

Do we believe fundamentally in hierarchy or in the companionship of equals? (This is not the same question as whether we believe in the hierarchy, for the significance of bishops and even of cardinals *could* be understood in terms of the society of equals.) In one sense, of course, we have to believe in hierarchy for it exists. The shelves are full of ethological tracts to tell us of the pecking-orders and status arrangements by which other animal species keep the peace among themselves and there cannot be much doubt that man, the restless animal, has also this heritage to use or to cope with. The question we have to ask in all sorts of contexts is: to what extent should we rely on the ancient inherited structures of authority and submission and to what extent we should explore new specifically human forms of co-operation amongst equals.

It is a tricky question for it is a matter of the right use of language. It is because we are linguistic animals that there is not only submission but Law, and therefore equality before the Law. Democracy is the product of language. But language can not only reveal and liberate, it can deceive, conceal and mystify. We can achieve what sounds like the companionship of equals but is really only a new mask for domination. We can superimpose political democracy on economic servitude. It looks as though at any point in history we can only move a certain way towards genuine democracy; if we try for more we can only move a certain way towards genuine democracy; if we try for more we produce only another way of concealing the truth.

That is why conservatives are not always wrong. They are not always simply holding back the movement of mankind towards equality; sometimes they are exposing the pretensions of sham freedom. It has become, for example, a platitude of the religious life that dismantling relatively authoritarian structures in the name of free participation can sometimes simply mean the unfettered domination of the strongest personality. If we are to move towards real democracy we cannot just demolish old authoritarian structures, we must also create new less authoritarian ones. This is a creation as subtle and demanding as a poem, it is not something that can be done by applying a few simple rules of thumb.

To belong to an Order of Friars is, of course, already to be committed to fraternity, to the ideal of brotherhood amongst equals, to the eventual elimination of all forms of paternalism. It means renouncing the temptation to leave someone else to make all the decisions, a temptation that can come in all kinds of pious disguises. It also means renouncing the rather more obvious temptation to make all decisions yourself. The kind of community in which everyone does his or her own thing is no more liberated than the most

authoritarian of convents. Indeed, the case against the latter is that they are quite often a front for the former.

It ought not, therefore to be surprising that a Dominican publication should carry something of a bias against the conservative side, that we should constantly try to discover new ways in which people can move further from the life of the pecking-order. But this is not simply the prejudice of a particular religious tradition for it lies at the heart of the Christian revelation. It is only in the companionship of equals that the new relationship discovered by Christianity, the relationship of *caritas* can arise. There can be affection, kindness, benevolence between master and slave, but there can only be real love between equals. The society founded upon love instead of domination can only be the society of equals, but real equality is not simply the presupposition of *caritas*, it is itself the product of it.

This is part of what we remember when we celebrate this month the birth of the man who claimed a fundamental relation of mutual love and therefore of equality with God. At Christmas we proclaim that God and man are not just related as creator and created, as master and slave (not even as benevolent master and slave), but as lovers each respecting the equality of the other. The mystery of Christmas is that as the Word was made flesh we are invited into the relationship that Jesus has with his Father. We are taken up into the love of God, into the Holy Spirit, and therefore into the equality that God recognizes in his beloved Son.

God, then, for Christians no longer means a benign figure presiding over the world of men, controlling its affairs for his own purposes. The incarnation means that the history of man is the acting out of the exchange within the Trinity; it is the history of divine love—not just of kindness towards creatures but of the love between Father and Son which is God. It is, then, in history, in the long complex and frequently disheartening story of the bringing of men towards love that we find the meaning of God. Not in some abstract unworld but in the actual struggles of history we discover what transcends history. Bethlehem is the end of religion as alienation; from now on the search for man is the revelation of God.

H. McC.