

THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE

By ANTHONY LEVI

THE SPIRIT OF an age, like the flow of the tide, is always first discerned in hesitancies traced on sand or in movements within isolated rock-pools. It is only later that the mainstream of ebb and flow confirms, magnifies and then totally engulfs the first tentative probings, making clear their significance as signs of the massive and ineluctable movement of the tide to come.

As with the ebb and flow of the tides, so also with the waves of cultural change. There are apparently insignificant micro-phenomena which indicate to the discerning the massive movements to come, but there is no way of stopping the flood. The only protection we have against the changing movements of tide and culture is to move out of the way.

All ages are always ages of transition. There are always new values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns seeking to emerge. Many never establish themselves, and those which do become socially acceptable at first only in isolated and often culturally privileged groups, with the imaginative power to explore their real personal and social implications before accepting or rejecting them. It is the quality of the imagination of those in whom new values first appear which indicate whether, modified by general acceptance, they will come to dominate the pattern of cultural change and to constitute the spirit of a new age. Values do not change as a result of argument, but as the product of imaginative explorations into forms of experience.

Our own age differs from previous ones chiefly in that new systems of transport and communication have accelerated the pace of change. The world has become a much smaller place, and the distance of an event no longer diminishes its significance as even twenty years ago it used to. But the media of communication, while accelerating the pace of change, have also paradoxically made it more difficult to discern its direction. Fear is the strongest of human responses, and the media, prodigiously consuming instant reactions on every side to every event and non-event of the day, effectively sell their products to a public mesmerized by any change or sugges-

tion of change which can be made to look like a threat to its security. The media are responsible for a great deal of good in our society. They on the whole develop our sense of responsibility and they bring to our notice events, decisions and developments which may need to be changed or prevented. But it remains the sin of the communications industry to exploit private insecurity in the interests of commercial success. Prophesying doom is a sure way to making a fortune, but it has itself assumed the dimensions of a menace.

It is said that our age is an age of violence. But it is clear that we are today much more sensitive to the malice of any attack on the social, political, economic and personal autonomy of the individual than was any other era of modern history. Whether violence can be said to be on the increase depends on how we define it. Physical assault outside the organized slaughter which previous generations legitimized under the name of war may possibly and regrettably be on the increase. But where physical violence is used as a weapon against political or economic exploitation, it must at least be considered in relation to the other and no less repugnant forms of violence, however socially acceptable, being wreaked on the oppressed. It may be regrettable that radical minorities have a recourse to violence in pursuit of political or economic ends, without making it any less regrettable that, until they do have such recourse, oppression and exploitation can go unregarded. A new sensitivity to the malice of all forms of violence is in fact one of the more encouraging features of our age, even if it also means that civilized societies can therefore also be blackmailed by hi-jackers and kidnappers, with or without real grievances. It is one of the less satisfactory characteristics of our age that the seriously oppressed in our world are so often still confronted only by the alternatives of resignation and despair. It is only those who have achieved hope who disrupt the system. In spite of aberrant violence, the spread of hope to the oppressed remains a goal to be worked for.

It is said that our age is an age of permissiveness. But, like the sentimentality which is a side-effect in an organism healthily reacting against the violence in its blood-stream, permissiveness is nothing worse than the by-product of a desire to preserve at all costs the autonomy of the individual. That desire can of course become self-defeating. A refusal to exercise any form of social constraints on one section of the population can end up by destroying the moral autonomy of those subjected to sexually alluring advertisements, or at least by corrupting their children. Yet it remains true that liberal

permissiveness is an ideal to be striven for. Some modern churchmen, perhaps understandably dismayed by the sillier and more self-defeating sorts of permissiveness, would do well to remember that the preservation of true human autonomy in whatever sphere, whenever it does not erode the autonomy of others, represents a moral ideal which is theologically preferable to, as well as eminently more attractive than, any sort of ideal based merely on abstract moral principles, especially when these principles were not clearly stated by Jesus.

In the late middle ages, it was allegedly argued by some scholastics that, since sins against God had a malice additional to that of sins against man, it was a worse sin to break the sabbath than to encompass the death of a thousand men. Similarly, since lies were intrinsically evil and no end justified an intrinsically evil act, it was not permissible to lie, even to save the world from destruction. Erasmus had no difficulty in ridiculing these over-rigorous applications of abstract moral principles by appealing to ordinary humane reactions based on concern for other people. Yet today the lesson remains unlearned, and we still hear far too many arguments based on abstract moral principle rather than on human compassion from the opponents of permissiveness.

Abortion may generally be a sin, but only because it is a 'mutilation' requiring a sufficiently grave excusing reason, at least while the foetus is non-viable, and not as the result of abstract arguments about the non-viable foetus's 'right to life'. The scholastics were uncertain about the moment at which a soul was created for the foetus, and those who simply fail to discriminate between murder and the destruction of a non-viable foetus are arguing in the abstract as well as neglecting the Church's tradition. The use of artificial contraceptives may often be morally reprehensible, but not simply in consequence of abstract arguments that the act of sexual intercourse demands 'of its nature' to allow the possibility of generation. Contemporary pagans correctly perceive that to bring into the world a child who is unwanted and who will remain unloved is a much greater sin than either abortion or employing artificial means to prevent conception.

Happily, the Church's teaching on matters of sexual ethics and its attitude to the mutually perfective dimensions of conjugal love has clearly not yet stopped evolving. There is a growing body of opinion supporting the possibility of sacramental remarriage after divorce. Confessors no longer regard all sexual sins as equally serious

and indiscriminately 'mortal'. The tragedy is that the reactionary attitudes and abstract arguments attract the publicity. They are not only out of harmony with the needs of our age, but they are both theologically and religiously unnecessary; and they alienate the age from the immense spiritual riches in the Church's tradition.

If the real problems of the age are not concerned with rising violence or liberal permissiveness, they are not concerned with ecology either. The radicals have some excuse for supposing that problems of environmental pollution by effluent, eye-sores, noise and fumes are a decoy, the self-abasing confession of a society perfectly prepared to put its ecological house in order, because it is the price it has to pay for continuing its system of modified and controlled industrial capitalism, made clear by the fact that objections to environmental pollution of whatever sort generally come from the more highly educated of its members. It is unlikely that objections to environmental pollution emanating exclusively from the poorer social strata would have compelled the serious re-thinking at present being undertaken. Technically, there are no ecological problems that cannot be solved by planning, legislation and international pressure. Pollution is certain to be restricted to acceptable levels by legislation in the relatively near future by all the advanced industrial societies, and revelations that it is occurring are already arousing massive campaigns in all of them.

The really intractable problem of our age is without any doubt the problem of the strains occasioned by urban life as we know it, extended and multiplied into the appalling stress set up by urban poverty, the root-cause of almost all our social ills, from racialism, through crime and divorce statistics, to drugs, riots and revolutions. But even this problem is patent of solution wherever sufficient subsidies for housing, medical attention and social security are forthcoming. It has for long been clear that racial tension in the United States is very largely economic in origin, with the poor whites split between sympathy for black power and a jealous determination to work for 'law and order'. In Detroit, there were whites sniping and looting in the 1967 riots. In the United States generally, the police force and the national guards contain too many members no longer required for a highly automated farming industry in rural regions. The pity is that, in the United States as so often in the third world, ideological considerations are erected on top of economic needs, until they come to outweigh humane ones, as they so unhappily did in Biafra.

The problems of our age are therefore in the end neither moral nor technical, but social and political. Morally, the compassionate society, for all its occasional flabby-minded sentimentality, marks a humane advance on previous centuries. Technically, we can control our environment, house, clothe and feed the world's population for the foreseeable future, and we can at least see the direction in which we must move in order to eliminate the under-development of the third world and the stresses imposed by urban poverty everywhere. But the spirit of any age is always the product of its political priorities, themselves emerging from a series of complex and often contradictory constraints. The spirit of our age is marked by the hierarchy in which it places the goals to which it aspires, the extent to which it chooses to afford the attainment of some of them, and the vigour with which it then prosecutes them. Political life is concerned with choosing priorities, and ordering them, typically as between defence, welfare, education and economic expansion, with the proviso that some or all of these might be interdependent, while others might be in conflict for available resources.

The last two years are often said to have seen a move to the right, at least in the anglo-saxon world. It is not hard to realize, however, that the choice of political alternatives in Britain and the United States needs to be seen against a clear movement of the central axis which splits the major parties towards the left, as the climate of public opinion becomes increasingly liberal throughout the western world. Even the american republican party is now concerned to achieve a disengagement in the far east. The first legislation of Britain's new conservative government was to provide pensions for the over-eighties. It is not surprising that a general shift of opinion leftwards should leave in its wake a trail of conservative majorities.

What distinguishes the cultures of the world is the tension generated by the speed with which they are moving towards the liberal values of the most culturally advanced western societies. This tension is clearly strongest in the under-developed world, where nationalist movements are still too often productive of totalitarian regimes. Parts of the western world are unlikely to attain to the liberal democratic organization to which they are moving, without bloodshed, whether one thinks of Greece and Portugal, or of Cuba and Rumania. In the wake of the second world war, the west generally is aware that its values are more threatened by the defenders of law and order than by student dissent and minority protest. In the United States, the tension could conceivably still result in

nation-wide insurrection. Partly, this is on account of the vast cultural divergences within the single political entity, and partly it is to be explained by the place 'law and order' has historically come to hold in a society where, a century ago, it was sometimes necessary to carry a gun in order to protect one's home and family.

The spirit of the age is the product of political choice, and political choice all over the world is moving towards liberal democratic values, whether from a starting point of industrial capitalism or from a starting point of totalitarian ideology. Behind the general move, however, there are varying degrees of political tension. It is one of the tragedies of the age that so many minority and regionalist movements are being forced into extreme marxist systems of political orthodoxy, so exacerbating political tension to the point of insurrectionary potential. The culturally under-developed countries are having to undergo in a decade or so the evolution which took western european countries centuries to achieve. It would be surprising if their political lives totally avoided the polarization of attitudes clear even in the United States, to say nothing of Russia.

The question which has to be asked, if this view of the spirit of the age be accepted, concerns the position of the Church and its possible contribution towards a smooth and harmonious evolution in the direction in which our culture is moving. It would be possible for the Church, as so often in the past, to fail to perceive what is happening and, in the name of abstract principles, to hold out against a cultural movement it considers radically wrong. Few churchmen would hold so reactionary an attitude towards the secular world. More common, and a more real threat to the contribution which the Church can and should make, is to mistake its important spiritual values for the abstract moral principles on which the pronouncements of its officials so often centre. The great danger is that the world will forsake the truly spiritual values taught by Jesus and given into the custody of his Church – the values concerned with the need for prayer, even for contemplation – with the spiritual advantages to be drawn from adversity, with the central optimism of the christian who knows that, on account of the redemption, there is no conceivable situation in which God's grace will not be available to him, and sufficient to enable him to achieve his ultimate salvation. If the world at present, while clearly and universally in need of a religion, turns away from institutionalized christianity, as it is so doing in increasing numbers, it is at least arguable that institutionalized christianity, for all its works of

mercy, has abdicated its spiritual task in favour of becoming an organization for administering the sacraments and acting as moral watchdog over public morality according to values which our contemporaries know to have been overtaken by sheer compassion.

It is clearly the task of the Church to avoid being identified with all that is reactionary in the modern world, although the forces of reaction only too naturally turn to the Church for support. The Church must not simply act as a prop for law and order, either, in the name of whatever principle, just as it must not support insurrection, or even subversion of however inequitable an established social order, in the name of social equity. Its role is spiritual, and not political or even social. The corporal works of mercy are a manifestation of the Church's inner self, a necessary part of its spiritual witness. But they must not be exercised in such a way as to soften the blows of a social system which is itself unjust, and so prolong its existence, any more than they should move from the sphere of social relief to that of political action. The Church's survival is in fact in danger, at least as a relevant witness to the gospel message. Survival depends on upholding the properly spiritual values which are wholly and uniquely in the Church's province, and neither on placatory concessions to relevance, nor on political militancy, nor on reactionary moral attitudes. Properly, spiritual values may need impartially to be upheld against the forces of law and order and of dissent. Left-wing christianity sells the pass as surely as do the christian supporters of fascist regimes.

The message of our age, in so far as it concerns the Church, is that the Church's spiritual function either has to be squarely assumed or the Church will perish. It would after all be a disaster if a puerile and immature 'hippie' culture were to make a take-over bid for the Church's prophetic function in the world, which is what at present is happening. The middle-class drop-outs are protesting more stridently at bourgeois and totalitarian values alike than is the institutional Church, too preoccupied with less substantial matters, and suffering from a lemming-like obsession with permissiveness. The Church alone can provide the spiritual insight to reconcile the forces of protest with those of law. If it does, it will have regained its true function and will contribute the most important values of all to our age. If it does not, the next decade or two will see a series of bloody and unnecessary conflicts which the movement of our culture makes inexorable. It will then no doubt be left to the new millenium to reinvent the christianity of Jesus.