

Hermann Hesse, “The Longing of our Time for a Worldview” (1926)

Abstract

The German-Swiss writer Hermann Hesse (1877-1962) became famous in the 1920s and 1930s, primarily through his prose works *Demian* (published in 1919 under the pseudonym Emil Sinclair), *Siddhartha* (1922), *Der Steppenwolf* (1927), and *Narziss und Goldmund* (1930). In 1946, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. In his works, the search for self-knowledge, authenticity and spirituality often plays a central role. This essay was first published in the November 1926 issue of the magazine *Uhu*. Published monthly by the Berlin-based Ullstein publishing house from 1924 to 1934, *Uhu* was a sophisticated mass-market magazine aimed at an educated middle-class readership. The social criticism Hesse expresses in this text, which establishes a connection between industrialization and the decline of morals, reveals the influence of the life reform movement on his thinking.

Source

The Longing of our Time for a Worldview

The new image of the earth's surface, completely transformed and recast in just a few decades, and the enormous changes manifest in every city and every landscape of the world since industrialization, correspond to an upheaval in the human mind and soul. This development has so accelerated in the years since the outbreak of the world war that one can already, without exaggeration, identify the death and dismantling of the culture into which the elder among us were raised as children and which then seemed to us eternal and indestructible. If the individual has not himself changed (he can do this within two generations no more than any animal species could), then at least the ideals and fictions, the wishes and dreams, and the mythologies and theories that rule our intellectual life have; they have changed utterly and completely. Irreplaceable things have been lost and destroyed forever; new, unheard-of things are being imagined in their place. Destroyed and lost for the greater part of the civilized world are, beyond all else, the two universal foundations of life, culture and morality: religion and customary morals. Our life is lacking in morals, in a traditional, sacred, unwritten understanding about what is proper and becoming between people.

One need only undertake a short journey to be able to observe in living examples the decay of morals. Wherever industrialization is still in its beginnings, wherever peasant and small-town traditions are still stronger than the modern forms of transportation and work, there the influence and emotional power of the church is quite essentially stronger as well. And in all of these places we continue to come across, more or less intact, that which were once called morals. In such backward regions one still finds forms of interaction—greeting, entertainment, festivals, and games—which have long since been lost to modern life. As a weak substitute for lost morals, the modern individual has fashion. Changing from season to season, it supplies him with the most indispensable prescriptions for social life, tosses off the requisite phrases, catchwords, dances, melodies—better than nothing, but still a mere gathering of the transitory values of the day. No more popular festivals, but the fashionable entertainment of the season. No more popular ballads, but the hit tune of the current month.

Now, what morals are to the exterior shaping of a life, the agreeable and comfortable guidance of tradition and convention, religion and philosophy are to more profound human needs. The individual has not only the need—in customs and morals, dress and entertainment, sports and conversation—to be

ruled and guided by a valid model by some kind of ideal, be it merely the daily ideal of fashion. He has as well in the deeper recesses of his being the need to see meaning attached to all that he does and strives for, to his existence, his life, and the inevitability of death. This religious or metaphysical need, as old and as important as the need for food, love, and shelter, is satisfied in calm, culturally secure times by the churches and the systems of itinerant thinkers. In times like the present a general impatience and disillusion with both received religious creeds and scholarly philosophies grow; the demand for new formulations, new interpretations, new symbols, new explanations is infinitely great. These are the signs of the mental life of our times: a weakening of received systems, a wild searching for new interpretations of human life, a flourishing of popular sects, prophets, communities, and a blossoming of the most fantastic superstitions. For even those who are superficial, not at all spiritual, and disinclined to thought still have the primal need to know that there is meaning to their lives. And when they are no longer able to find a meaning, morals decay, and private life is ruled by wildly intensified selfishness and an increased fear of death. All of these signs of the time are clearly legible, for those who care to see, in every sanatorium, in every asylum, and in the material reported everyday by psychoanalysts.

But our life is an uninterrupted fabric of up and down, decay and regeneration, demise and resurrection. Thus are all the dismal and lamentable signs of cultural decline matched by other, brighter signs that point to a reawakening of metaphysical needs, to the formation of a new intellectuality, and to a passionate concern for the creation of new meaning for our lives. Modern literature is full of these signs, modern art no less so. Making itself felt with particular urgency, however, is the need for a replacement for the values of the vanishing culture, for new forms of religiosity and community. That there is no shortage of tasteless, silly, even dangerous and bad substitute candidates is obvious. We are teeming with seers and founders; charlatans and quacks are mistaken for saints; vanity and greed leap at this new, promising area—but we must not allow these facts alone to fool us. In itself this awakening of the soul, this burning resurgence of longings for the divine, this fever heightened by war and distress, is a phenomenon of marvelous power and intensity that cannot be taken seriously enough. That there lurks alongside this mighty current of desire flowing through the souls of all the peoples a crowd of industrious entrepreneurs making a business of religion must not be allowed to confuse us as to the greatness, dignity, and importance of the movement. In a thousand different forms and degrees, from a naïve belief in ghosts to genuine philosophical speculation, from primitive county-fair ersatz religion to the presentiment of truly new interpretations of life, a gigantic wave is surging over the earth; it encompasses American Christian Science and English theosophy, Mazdaznan [neo-Zoroastrian cult] and neo-Sufism [Muslim sect], [Rudolf] Steiner's anthroposophy, and a hundred similar creeds; it takes Count Keyserling around the world and leads him to his Darmstadt experiments [a spiritual School of Wisdom], supplies him with such a serious and important collaborator as Richard Wilhelm, and concurrently gives rise to a whole host of necromancers, sharpers, and clowns. I do not dare draw the line between that which is worthy of discussion and the utterly farcical. But, aside from the dubious promoters of modern secret orders, lodges, and fraternities, the unabashed superficiality of fashionable American religions, and the ignorance of unflinching spiritualists, there are other, sometimes supremely worthy phenomena, like [Karl Eugen] Neumann's [1922] translation and dissemination of sacred Buddhist texts, Wilhelm's translations of the great Chinese thinkers; there is the great and splendid return of Lao Tse, who, unknown for centuries in Europe, has appeared within three decades in countless translations in nearly all European languages, and conquered a place in European thought. Just as there arose within the chaos and irritating bustle of the German revolution a few pure, noble, unforgettable figures, like Gustav Landauer and Rosa Luxemburg, likewise there stands amid the raging, murky flood of modern attempts at religion a number both noble and pure: theologians like the Swiss pastor Ragaz; figures like Frederik van Eeden, who returned to Catholicism in old age; men, quite singular in Germany, like Hugo Ball, once a dramaturge and one of the founders of dadaism, then unabashed opponent of the war and critic of the German war mentality, then recluse and author of the wonderful book, *Byzantinisches Christentum*; and, so as not to forget the Jews, Martin Buber, who points modern Judaism toward profounder goals and has reacquainted us with the piety of the Hasidim, one of the most charming of all the blossoms in the

garden of religions.

“And now,” some readers will ask, “where is it all leading? What will be the result, the final destination? What might we expect of it in general? Has one of the new sects the prospect of becoming a new world religion? Will one of the new thinkers be able to put forward a new, broad-minded philosophy?”

In some circles these questions will be answered in the affirmative. Among some adherents of the new doctrines, in particular the young, the happy mood of devotees confident of victory reigns, as if our epoch were destined to give birth to the savior, to give the world new certainties, new faiths, and new moral orientations for a new period of culture. That black mood of decline of some older, disillusioned critics of our time corresponds to this youthful credulity of the newly converted as its antipode. And still these youthful voices resound more pleasantly than those of the ill-humored and old. Nevertheless, these believers might be in error.

It is proper that we meet the longing of our time—this yearning search, these experiments, some blinded with passion, others coolly bold—with respect. Even if they are all condemned to failure, they nonetheless remain serious concerns with supreme goals; should none at all of them survive our time, they fulfill an essential function while they live. All of these fictions, these religious elaborations, these new doctrines of faith help people live, help them not only to endure this difficult, questionable life but to value it highly and hold it sacred. And if they were nothing but a lovely stimulus or a sweet anesthesia, then even that perhaps would not be so little. But they are more, infinitely more. They are the schools through which the intellectual elite of our times must pass. For every intellectualism and culture has a twofold task: first to give security and encouragement to the many, to console them, and to bestow meaning on their lives and second the more secret but no less important task for the few, for the great minds of tomorrow and the day after: to make it possible for them to mature, to lend protection and care to their beginnings, to give them air to breathe.

The intellectualism of our time is infinitely different from the one that our elders once took up as our heritage. It is more turbulent, wilder, and poorer in tradition; it is less well schooled and has little in the way of method. But all in all, this contemporary intellectualism, including its powerful bent for mysticism, is certainly in no way worse off than the better trained, more learned, richer in traditional heritage, although less powerful intellectualism of that time in which aged liberalism and youthful monism were the leading tendencies. To me personally even the intellectualism in today's leading currents, from Steiner to Keyserling, remains a few degrees too rational, too little bold, too little prepared to enter upon the chaos, upon the underworld, there to overhear from the “mothers” of Faust the longed-for occult doctrine of the new humanity. None of today's leaders, however enthusiastic or clever they might be, has the breadth and the significance of Nietzsche, whose true inheritors we have not yet learned to be. The thousand intersecting voices and paths of our time, however, have this one valuable thing in common: a coiled desire, a will born of the need to surrender. And these are the preconditions of all greatness.

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