Forum

Religion and our loneliness*

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LONELINESS, THE COMMON DENOMINATOR OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

I could not have chosen an easier subject: I have empirical evidence on my side. Here we are, you and I. We would not have come to this congress if we had not been lonely and were not therefore looking for some form of company, an imagined or real togetherness or non-aloneness. The togetherness we can find here is, of course, limited by the mutual agreement that the purpose of this congress is intellectual. If one should also find a friend here, that would be a bonus – in which case the bonus would be more valuable than the agreement.

From the moment the infant has said the word ‘I’ for the first time, it will be alienated more and more. The small child’s wishes are seldom understood. When adolescence is reached, the human being knows alienation in the extreme; it has become like an incurable disease. As we mature, getting to know the ways of the world, we develop worldviews that in their necessary uniqueness separate us from each other. Finally, in old age we are in touch with loneliness in its fully developed dreadfulness.

Death completes this journey through loneliness. After that, what follows? The answer depends on one’s mood at the moment of contemplation. Sometimes, when you miss relatives and friends or when you are in a sentimental mood, you prefer the idea of a circle that will be unbroken again. When the sentiment is replaced by balanced judgment, however, we remember the pain we inflicted on each other, intentionally and unintentionally, thereby adding to each other’s loneliness. One may then prefer the idea of entering the Nothing that is the All. Somehow this ‘evaporation’ of the self seems to be the more dignified option.

Meanwhile, let us concern ourselves with life, the process of entering out of nothing into loneliness.

Why do we experience loneliness? No other question has occupied me so consistently and no other question has led me to more diverse answers. When I was a child we lived an isolated life. But there were times, which I remember with particular fondness, when being alone was not a problem. I wandered on my own in the veld, fascinated by the variety of trees, the different feelings they evoked as I touched the bark and branches, the thorns or flowers. Absorbed in a world of constant wonder, I wasn’t alone.

But life wasn’t idyllic all the time. When I returned home and re-entered into family relationships, the feeling of loneliness returned. Psychologists may say I wasn’t socialised properly. This may be true, but it is not a sufficient explanation. I enjoyed playing with my sister (that is, when we were not fighting). I loved the company of friends, but preferably not more than two or three at a time.

But somehow those were times of escape. My closest friend was loneliness. My deepest feeling was that of not belonging. In the search for an explanation religion came into the picture; it seemed to have the ultimate answer: ‘What a friend we have in Jesus.’ As a child and even as an adult I didn’t allow myself to say it, but even this reassurance did not take away the feeling of loneliness totally and permanently.

An explanation that intrigued me for a time was that we come into this world with the memory, however faintly it may be realised in the conscious mind, of a very deep – and maybe also a very long – togetherness. Once, maybe a hundred and maybe thousands of years ago, we knew at-one-ness; maybe with similar beings to those we know now, more probably with beings who were very different. Whatever this at-one-ness may have been like, it haunts us throughout life. In moments of deep self-awareness we experience the agony of this loss. The gnostics, from Valentinus to Cioran, maintain that we have been tricked into this life we are living now. We are alone because our deepest ‘knowledge’ prevents us from compromising with a world that is not the one we ‘remember’, the world with which we had once been at peace. In a deeper sense than the biological, we are all foster children; we have been taken away from ‘home’.

This position is, however, fraught with unexamined presuppositions. Everything, more, everyone confronts us with the fact of impermanence. Why, then, should we presuppose that there is something permanent and indestructible in us, something that survived a previous existence and will survive the present one as well?

The argument seems to be that something as miraculous as the human