

Frank MacShane

LONELINESS AND THE ASIAN PSYCHE

ALTHOUGH INDIVIDUAL LONELINESS is by no means unique to the present century, it has grown so widespread in recent times that people everywhere have become concerned to discover a way to alleviate it. Found especially amongst university students, suburbanites, and the elderly, it is the product of a number of features that seem to characterize the whole of the twentieth century—mobility, technology, and the growth of vast cities with suburban complexes. But the desperate feelings of anonymity and alienation that typify modern life are not merely the result of social maladjustment. They are the product of a far more basic force, lying at the very heart of Western society.

For the most part, Western civilization is Christian, and this has meant that it is essentially otherworldly. It has accepted the premise that life on this earth is a preparation for life after death—a reward in heaven or a punishment in hell. It has thus taken seriously the importance of individual lives and has established the *imitatio Christi* as a model for behaviour. This in turn has meant that Westerners have always had a strong sense of purpose and that they have been extraordinarily active. In Protestant countries, especially those—such as Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States—which have been affected by the Puritan ethic, this motivation has been most marked.

Christian doctrine made its extraordinary impact on the West not merely because it offered hope to mankind but because it was logical and seemed to fit in well with observable phenomena. It was an entirely rational explanation of the universe, and its intention was to be rational, insofar as was possible. The appeal of Christianity was that it really attempted to “justify the ways of God to men.” But this emphasis on rationality affected Western civilization in a most fundamental and paradoxical way: it not only brought about the spread of science and technology, which was to be expected, but it also brought about a decline in religious belief, which was not. Christianity declined because its doctrines were no longer in accord with observable phenomena; and

it was on this basis that it lost the argument: its "reasonable explanation" of the universe could not hold up to the "reasonable explanation" provided by scientific experiment.

This process of decline has been going on for nearly three centuries, but within recent decades it has accelerated. Today few people believe in heaven or hell, which means that few accept the theological core of Christian faith. Complete disintegration of the system has been delayed, however, by a shift of religious emphasis. Instead of stressing doctrinal matters, many of which have proved to be logically untenable, the Christian churches, and especially the Protestant sects, concern themselves with human behaviour. They have been transformed into ethical societies. The Mass or Holy Communion, with its promise of resurrection, has lost its central position in favour of an externally contrived sense of brotherhood or fellowship. The spread of the concept of a common faith for all Christians and the pragmatism of the ecumenical movement are particularly illustrative of this tendency since their very success depends on a lack of interest in specific articles of faith. Moreover, Western Christianity has been able to survive simply out of habit. The ordinary Westerner is so conditioned to following a Christian pattern of life that he continues to do so even though he no longer believes in the doctrines. He is married in a church and buried in a Christian cemetery because it is the custom to do so. In addition, he is charitable and he still engages in good works; above all, he is still active and energetic. Indeed many Westerners have tried to find a solution to their loss of faith in their very activity. They are like the retired man who wants to keep himself busy.

Clearly the present situation cannot last, because the essential questions for which Christianity once provided answers—the questions of life and death—cannot be answered by ethics or fellowship, or by mere activity, or by rational enquiry. Hence the signs of increasing stress in Western society—loss of communal feeling and responsibility, higher rates of crime amongst young and old, and above all, individual loneliness and alienation.

Having surveyed, however inadequately, the situation that has forced itself with increasing insistence on thousands upon thousands of Americans and Western Europeans, we may look with profit to the East to see whether it can offer us a means of escaping from our dilemma. Not to the East that is represented by Japan, for that country has been Westernized, and its consequent neuroses are far worse than those of the West, but to the East that is represented in the so-called more primitive countries: India above all, and those that have been influenced by India—Nepal, Burma, Indonesia, Ceylon.

It is easy enough to falsify a comparison by selective observation, but the scenes of Asian life which I should like to present are, I believe, entirely typical, because none is entirely attractive or unattractive. I should like to begin with the Balinese village of Ubud, which in most respects is an ordinary village: most of the inhabitants live in wooden houses roofed with thatch; they wear simple clothes, and they gain their livelihood by farming. What is unusual about Ubud is that it is the principal centre of painting on the island, and there is even a museum, built, I believe, with the help of the Rockefeller Foundation, to house some of the better work. When I visited Ubud some years ago, I first called on the Tjokorde Agung, who is the chief dignitary of the village and who lives in a handsome "kraton" or palace at a little distance from the centre. After tea, the Tjokorde Agung took me on a tour of a new temple which had just been completed and which was to be inaugurated on the following day. Virtually every one from the village was present, and it was explained to me that this new compound with its innumerable shrines was entirely the work of the villagers themselves. While it is almost commonplace to say that every Balinese is an artist, and especially those living in Ubud, it was an extraordinary sight to see the product of their artistry—the handsome brickwork of the temple walls, the paintings, the metalwork, and the intricate stone and wood carvings which decorated the gates. These had all been created, with the most minute attention to detail, by villagers who were ordinarily engaged in the rice fields. It was, in the late 1950s, a complete return to the mediaeval world and, as the men and women, and even children, applied the finishing touches, attaching cloth banners to the flagpoles, decorating the temporary stage which was to support the gamelan orchestra on the following day, I was impressed with their gaiety and their sense of purpose. It was one of the most convincing examples of community spirit I have ever witnessed.

Or consider again—on any day, in any year—the ghats of the holy city of Benares. Benares is the city of the dead: it is the one place, above all others in India, to which the dying go so that they may be cremated along the Ganges. A city of pilgrims who have come from all over the sub-continent, it is almost overwhelmed with temples and shrines, especially along the narrow streets that lead down to the river. These are always crowded—with vendors of fruit and sweetmeats, with holy men covered with red powder and grease-paint to indicate their adherence to the cult of Siva or Vishnu, and always with cows, those sacred beasts which saunter majestically along as though the ancient city belonged solely to them. Benares is a complete *mêlée* of old and young, the healthy and the dying. Almost all day long the crematory pyres burn with

the bodies of the dead, while beside them, on a neighbouring ghat, small semi-naked children run about and swim in the river. The main road leading down to the ghats is lined with scores of women squatting on the ground and begging for food as tradition directs them to do, for they are all widows waiting to join their husbands. Nearby, along the river's edge are dozens of tall umbrellas that are set up to shelter the holy men who gather there to read from the sacred scripts or to comment and teach. There is no city quite like Benares: it is a dream-like place in which everybody seems partly drugged, living as it were in another world. Yet despite the spirit of death that permeates the place, and the dirt that is everywhere so present, the dominant note that is struck is one not of gloom or misery, but of a wild, almost insane joy. A twisted, hump-backed beggar, struck down to midget size, does not evoke pity but joy — for he has dramatized his life like a mad actor. You recognize something conspiratorial about him, and there is spontaneous laughter between you, even though, from a purely rational point of view, his plight is horrible and grotesque in the extreme. Except for the tourists, everyone in Benares is caught in this strange atmosphere: many have travelled vast distances to this holy place, from the Himalayas in the north or from Bengal or South India, and many have come on solitary pilgrimages. But once they arrive, they enter into the atmosphere of the place; they lose any feeling of alienation they might have had; they become part of the myth itself.

Yet another picture: it is a Saturday morning in the valley of Kathmandu, in Nepal, and hundreds of pilgrims have forgathered near the southern rim of the valley at a place called Daksinkali, where two rivers join and where a small shrine has been constructed to Kali, the multi-armed goddess of death. Virtually every group or family which has travelled out to this place has brought along a chicken or a goat to be sacrificed to Kali. The *puja* or religious ceremony takes place in the open court before the shrine, and here the chickens and goats, all garlanded with flowers, are first sprinkled with rice, water, and red and yellow powder. They are then handed over to one of two or three Brahmans, whose dress is already streaked with the gore of other sacrifices, who dexterously slits their throats, splattering the blood over the stone images which line the walls of the shrine. After that, the goats and chickens are decapitated, and the carcasses are taken by the donors to the nearby river where they are skinned and cleaned. Finally they are taken into the woods that surround the shrine, and there they are cooked and eaten.

While from the Western point of view the sacrifice of living animals to a goddess of destruction is a horrible sight, for the Nepalese who partake of

the ceremony it is an entirely natural event. When the family that has just sacrificed a chicken sit down to eat it at their picnic, they have no sense of horror or shame at what they are doing. On the contrary, they have the blood of the sacrificed bird placed on their foreheads as a "tika" or mark of the sacrifice, so that when the father looks up, he will see the blood on the foreheads of his wife and children, and as he eats, he will be reminded of the blood on his own brow. Here, in short, is a true communion, a true fellowship. In early Christian times, such a feeling was doubtless engendered by the Holy Communion, which is also a sacrifice; but today the animalism of such ceremonies has become distasteful to us. Reason has triumphed, but the price of its victory has been the loss of true communal feeling. And with that loss has come fear and loneliness.

In each of the places here described, the communal element is entirely natural and uncontrived. The reason for this is that the Asian is always open to such undertakings. He is never "too busy" or too concerned with his own ego to take part in some religious ceremony or to join a procession. As a consequence, virtually all of the dozens of religious holidays that appear in the Hindu and Buddhist calendars are observed, whereas we in the West—at least in countries where the Protestant ethos is predominant—celebrate only two or three Christian festivals. Communal events are as natural to the Asian as breathing is, and as often as not, are spontaneously devised. This concept of naturalness cannot be exaggerated, for as anyone who has lived in the East will have observed, the Asian is capable of "doing nothing" with the greatest of ease. A group of two or three men will spend all morning sitting under a palm tree in Ceylon; in Kathmandu, groups of boys will happily loiter about the town for days and weeks on end, apparently accomplishing nothing; in Mandalay the market stalls are occupied by groups of women who seem apparently so contented with one another's company that they are not especially concerned to sell their wares. And so on. The pattern of individual or communal quiet and ease is the same all over the East—from Kashmir to Cape Comorin and from Iran to Bangkok.

There are a number of explanations for this quietus, which is absent only in such Westernised centres as Calcutta, Singapore, and Hong Kong, but the principal reason is the different attitude toward time that is taken in the East and in the West. As Dr. Jung has put it,

The mythic needs of the Occidental call for an evolutionary cosmogony with a *beginning* and a *goal*. The Occidental rebels against a cosmogony with a *beginning* and a mere *end*, just as he cannot accept the idea of a static, self-con-

tained, eternal cycle of events To Western man, the meaninglessness of a merely static universe is unbearable. He must assume that it has meaning. The Oriental does not need to make this assumption; rather, he himself embodies it. Whereas the Occidental feels the need to complete the meaning of the world, the Oriental strives for the fulfilment of meaning in man, "stripping the world and existence from himself" (Buddha).

The Oriental attitude toward time is expressed concretely in the familiar concept of reincarnation. This concept vitally affects the life of every Buddhist and Hindu because it postulates that instead of having a single life in which to fulfill one's destiny, one has thousands upon thousands in which to do so. Life is not a short direct movement from A to B, but a long, fluctuating development full of an almost infinite variety of conditions. The immediate result of this belief is a more relaxed attitude toward each individual life or incarnation. Free of panic about one single life, the Oriental approaches life as a whole in a far more genial spirit: it is not that he is lazy or idle, rather he simply has time to do nothing, to sit with his friends under a palm tree or to loiter about the streets; he has time (and enthusiasm) for the communal undertakings that are a natural outgrowth of his society. In fact, the purposes of his life, as Jung observed, are in life itself, rather than in the hereafter.

Thus, whereas individual fulfillment is rare in the West, it is commonly encountered in Asia. One example is as good as any, and Dr. Jung has provided it in his account of a visit to the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, where a religious ceremony took place:

As a prelude to the ceremony a one-hour drum concert was performed in the *mandapam*, or what in Indian temples is called the hall of waiting. There were five drummers; one stood in each corner of the square hall, and the fifth, a young man, stood in the middle. He was the soloist, and a very fine drummer. Naked to the waist, his dark-brown trunk glistening, with a red girdle, white *skōka* (a long skirt reaching to the feet), and white turban, arms covered with shining bracelets, he stepped up to the golden Buddha, bearing a double drum "to sacrifice the music". There, with beautiful movements of body and arms, he drummed alone a strange melody, artistically perfect. I watched him from behind; he stood in front of the entrance to the *mandapam*, which was covered with little oil lamps. The drum speaks the ancient music of the belly and solar plexus; the belly does not "pray" but engenders the "meritorious" *mantram* or meditative utterance. It is therefore not adoration of a non-existent Buddha, but one of the many acts of self-redemption performed by the awakened human being.

I myself have observed similar phenomena—in a Hindu temple by the Jumna in Old Delhi, in a Tibetan monastery in Nepal, in Benares and Amritsar—

indeed, such events are so common in Asia that they represent in a real sense the actual life of the Orient, while the day-to-day events count for comparatively little. In relation to the present discussion, what is so overwhelmingly clear is that loneliness is simply impossible in the East because the Easterner is forever in some sort of communion with himself, with nature, or with his fellow human beings. He is constantly a part of a living communion.

To the Westerner, the public or communal aspect of Oriental life, with its lack of privacy, may be distasteful; but it is surely in order to ask whether at least some part of the Oriental attitude toward life may not be made applicable to our rationalist West. It may be argued that the East is excessively communal and in danger of growing more so, but we in the West face the opposite danger—that of increasing fragmentation and disintegration of society with the resulting isolation and loneliness of the individual.

These developments are primarily the result of the Western rationalist tradition, which has produced a civilization noted mainly for its technological achievements. This civilization is by no means wholly evil, for it has allowed man to escape from his immediate surroundings and the drudgeries of a limited life. But at the same time, technology has provided nothing but itself to fill the gap it has created. It supplies physical comforts and conveniences, but it is incapable of satisfying real human needs: it cannot yield a full life in the sense of a serene one. Nevertheless, what has happened is that more and more people are relying on technology for things it cannot possibly provide, and as a consequence it becomes increasingly powerful and dominant in all of our lives. Virtually every technological advance therefore means a further de-humanization of mankind.

Since this is obviously an insane situation, it is worth while asking how it came into being. There would seem to be several reasons. First of all, the extraordinary success of technology in solving material problems has given it (and the so-called scientific attitude in general) such a reputation that it is now considered capable of solving virtually all problems. Because of this belief in the efficacy of the scientific method, older, non-rational elements in human judgments have been allowed to atrophy. Furthermore, it would appear to be true that with the growth of self-consciousness which accompanied the spread of rationalism, there quite naturally developed a parallel desire to escape from the continual pressure of coping with one's identity. It is easier to go to the moon than to know oneself, and that is why there is so much interest in space travel. This desire to escape from oneself will inevitably mean world destruction, however, for that is the natural consequence of no longer

caring for oneself. This is the final twisted stage of Christian otherworldliness—already reached by the technologist who has so forgotten his common humanity that he is only a thinking-machine capable of anything, including self-destruction.

What Western man must do, therefore, before it is too late, is to attempt to establish within himself a balanced view of human life. The Western psyche has followed the purely rationalist approach for so long that all other impressions and intuitions have fallen into disuse. To effect a balance the Westerner should begin to turn to the East, and particularly to India, for in that section of the world, non-rationalistic understanding has been kept alive. There man is sensitive to his surroundings and to his own role in society, and he fulfills himself in his own square foot of land rather than attempting to escape from it.

This is not to suggest that we in the West should establish some communal organization based on Hindu or Buddhist teachings, for that would be an intellectual solution only, and the product would be merely one of those "fellowship" groups which have proved to be so fruitless within the Christian framework. Rather what is needed is a purely individual effort. The lonely man must find his solution in his own lonely being.

What is required is a rigorous reassessment of one's own nature and of one's relationship to one's surroundings. The lonely Westerner is lonely because he feels hostile towards his surroundings. He doesn't accept or welcome them, but fights against them and tries to escape from them. At best, he tries to use them in a limited, practical way. Yet as the history of the world shows, true civilizations are interpretations of natural surroundings, and all great civilizations have begun with individual recognitions.

By material standards, the condition of the Nepalese or Indian peasant, or of the Chinese coolie or the Pakistani water-bearer, is a good deal worse than that of the labouring man of Leeds or Chicago whose life is encased by grimy buildings; and certainly it is worse than that of the American or English suburbanite or student. Yet the Oriental labourer is more contented with his life than is the Westerner. For instead of kicking against the pricks, the Asian accepts his condition in a wider perspective. He is able to do so because he is closer to nature, to the cycle of birth, growth, decay, and death than the Westerner is. In the West, rationalist technology has disinfected existence, and the crucial events of life—birth and death—are handled in such a way that the actualities are never seen, at least by the majority. But in the Orient, these things are not hidden any more than the landscape is. As

a result, the Oriental feels a natural affinity toward all natural beings and toward his surroundings; he personifies them, he mythologizes them—in terms both of himself and of his whole race. As a consequence, he is less desperate about his individual life than the Westerner is, and he will accept much more than the Westerner will. He accepts death and cruelty and poverty—because these are all part of the natural cycle; moreover, he accepts the non-rational, the instincts. Unlike Eliot's Prufrock, the prototype Westerner, he has time to "murder and create"—and love. In short, he is the more complete man.

One immediate consequence of his self-sufficiency is that he quite naturally and simply finds himself a member of a community of like-minded people. He can never be lonely because he is part of a universal development and he accepts it through enjoying life itself—the here and now—rather than putting everything off for the hereafter. He is able to do this because he does not intellectualize everything out of existence, but lives according to his senses as well. The tendency of the rationalist is to be discriminatory: the mind works in isolation and tends to isolate the thinker from his surroundings. By contrast, emotions and physical feelings create a sense of community. The Asian does not neglect rational thought, but because he does not neglect his intuitions and his physical being, he maintains a balance and thus escapes the Westerner's feelings of alienation.

In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin has made the point that the Negro is not anxious to be like the white man for the simple reason that the white man is so divorced from reality:

Something very sinister happens to the people of a country when they begin to distrust their own reactions as deeply as they do here, and become as joyless as they have become. It is this individual uncertainty on the part of American men and women, this inability to renew themselves at the fountain of their own lives, that makes the discussion, let alone elucidation of any conundrum—that is, any reality—so supremely difficult. The person who distrusts himself has no touchstone for reality—for this touchstone can only be oneself. Such a person interposes between himself and reality nothing less than a labyrinth of attitudes.

But if the civilization of the American white man is basically rationalist and voyeuristic, so is that of most of Europe; and the loneliness and misery that have enveloped whole segments of European and American society have come from this basic mistrust of individual life. The complete man, by contrast, cannot be lonely or miserable. He is a man who combines the selectivity and discrimination that come from intellectual and rational training with an ac-

ceptance of the rest of life through intuitive and sensuous means. He is not only a man who thinks intellectually, but one who "thinks" emotionally, physically and psychically. Thus he does not fear life but loves it—as Thoreau did when he wrote:

I love to see that nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another; that tender organisations can be so serenely squashed out of existence like pulp,—tadpoles which herons gobble up, and tortoises and toads run over in the road; and that sometimes it has rained flesh and blood! With the liability to accident, we must see how little account is made of it. The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence. Poison is not poisonous after all, nor are any wounds fatal.

HIS NAME WAS MERIT

[to a father-in-law]

Donna Dickey Guyer

No torrent ever, his life's gentle stream
 poured from the mountain of its youthful source,
 pure in the first spring sunlight of a dream
 and never after altered from its course.
 Beneath the weight of wind and pound of rain
 the current of his days and nights flowed strong,
 endlessly kind to dry and dusty plain
 and filling many a forest with its song.
 What unknown travellers stopped beside this river?
 Even the wisest in the ways of men
 paused on the shore and thankful to the giver,
 drank at his fount again—and yet again.
 Now that the flow has passed its final quay,
 many are hands that long to touch the sea.