

Climate Change and Cultural Transformation

Chapter 2 **The Simplicity of Nothingness: Nuclear Holocaust**

The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything except our way of thinking. Einstein

The nuclear bomb is the most antidemocratic, antinational, antihuman, outright evil thing that man has ever made.

If you are religious, then remember that this bomb is Man's challenge to God.

It's worded quite simply: we have the power to destroy everything that You have created.

If you're not (religious), then look at it this way. This world is 4,600 years old.

It could end in an afternoon.

Arundhati Roy, *The End of Imagination*

We have lived with the possibility of annihilation by nuclear war for half a century. The development of the atom bomb was no accident but a logical consequence of our atomising scientific culture. A nuclear holocaust, the spectre of which points to the disintegration at the heart of our Western civilisation, would spell our instant, rather than our gradual, extinction, but, apart from drawing back from such a holocaust, it is debatable whether we have learnt what we need to from it. Perhaps this is because the “end of history”, whether it comes from nuclear war or environmental collapse, defies our ability to give it any meaning other than annihilation. The “nothingness” of the modern age is simply an empty nothingness, beyond our comprehension or imagination.

The Nuclear Sword

The sword is traditionally the symbol of the warrior caste, and confers both the virtue of valour and the office of power. But it can be double-edged. Though able to

destroy injustice and crime and maintain peace, it can be destructive of the innocent as well as the guilty. If nuclear arms are modernity's sword, acquired to defeat the totalitarian powers in what has been history's most violent century, their invention and use come at a huge cost both in terms of their destructive potential and in the "knowledge" they brought us.

As Peter Conrad declared in his account of life and art in the Twentieth century, the world seemed to end at Hiroshima in the early morning of 6 August, 1945:

A light blotted out the sun and tore the protective membrane of the sky; through the scar, a storm of energy escaped, knocking the city to its knees and vaporising or scorching its citizens..... The blast surrealised the world. i

Conrad compared Hiroshima to Pompeii. While the cooling lava from the volcano calcified the citizens of Pompeii and preserved their material corpses as rough and immortal sculptures, at Hiroshima the bomb, generating 5000 degrees centigrade of heat, left only "elegiac shadows" of people behind on the otherwise bleached concrete steps on which they were sitting.

The plan to release nuclear energy through a bomb constituted a far deeper interference with nature than anything we had ever before attempted. Who could have imagined that we could take a tiny amount of matter and, by the process of nuclear fission, release a magnitude of energy so great as to destroy a city in seconds? This was scientific knowledge which took the ground from under our feet. Quantum theory had prepared the way by showing us that the atom, the basic form of classical physics, was not the entity it appeared to be but contained "emptiness" at its core, an emptiness that was the source of unimaginable power.

Los Alamos

In his memorable book, *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns*, Robert Jungk described the experience and ambivalent thoughts of the scientists led by Robert Oppenheimer at Los Alamos as they witnessed the first, experimental explosion of the bomb they

had been working on. ⁱⁱ In the chapter, entitled “For they know not what they do”, he depicted how the implications of their work dawned in the minds of his colleagues. They were transfixed with fright at the power of the explosion they witnessed and Oppenheimer himself famously recalled a passage from the *Bhagavad Gita*, the sacred epic of the Hindus:

If the radiance of a thousand suns
were to burst into the sky,
that would be like
the splendour of the Mighty One

Yet, when the sinister and gigantic cloud rose up in the far distance over Point Zero, a further line from the same source came to mind:

I am become Death, the shatterer of worlds.

No wonder that Oppenheimer, aware now of the instrument of power that had fallen into his hands, was often compared thereafter to Prometheus in stealing fire from the gods.

Jungk describes how none of the scientists present at Los Alamos reacted to the phenomenon as he had supposed they would. They all, even those without religious faith, recounted these experiences in words derived more from the world of myth and theology. Jungk quoted General Farrell, for example:

“The whole country was lighted by a searing light with an intensity many times that of the midday sun..... Thirty seconds after the explosion came, first the air blast pressing hard against the people and things, to be followed almost immediately by the strong, sustained, awesome roar which warned of doomsday and made us feel that we puny things were blasphemous to dare tamper with the forces heretofore reserved to the Almighty. Words are inadequate tools for the job of acquainting those not present with the physical, mental and psychological effects. It had to be witnessed to be realized.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Oppenheimer was feted as 'the father of the atom bomb', whose use at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was celebrated as bringing the Second World War to an end. But he knew too much to share in this overwhelming tide of optimism about the future and viewed this enthusiasm with, in Jungk's words, 'the same sadness with which adults sometimes watch the innocent play of children'. He understood that the primitive bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the beginning of a new kind of weapons development whose limits could still not be seen. He also knew that what the scientists had provided for the politicians would become the germ of atomic rivalry between the two superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union. However hard they tried to caution the politicians about the dangers, they could not now undo what they had created. The world was irrevocably a different place after 1945.

The Zone of Uncertainty

So far – some seventy years on - we have avoided the event of the nuclear holocaust which Oppenheimer and his colleagues so feared, but nuclear weapons remain a continuing threat, particularly with more countries now possessing them. There have been times when nuclear war was a very imminent and real possibility and we all lived in considerable fear. In his 1982 book, *The Fate of the Earth* ^{iv}, Jonathan Schell described in searing detail what would happen to the earth and to us all in the event of a nuclear holocaust. At the time he wrote his book the nuclear powers could deploy weapons with more than a million times the same destructive force of the bomb detonated above Hiroshima, which, were they used, would cause massive destruction and indiscriminate slaughter, involving not only the sweeping breakdown of all order and existence and the collapse of society itself, but would tear the planet's ecosphere itself apart. Although we have avoided a nuclear war our knowledge of the effects of the detonation of thousands of megatons of its explosives has changed history for ever.

Schell considered that, whether nuclear war happens or not, we have entered a new zone of uncertainty, "the zone of the risk of extinction" and this changes our

relationship with the earth and with ourselves. “Up to now”, he stated, “every risk has been contained within the frame of life; extinction would shatter the frame. It represents not the defeat of some purpose but an abyss in which all human purposes would be drowned for all time.” Schell had contemplated the systemic and limitless complexity of a nuclear holocaust’s effects on human society and the ecosphere, a complexity that seemed to be as great as life itself, but, he concludes:

...if these effects should lead to human extinction, then all the complexity will give way to the utmost simplicity – *the simplicity of nothingness*. We – the human race – will cease to be.” √

We now have it in our power to reverse, in a matter of hours, what has taken billions of years to evolve. As Schell pointed out, this prospect is tantamount to a “second death”. The individual death that comes to us all happens, of course, in the context of the continuing life of the generations that follow us and who ensure for us a kind of immortality. The event of a nuclear holocaust involves the death of us all and of the life-world we inhabit and, therefore, the “extinction” of the future unborn generations. It is the death both of birth and death, of the life cycle itself.

For Schell, we had a choice: either to take steps towards peace and disarm, or do nothing and wait for the holocaust to happen. It did not occur to him to ask questions about the meaning for us of the development of nuclear weapons in the first place or the existential implications of the nothingness that would follow an all-out war. Anthropogenic annihilation - which is what a nuclear holocaust would amount to - is tantamount both to collective suicide and the simultaneous murder of all other species. It is a crime of unimaginable proportions and because we have lost all sense of a moral order - beyond the apparent world we are born into - we are unable to count the cost for our souls. The Christian principle that “as ye sow so shall ye reap” – the doctrine of Karma in the East – suggests that somehow we would have to pay for our actions. The least we can do is think about the existential consequences of this while we are still here to do it. The “nothingness” that Schell regards as “simple” and which our modern nihilism can only imagine as a vacuous state may not be so empty or inconsequential as we think.

Thanatos and Eros

In the concluding paragraph of *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud, himself had posed “the fateful question”, as early as 1930, concerning our survival as a species. He died, of course, some seven years before Hiroshima but he was in no doubt that “human beings have made such strides in controlling the forces of nature that, with the help of these forces, they will have no difficulty in exterminating one another, down to the last man”. And he adds that they know this and “that accounts for much of their disquiet, unhappiness, and anxiety”. We may not believe in gods anymore - and neither did Freud - but how else to give adequate expression to the cataclysm of the First World War and its violence but as a mythical power, symbolising our collective spirit, that lives in, and works through, us? For Freud this was the spirit of the Greek god of death, Thanatos.

Yet in that last paragraph of *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud concludes, on a note of uncertain hope by referring to that other great mythical being. He ends:

And now it is to be expected that the other of the two “heavenly powers”, immortal Eros, will try to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary. But who can foresee the outcome? ^{vi}

From where, one might wonder in these uncertain times, is “immortal Eros” to enter this struggle and in what form?

Freud’s writings may, in fact, seem to give a clue. As one of the “masters of suspicion”, along with those other contemporary philosophers, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Bergson, and as an admirer of Schopenhauer, he was thought to be a pessimistic thinker. But there are many who think that, if Eros is to emerge, the inspiration is more likely to come from outside Europe and the West and, although Carl Jung is traditionally the Western psychotherapist who draws most obviously on Eastern thought, there are important parallels in the ethos and approach of Freudian psychoanalysis with Buddhist practices. ^{vii}

If Freud looked to immortal Eros to save the human race from itself there was a problem and that lay in Freud's, and the West's, understanding of this "heavenly power". Eros is often identified anthropomorphically with human erotic and physical sexuality, as it was by Freud, but, even more significantly it became for him the representative of the "libido" or human life instinct in opposition to the death instinct. Eros was viewed as the "adversary" of Thanatos. They were a duality, two deities at war with each other, who gain expression through our conflictual instincts.

By contrast, their corresponding deities in Eastern mythology – Vishnu and Shiva, whom I refer to in the introduction – are not only twins, but part of a celestial triad. In the Indian *Vedas* life and death are not opposites. Birth and death might be said to be opposed, but "life" embraces both of them. While Shiva is the destroyer and Vishnu, the preserver, Brahma represents the fact of creation, or the primordial "uncreated" universe, the cosmos which is indestructible. In Indian cosmology the universe simply *is*, it cannot not be. Its manifestations might fade but not the source of the manifestations, which are eventually reborn in new forms.

From this perspective death is seen as a transformative rather than a purely destructive force, itself part of the creative process. It facilitates new life. (The idea that death might be one of evolution's most creative, if mysterious, inventions is slow to occur to us. ^{viii}) In recent centuries we have come to deny the reality of death as it affects us individually and socially but, now as we face the thought of our extinction, could we be waking up to a new understanding of our existence in relation to the rest of life around us?

The Four Contemplations

The precious opportunities and endowments are rare and easily destroyed.
The world and its inhabitants are impermanent; soon, I too will die.
Without fail my good and bad deeds will ripen in me,
And there is no lasting happiness within cyclic existence.

Jamgon Kongtrul ^{ix}

For all our accomplishments and achievements there is a nihilism at the heart of Western culture, materially symbolised by the destructive power of nuclear arms and the ecological damage our technology is doing to the earth. As we face the real prospect of annihilation we seem to lack the will to help ourselves or the strength of mind to see beyond it. Science fiction looks fantastically to outer space for some form of salvation but this is merely an extension of a vain technological endeavour to secure an unreal future. It is surely to inner space that we should direct our attention and to looking in our own world to find it.

The Tibetans teach that there are four thoughts, or reminders, the contemplation of which is the initial ground of enlightenment. The first reminder points to the precious opportunity that is given to us all as a result of being born as a human being, an opportunity that can be taken away at any time. The second reminds us that all life is impermanent, including our own, and that we can lose it at any moment. The third insists that nothing happens without a reason and an effect, and that all our thoughts and actions have positive or negative consequences. The fourth tells us that true happiness is to be found by looking through and beyond the cycle of birth and death.

These four contemplations apply universally but we might do well to think of them particularly now. Firstly it is ironic that, just at the time in human history when we have put the world at risk, we have also discovered more than ever - and to our growing amazement - how mysterious, complex and beautiful it is. Just as science has made our extinction possible it also reveals to us something of the preciousness of life and of the limitless possibilities of the universe we inhabit. We glimpse this, it seems, only when we may be on the point of saying goodbye to it.

Secondly, as we contemplate what nuclear war would do to us all and to the Earth, we are also forced to acknowledge our essential transience. While we know that death comes to us all as individuals at any time, we can now conceive of our collective death too. There is nothing necessary, or ordained, about our existence. As a race and a species, despite all our achievements, we are as impermanent, and

as contingent, as any other life form. It was never otherwise.

Thirdly we have now to face the fact that it is we ourselves who have brought about the possibility of our own destruction. We cannot blame it on some supernatural power or pretend, like the ancient Greeks, that we are the victims of the Gods. "As ye sow, so shall ye reap" is the great Christian expression of the Eastern doctrine of Karma. There are no actions and no thoughts without consequences, good or bad. We simply cannot escape this. It is our delusion we think we can. If the world ends in the next century or so it is we who are responsible.

Finally it dawns on us that, just as we see how the very life cycle - the process of birth and death, time itself - can come to an end, we have to wonder, despite all our science, whether we have even begun to understand it. Perhaps there is another way of looking at life that we have missed. Are the processes of birth and death quite what they seem or are there secrets that lie within them, beyond the arising and dissolving of life or the mystery of past, present and future, that only now we begin to discern? Is the world, and the life it supports, including ourselves, now becoming transparent to us in a way we could not have dreamed?

NOTES

i Peter Conrad, *Modern Times, Modern Places. Life & Art in the 20th Century*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1998. P 533.

ii Robert Jungk, *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns. A Personal History of the Atomic Scientists*. Translated by James Cleugh. London: Penguin, 1960.

iii *ibid* p 184

iv Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* London: Pan Books 1982. Schell's book was something of a publishing sensation when it came out, 'The new Bible of our time, the White Paper of our age', according to one reviewer. It remains compelling reading.

v *ibid* p 96

vi Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and Its Discontents* Translated by David McLintock. General Editor, Adam Phillips. London: Penguin Classics 2002. P 84

vii As Mark Edmundson declared in his introduction to the Penguin Modern Classics new centenary translation of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: 'The quest for equanimity through psychoanalysis is akin to Buddhist attempts to attain relative calm through yoga and meditation. The way to live beyond delusion, for Freud, is to achieve skeptical distance from one's desires – though without ever suppressing them'. The practice of 'free association' has much in common with Buddhist meditational practices and it was Freud who, as a phenomenological psychologist, led the way in redirecting modernity to the inner world of the subject.

viii For an intriguing discussion of death as one of evolution's great inventions see Nick Lane, *Life Ascending: The Ten Great Inventions of Evolution*, London: Profile Books, 2009. Ch.10.

ix Adapted from Jamgon Kongtrul *Nectar of the Simple Yogi*, by Yongey Mingur Rinpoche, 2007.