

The World as It Really Is

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

This article was entered on 6 June when its proper place is here. I have changed the article listed under the title “The Limitations of Science,” and I ask you to read it before the following.

THE ADVANCEMENT of knowledge has been remarkable. I kept the calculus book I used in 1955, the year I entered university, but it is less suited now to a university classroom than to a museum, along with my slide rule and the radio tubes I spent a full year experimenting with in a third-year lab. But even as I admit that mathematics as a science comprises more information about numbers than it did forty or fifty years ago, I am not sure that individual mathematicians know more, although they certainly know different things. When I say “more” I am referring to what they know not only about mathematics but also about other things, from literature to landscapes. Mathematics as a science has greatly developed, but the very extent of the present science requires the practitioner to select. The price of his greater knowledge is a specialization, which, here as elsewhere, closes off many sectors of a discipline to the devotee who will master some of them.

The breadth of knowledge in earlier times, and even the mode of knowing, allowed the arithmetician, for example, or the geometer, an experience of number and shape which will have been lost with the adoption of calculators and computers. In a more obvious way, the universal use of these machines has affected the way children learn about numbers. No one could claim that electronic calculators have made school children more mathematical than their predecessors, who could add up a column of figures without mechanical assistance or follow Newton’s method to extract a square root. I do not, as yet, state of preference for one approach over the other, only that the difference in approach do not necessarily mean that one

is better than the other. Similarly, I can ask who knows more about the moon: one who watches her wax and wane, as people did when a full moon was important for evening events, or one who may have read something about the phases of the moon in a text book? Who knows more about the stars: one who regularly looks at them and can identify their patterns and shifting placement in the night sky or one who from time to time stumbles across a detailed and accurate map of the night sky in the newspaper? I'm not saying one could not learn more about astronomy today than in the past; only that most people do not know much about the science of astronomy and, furthermore, lack any actual experience of the stars, which are invisible in a town or city where their light is lost in the glare of street lights and signs.

Do lawyers know more today than they used to? Again, I'm not questioning the fact that there is more law to know today than there was in the past. My concern is with the range of knowledge about all sorts of things that lawyers have and had. As with science, so here, the sheer amount of information requires specialization and then a concentration on a specific subsection of law that virtually precludes any other interest. A hundred years ago, a professional man would have had a fairly high level of culture in general. He's too busy for that today, although he certainly knows his specialty better than the more leisured practitioner of another age. While it's hardly possible to compare quantitatively different sorts of knowledge, it is not immediately obvious that modern lawyers in general know more than their predecessors did.

One could extend this discussion to the arts: music, drama, literature. Our experience of most of these consists of a vicarious watching or listening to the (usually) canned performances of others. Does our inattentive hearing for the umpteenth time of a familiar symphony or opera make us more knowledgeable about it than the music lover before recordings who would have heard it perhaps once in his lifetime and who would have been completely focussed on the unique event in order not to miss a note? Each has its advantages, but one is not obviously better. Consider the similar case of dancing. Our experience of dance is different from that of other peoples and times, but is it better? Though we can watch the greatest dancers repeatedly, if we want to, few actually do so. And as for actual dancing, it has nothing like the importance and frequency in our society that it has had in virtually every other.

There is a difference in our attitudes to all of these activities, and others one could examine, such as crafts, cooking, and games. The feel for metals that a blacksmith had is something like the almost instinctual

acquaintance of a computer hacker with his machines, but one may wonder if the smith might not in a way have been superior to the computer ace. It's the difference between a man's doing something for himself and having it done for him. A hiker knows a smaller terrain than a motorist or a pilot, but he knows it intimately, just as a weaver or dyer knew fabrics and natural dyes as a worker in a textile factory cannot, even though the factory worker knows a lot of other things.

My bias is obvious. I prefer the path of experience to that of observation, of involvement to objectivity, so called. And the reason for my preference will suggest itself to my regular readers, who will know that it must have something to do with religion. There is a religious question lying just below the surface of what I have been discussing: who knows more about reality, the one who recognizes the existence of a transcendent realm or the one who ignores it? Here there is no need to be fair, in balancing areas of experience and ways of knowing. The most primitive tribe that sees a spirit in every brook or tree is closer to what these objects really are than the most scientific woodsman or sailor who happens to be an atheist. The experience or at least the recognition of the numinous in the material world is the condition for encountering the world as it really is. Entire civilizations have been based on this principle, and their spiritual insights recommend them to our attention. Once their excesses and deficiencies have been corrected by Christianity, they can help direct modern man to God and, in so doing, lead him to comprehend the purpose of science and technology.

With an appreciation of spirituality, man's partial mastery of one or another field of human endeavour will not hobble him, for he will have a framework in which to locate his specialty. I would go further in suggesting that—given the spiritual realm is superior to the material—it would be possible for a holy person to bypass to a large extent the common methods of learning in his ascent to God. This is a dangerous idea, because the normal path to heaven has been blazed by God himself and it leads across the domain of creation. But just as religious life is supposed to be a shortcut to God in which human affection flows from the love of God rather than the more usual other way around, so an experience of the divine can produce a valid insight into the meaning of creation. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux for example, despite her utter innocence of the most elementary facts of the physical and biological sciences, was a wise woman. The reason is that sciences and the arts should reveal God. The scientist or artist who does not complete the journey his studies have begun must distort, to some extent, what he observes. But the saint, in anticipating the beatific vision, will see all things as they are, even if his knowledge of science and arts is limited.

A civilization without God is a dead as a body without its soul; its monuments will be hideous and its science death dealing, as the Nazis and communists have demonstrated. But a society with gods, however primitive its technology, will produce the beauty we find in African art and the heroism in Norse myths. This is the context for the Popes' continuing call for a new evangelization as we move into a new millennium. Our secularized society needs the Gospel more than any other, in that it lacks the wisdom that every religion contains, at least in part. To convert such a nation is to save it in more ways than one, for only the Gospel of life can deliver us from a "culture of death." ❧