

by Simon Tugwell, O.P.

I am sometimes asked how I reconcile being a monk with my involvement in movements devoted to the Alternative Society. I think we should turn that question upside down. A monk is *ipso facto* involved in the enterprise of the Alternative Society, and the wonder is that so few seem to realize it.

After all, what do we mean by the alternative society? We mean, I take it, that we have glimpsed, far away, a vision of what it might be like for man to be free; a dream of human society in which love is all you need, in which death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more (that's from the Apocalypse, actually). And not only that. We have decided to stake all on that vision, that dream. We have committed ourselves to living as if man were really like that, as if society could really live by love alone. We have let ourselves be subverted by utopia, and can never be the same again.

And that is the definition of the Church, and most especially of the religious orders. The Church is, according to the Second Vatican Council, the present sign and nucleus of the future kingdom, the new creation; and religious orders are in particular called to live their whole lives as a witness to this future, this Utopia.

This approach differs from traditional politics in several respects. First, it is not overawed by practicality. Like Emily Dickinson, it refuses to be shut up in prose. What if all the odds are against us? Nothing less than Utopia is worth existing for. The pessimist will know that he has at least preserved his dream intact; the optimist will know that at last it *must* come true. But either way 'impossibility exhilarates—like wine' (Emily D., again). We don't start from hard facts (which we suspect may not really be as hard as all that anyway); we start from our vision of what it could be like.

But, secondly, we don't have blueprints or ideologies. Our vision of the future is not plotted. It is given, it will unfold itself in mutual dance with our unfolding selves. We trust the integrity of the future more than we trust our own; we are too conditioned by the past, too far from freedom to know the difference between desire and naughtiness (prohibition is no better motive for action than is command). Our vision is, we hope, constantly open to further vision,

¹Reprinted from *Foreign Devils*, an Oxford underground periodical published by Oxford BIT, No. 2 (24th May, 1969).

our new society must never settle down into an old society. To stand still is to fall backwards (an insight common to St Bernard and the Red Queen). Nothing less than absolute transcendence, ultimate novelty (if such there be, and I believe there is) will satisfy us.

And this brings us to the third thing. The politician is usually concerned with getting other people to do things. The traditional political approach to social change aims only at *public* change (the importance of which is not for a moment being called in question). Change structures, change institutions, change the currency. . . . Our vision, by contrast, requires of us not only public but also private change. It requires of us that we become a particular kind of people. This is not to say, all we are out to do is to change ourselves, and disown the whole public realm (the temptation of traditional spirituality); but it is a direct result of our conviction that the desired institutional changes 'must be carried out by people who are already freeing themselves from the repressive and aggressive needs of our society, people who are therefore, at least potentially, the bearers of essentially different needs, goals and satisfactions' (Fergus Kerr, O.P., paraphrasing Marcuse). That is, we are committed, not only to doing, but also to being, and that is precisely the enterprise of spirituality, which is, in turn, the enterprise of monks of all religions.

And I think this is particularly important in our present situation. Marcuse's analysis of our society points out clearly the degree of spurious liberty that is available to us; the problem is no longer simply one of liberty, but of the quality of liberty. We are turning into 'one-dimensional man', and within our one dimension we can, probably to an unprecedented extent, have what we want. But, to the same extent, we forget that we are no longer free to *want* what we want. Our very desires are conditioned by advertising, mass media, and other more subtle pressures. We are free to choose between a wide range of prepacked goods, and overlook the fact that they are all really the same, and produced, as likely as not, by the same firm. And so we lose our roots, we become strangers, indeed, invaders, in the universe. But so successfully is this veiled, that most of us do not notice. And those who do, tend to be driven insane, if only by being called such.

Our primary task, then, must be to secure the freedom of the imagination and of desire. And in so doing we will rediscover who and what we are in the world.

And this is the enterprise of spirituality: know thyself. And it requires a deep asceticism of genuine hedonism. We must train ourselves to do *only* what we really want to do, *simply* because we want to do it, spontaneously and authentically. It is not enough that we have been told to do it, nor that we have been told not to do it; it is not enough that we have been conditioned to want to do it. Our hunger must come from our belly, not from the clock (it seems

likely that untold damage is done to babies by timetable feeding). And this means that we must somehow stop the mindless flurry of life, stop the constant noise and busyness, sit down quietly and do nothing, absolutely nothing, sink into the silence, and the darkness . . . and then we can begin to ask questions. Do I really want to do this? Do I really have to do that? And when you ask questions, according to St Athanasius, the demons flee away.

This is not just the enterprise of spirituality, it is the enterprise of monasticism (of whatever religion, if any). The monk is the full-time drop-out, he is the mirror reflecting to the world its own falsehood, he is the aroma of paradise wafting forlornly over the *tohu wabohu* of unformed chaos, reminding us that we don't have to exploit, we can also reverence; we don't have to dominate, we can also love; we don't have to terrify and be terrified, we can also trust.

And it is no accident that I should be writing like this just now. I am sure that McLuhan is right: a radical shift in our consciousness is going on, whether we like it or not. And the new consciousness is one of union, harmony, reverence; it works with myth and symbol, ambiguity and paradox. It revels in the joyous nonsense of reality. It would rather 'learn from one bird how to sing than teach ten thousand stars how not to dance' (e. e. cummings). In the midst of our one-dimensional scientism, suddenly all the old wisdom sciences are re-emerging: the science of the human spirit, the science of the stars, the science of rays, the science of magic, the science of telepathy. . . . In the midst of our hard-headed materialism comes a new flowering of mysticism and psychic powers.

Of course the New Age is coming. Of course it is not of our making. But the challenge still remains: are we going to let it remake us? Or are we going to try to destroy it? Are we going to use the new light and power for the purposes of darkness and evil?

And this brings me to my last reflection. Our culture has so deeply forgotten about the powers of the soul, that it can easily go astray when they re-appear. It can confuse the merely psychic with the spiritual, and that is a royal road to megalomania. Telepathy, for instance, is no more spiritual than the telephone. Although, relative to our present society, telepathy is 'transcendental' and of the Alternative, it has no absolute or ultimate transcendence. The telepathist, as such, has no more transcended his ego than anyone else.

Equally there is the danger that we shall carry over into the new consciousness something of the technocratic, dominative arrogance of the old. Spirituality can be viewed simply as a technique for manufacturing even bigger and better goods; power can be absolutized. And in the realm of the spirit absolutized power means something pretty horrid.

In such a situation, however preposterous it may seem, I believe that the Church has an important role to play, if she will have the

courage to discern it. At the very least she is a repository of a traditional spiritual wisdom; and, however eviscerated our tradition may be, if we will only open ourselves to be reinvigorated, in our own tradition, by the new consciousness of the age which is coming upon us, I profoundly hope that we may be able to offer it in return some protection against the dangers I have mentioned, of superstition and satanism.

Let Abbot Joachim sum up. Towards the end of the twelfth century, this Cistercian abbot prophesied the coming of a New Age, which, he said, would be the age of the Spirit, an age of little children, an age of contemplation and leisure, a moneyless age—and an age of monks. Most of that could almost be found in the *International Times*.

ANY book of interest to CATHOLICS can be obtained from:

BOW HOUSE, 129 Victoria Street, S.W.1
(Burns Oates Retail Ltd)

Prompt service given to postal orders