennium–
What We Have Grasped On Approaching the XXIst Century

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I invite you . . .
For re-creation yourself.

–Maximilian Voloshin
(Russian poet, 1877-1932)

I. Failure Of Modern Culture: Existential Vacuum.

On approaching the third millennium, we are peering involuntary into the Future while estimating the Past (Nalimov, 1994a, 1994b). The twentieth century, flooded with blood, forces us to stop and think over the way we are living. Our being cannot withstand an evergrowing power of violence induced by so-called “technical progress.” New means of violence are available not only for governments but for individuals as well. Society must protect itself by means of legal violence and the result is very poor—about one million prisoners in Russia, and even more in the prosperous USA. This is just one example. And what about society—does it feel safe?

Human beings, as much as Nature and the hospital planet Earth, are suffering from violence. According to newspaper data, only in Russia have we officially registered 3.5 million abortions each year—which means 98 operations per thousand women of ages 14-49, and 225 unborn babies per 100 delivered (*Izvestia*, June 26, 1995).

As to wars—they still remain the main way of solving national problems brought about by offenses and injuries accumulated over centuries. Can we ever learn the lesson that it is impossible to differentiate properly between victory and defeat? Each victory is nothing else but a new conflict. It comes to a stop when both sides become sufficiently sick and tired. But . . . weapons are continuously being perfected and available all over the world.

People are losing hope and cannot look ahead with confidence. They cannot even look with confidence around themselves. Maybe violence is responsible for the unprecedented thirst for dope.

So we observe a very unfortunate closing to the twentieth century.

The culture of the Western World is clearly exhausted. It fails to produce *peace and mutual help*, fundamental for supporting a living society.

Cultural change seems to be a natural process. Every living thing needs to be renewed. We were taught, while still in school, about periodical changes in the Biosphere. In the Humansphere, all processes flow even faster. Almost before our eyes, great cultures of the Mediterranean area and

ancient Rome have disappeared. The creative process—whenever and wherever it takes place—is always unrestrained: it clears away the road to the forthcoming.

Let me now dwell on what has collapsed in our culture:

1. We have lost the meaning of life. The dominant purpose has shifted to the comfort of life. Yet how hard it is for Nature to endure the burden of that human need!

2. We have lost fundamental meanings because culture is not used anymore as a *single whole*. The culture turned to is a patched one, and very often different patches do not fit with each other because the pathways of intellectual life have become too narrow. Hence an integrated world outlook fails to evolve. And those who are beyond frontiers of intellectual life appear to be beyond even those patched areas. A special term is even coined for the “miserables”—*mass communication media*. Past cultures were not as differentiated as they seem now, in spite of the definite esoterism in the past (as in Plato, for example).

The esoteric character of modern culture automatically arises from its implied complexity—knowledge combines a variety of disciplines. To understand mathematics, it is necessary to be a mathematician. But to understand modern culture, it is necessary to be also a physicist, a biologist, a psychologist, a philosopher, and what not. It is a bit too much even for some outstanding intellectuals. And what to do for those who do not belong to the field? For the majority of them, modern culture is available mostly through technology. Popularization does not make sense: it is just a parody of true science.

3. The technization of all aspects of cultures that was so well understood by M. Heidegger (Seubold, 1986), shadowed from us those sides of Being which were clear to people of past cultures. Heidegger spoke about modern technology as a “world-order (structure)” and about an oncoming “technological desert.” He was supported by his follower (and critic), the German philosopher, Rombach (1985). The word combination “Philosophische Zeitkritik” has turned out to be a new philosophical term. The French philosopher, J. Ellul, speaks about social progress in our time as the inexorable enslavement of human beings by technique. That is true. But what is responsible for the enslavement? I would think that the emergence of this negative phenomena can be explained not by the necessity to satisfy ever growing needs, but by the fact that *the very needs themselves do not satisfy people any more*.

4. Philosophy itself is exhausted. Heidegger and Gadamer seem to be the last representatives of traditional philosophy. Quite a number of authors testify to the demise of philosophy (Baynes, Bohman, & McCarthy, 1987; McCarthy, 1990; Nalimov, 1993a). One would think that present day philosophy and science could be merged together. But will philosophy then stop to be philosophy? And how is that kind of merging possible if the scientific Weltanschauung is of a patched character? As a scientist, I am trying to root my philosophical thought in the ground of different branches—mathematics, theoretical physics, linguistics, psychology, and biology. Yet we are without any answers from philosophers. Nevertheless, I would not like to think the effort is in vain.

5. At the beginning of the century, the words by Nietzsche were loudly pronounced: “God is dead.” Terrible words. But I think we are rather not to speak of God’s death, but of a religious feeling in our culture which is dying away. I am old enough to remember the flood of Christianity (my grandfather was a devoutly religious merchant), and the power of paganism in old Russia (my father was an ethnographer of Ugro-Finnish nationality whose religion was free from dogmatic restrictions and any violence with respect to Nature and man). And what do we have now?

In the book by a popular Russian priest, Father Alexander Borisov, there is an answer to the question: the Church is supported chiefly by *old women* (Borisov, 1994). And that is natural, as the Church itself is *old*, if not decrepit. It is obstinately trying to be rooted into the Past as if it does not understand that

culture and people have changed radically. We cannot just believe in the dogmata of our ancestors any more.

In Russia, in the early years of the Revolution, in the promising days of general renewal, an attempt was made to resort to early Christian thought—Gnosticism. This is also from the distant past, but its potentiality is not exhausted. Gnosticism implied the ideals of freedom in a spiritual quest and consequent nonviolent world-order. Profound and mystical, it is beyond easy grasp. In its social aspect, it opposes any violence. In Russia, it was manifested as a movement under the name of “Mystical Anarchism,” while esoterically it was identified as the “Russian Detachment of Knights Templars.” Practically all of them were destroyed during the years of repressions. I wrote about them in my book *Tight-Rope Walker* (Nalimov, 1994b).

6. And the most essential Problem is—*Life-Death* (Nalimov, 1994a). This problem is the background and main point of each culture. World outlook mythology sprouted up from here. The process of cultural ripening is rooted in this very problem. Nowadays, it has disappeared from the field of vision as it does not agree with the modern *Weltanschauung*. Heidegger tried to clear it up from a purely philosophic point of view. In his book, *Being and Time*, he devoted 8 pages to the issue. Here is his summary (Heidegger, 1983):

We may now summarize our characterization of authentic Being-towards-death as we have projected it existentially: *anticipation reveals to Dasein its lostness in itself, and brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself, primarily unsupported by concerned solicitude, but of being itself, rather, in an impassioned freedom towards death—a freedom which has been released from the illusions of the “they,” and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious.* (p. 311)

Yes, Being-towards-death does become an existential category.

But the problem remains open. The very loss of memento mori turns out to be an important event in the history of humanity. We have lost the sacred aspect of Life, and I think many misfortunes spring from this. I discuss this difficult point in a brochure of mine (Nalimov, 1994a). Life has turned out to be a misadventure for many people at the closing of the century.

7. And now, as a consequence, I have to name another disadvantage—the loss of the moral and ethical principle. Nowadays, ethics exists as a philosophic discipline at universities and not in everyday life. That is due to the lack of a true ground.

II. Quest For New Culture

What do we expect from the new culture? Broadening of *spiritual* horizons. I mean here the following:

1. Expansion of the idea of our habitation—we must become patriots of our planet Earth and not only of individual motherlands. Otherwise, how shall we be able to overcome wars?
2. Learning how to be open and alert through our ability for deep contemplation.
3. Evolving the problem of *Life-Death* with a proper feeling of its importance.
4. Searching for the purpose in Life and ensuing responsibility for it.
5. It is necessary to experience mutual help as a factor of evolution. Developing a new approach to ethical problems is necessary.

6. It is necessary to abandon violence and any power based on it. Governments must lose their dominant role and must disappear in the end.

7. Religious belief should be of an ecumenic character, and religious revelations must be a personal experience.

8. And what is most important—everyone has to start thinking and to take responsibility for Life.

All the above-named issues are the fragments of a new spiritual field which is to be manifested through a single image—an image of a new culture. They *do work when combined*—that is Culture and . . . Therapy. When separated, they are empty—that is the point.

We do not know how new cultures emerge, what gives them impetus, how they come forth. That is a *Mystery*. But in the face of calamity, it can be unveiled (Nalimov, 1993b, 1993c). Philosophically-minded intellectuals concerned about future life on Earth have to prepare society for the coming explosion of new ideas of global value.

But would only human effort be enough?

There is a passage from Heidegger's interview for *Spiegel* to the point, where he says that neither philosophy, nor any physical or mental act (Sinnen und Trachten) can directly influence the present state of the world (Augstein & Wolf, 1991):

Only God can still save us (*Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten*). We have only one thing left: to prepare in mind and poesy readiness to meet God or to lose God and perish; in the face of the Divine emptiness we are to die . . . Our thought is not enough to call to Him; but we can evoke the willingness of expectation. (p. 243)

I would think that our expectation can be realized not through a direct advent of the Divinity, but rather through an incarnation of advanced beings who have visited the Earth many times, and whose experience is well-developed by their adventures in different times and worlds.

The concept of reincarnation is rather well comprehended now: for example, I note the fundamental works by an American professor, I. Stevenson (1975, 1977, 1980, 1983). The list of his publications on the topic covers more than 31 items (Stevenson, 1987).

Stanislav Grof also contributed much by analyzing various methods of dealing with deep levels of consciousness (Grof, 1976, 1980, 1988). We have touched that level of psyche through the use of meditation in our research (Nalimov, 1982; Nalimov & Drogalina, 1995).

Heidegger mentioned poesy as a realm of openness. I would say that the most striking examples of reincarnation memory we can obtain are precisely from poetry. Here is one of the poems from the cycle, "Ancient Memory," by the noted Russian poet and mystic philosopher, Daniil Andreyev (1906-1959), who spent 10 years in a prison of Gulag:

India!—The mysterious name,
Ancient as my way in the universe!
The rainbow of the yearning heart
Images persistent like memory . . .

Shall I talk about it?—People won't believe me.
Shall I hint?—They won't understand a single word.
They'll rebuke me for the dark predilection,
For the invincible vision.

Shall I ever touch with my beggarly hand
The light dust of the holy roads,
Shall I bend my knees where for the first time
I was born out of darkness by Mother-Earth?

—In Nalimov, 1982

In a private conversation, Daniil Andreyev said that once a chink opened up in his consciousness and he learned that in one of his past lives he had been an Indian Brahmin but had been expelled from the caste because of his marriage to an untouchable. He asserted that he had very distinct memories of his earlier births.

I would like to quote another famous poet who emphasized his attachment to his past life, and in this case, to the Hellenic world. I am referring to the German poet, F. Hölderlin. Here is the beginning of his poem, "The Only One":

What force
Has chained me to the ancient, blessed
Shores so that
I love them more than my native land?
As if I am sold into Celestial slavery,
Where Apollo was marching
In his regal image.

—In Nalimov, 1982

Recall that Goethe was also an ardent adherent of Hellenism.

To conclude this section, I would like to say a few words about Theology. Western theologians, ahead of others, saw the necessity of reform. They understood that Christianity can become an axis mundi of modern culture if it responds to the needs of a living person. As a result, theological thought has started to become more free. The culmination of this freedom sounds very appealing—everyone is to become a theologian! I was enthusiastic enough to write an article on the topic under the title, *Am I Christian? Or How Is Personal Theology Possible?* (Nalimov, 1995).

I think modern theology should include consideration of both reincarnation and gnosticism. Early Christianity was much more open to these subjects (Lampe, 1987).

I believe in the creative power of a free thought and never forget it, even in the face of calamity. And the joint thought has a powerful energy capable for *re-creation* of any personal and common life! That is why it makes sense to exchange thoughts. We are striving for a new culture. We are at the turning point. But that means that we are under the situation of *rebellion*. Can we manage it properly?!

NOTE

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