

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD OR MADISON AVENUE?

WE ARE getting a little tired of hearing what is wrong with us and our world, how different we are from other generations, what frightful pressures we are undergoing at home, at work, at play. We hear on every side about the earth-shattering problems that are surging and seething in our cities: racial problems, teen-age problems, family problems. The changing towns and villages of the country are not without their social and economic upheavals. Now William Whyte, David Reisman and Vance Packard have laid bare the dark and terrible forces that are at work among us in our large corporations, in the advertising industry, in the suburbs. They have hinted at the ominous compromises that are being worked out under our very noses, across many a polished organization desk and along the thousand sapling-lined streets of suburbia. We have not even dared to imagine what conditions must be like in exurbia! There is a conflict raging between the old Protestant ethic and the new Social ethic; between the "inner-directed" and the "outer-directed" man, between the old city ward-dweller and his new suburban environment. And to top it all off, we are all being motivated against our will by that omnivorous monster, subliminal advertising. No wonder that we are coming to believe that we are caught in a vicious web of someone else's spinning and that only the sociologist and the psychiatrist, by working overtime, can unravel it and make us once again the happy carefree children of nature that we never were.

Are things really as bad as they say? Can we, who are the stuff of their statistics and the guinea pigs of their theorizing, still think for ourselves? The prophets of gloom bemoan the present plight of man upon the earth, and while not despairing entirely, the world they envision in speculation and which they insist is now coming into being, is hardly one to enthrall us. The sociologists and the psychologists seem to be divided into two camps: those who foresee the total conformity to the new Social ethic, and those who insist that there will be a return to the old Protestant individualistic ethic. At the risk of being an enemy in both camps, let us offer another solution.

First of all, let us admit that there is much truth in what they have found out. There are a great many conflicts in the modern world, and there are probably more in suburban USA than elsewhere. No one would deny that there is a great deal of conformity in our communities, a certain sameness and monotony, if you will. Many of us are afraid to step too far out of line for fear of being called "out" by the "ins"; too many, perhaps, are raising their children to be more concerned with security and group activity than fighting for their place in the sun. These are things that no thinking person could deny, in fact one has only to be mildly astute to realize that we are wallowing in conformity up to the very television aerials of our split-level villages. It is the mass-media that is conforming us; we are only too aware of that. But who is going to rip out his television set or cancel all his subscriptions to magazines and newspapers? Who would want to? Frankly, the advertising men are not fooling us very much; they are spending millions of dollars every year to convince us that we want things that no sane person would not want. No housewife has to be convinced that she should exchange the wash-tub and the clothes line for an automatic washer or dryer. Furthermore, who would deny that he had a secret desire to be tattooed, wear a red bandanna, and smoke the same cigarettes that such fascinating people do?

Group activity is also helping to conform us. We are all being influenced for better or for worse by the other members of our community, our church, our organization, our bridge club. These subtle bents and biases are to be expected in a free-wheeling society such as ours. They are not dangerous as long as we realize that we are being influenced. The danger lies in the fact that we might become so accustomed to conforming to the group, so used to the "soft-sell," that we will go along with the group without thinking, submit against our principles in important things, want things for which we have no desire or need. In other words, that we will become conformed to the image that the group or the advertising-men are creating for us, rather than being conformed to the image of God in Whose likeness we have been created.

But to attempt to avoid the danger of the group ethic by a return to the rugged individualism of the Protestant ethic is no solution at all. That would be inimical to the Christian ideal. Too much of real worth has come about in the communities of America in these last decades to make us nostalgic for the era of the "robber barons." So we have to admit that there is a dilemma, a

very real one that will become more acute before it is resolved. There is the necessity of living in community, of conforming to the customs of our times, of moving in a particular stratum of society and adapting ourselves to its culture and tastes. On the other hand, there is often a gulf between our own ideals, our own tastes, our own code of conduct, and those of the group or society. How far should we go in clinging to our own ideas and tastes; how far should we go in accepting those of others? There is a danger that our own selfish interests are interfering with those of the group, and we might be led to believe that it is better to go along with things as they are, to trust in the common judgment of mankind and drift with the current instead of fighting it. Often it is easier to accept the image that the radio and television, the magazines and moving pictures are fashioning of us, to tell ourselves that we do not have any right to be different from all the others.

And what about society itself? It depends on the cooperation of all its members and their joint efforts to promote the common good. It is difficult to know where to draw the line in cooperating, when to resist the pressures of society and when to yield to them. From all we have said it would seem that the dilemma is an insoluble one. Since there are such obvious dangers in conformity to the social ethic, too much "togetherness" in modern society, too much of the out-going and the other-directed, it would seem that the only course is to withdraw one's loyalty to the group, concentrate on the inner man, return to the individualistic ethic, join the frantic protest of the "beatnik." We have already rejected this solution of those, who, seeing the unhealthy trends in an over-emphasis on group activity, are crying for a return to the "frontier mentality" that helped America hack its way to greatness in the last century.

Now we must reject the solution put forth by the proponents of the Social ethic, which calls for an ever deeper submergence of the individual personality in the community, the organization or the group. Both solutions are based on the false principle that any divergence of opinion between the person and the society to which he belongs is unhealthy, that any conflict between the individual and the group is dangerous. We believe that such conflicts are not only healthy, but necessary for a dynamic society. So did the ancient philosophers, the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, and so does the Church today. There have always been tensions between the individual and society, call them conflicts if you will. There always will be. Aristotle realized that man is a

political animal who lives in community to attain the good life, shaped for him by the laws, customs and institutions of the group. Without society the good life is unattainable, so Aristotle devoted some of his greatest works to analyzing and resolving the difficulties that are bound to arise between them. He saw that without tensions and conflicts, both society and the individual would stagnate; with them, society is dynamic and the individual personality grows and develops by meeting and resolving them. It is true of course, that society exists for the good of the individual persons within it, but private interests are best served by serving the interests of the group. The individual is perfected by working for the common good, and it in turn is promoted by his individual efforts. At first sight this might seem to be a paradox, and in a way it is, for man himself is a paradox of sorts: a creature of flesh and spirit, a social animal who is also an individual person seeking his perfection not as a lone wolf, but as a member of society.

Since man naturally attains his perfection in society and tensions and conflicts are bound to arise between the two, nature must provide the means to overcome the tensions and resolve the conflicts, and she does. Aristotle called them virtues and treated them at great length in his *Nicomachean Ethics*; St. Thomas Aquinas called them the same thing and devoted 170 Questions in his *Summa Theologiae* to the study of them. Yes, they are that important. The virtues are habits that perfect man in his truly human actions of intellect, will and sense appetite; they are either intellectual or moral and make man perfect as man and are only acquired by dint of hard labor and repeated good actions in the natural order. We must point out here that there are supernatural intellectual and moral virtues that are infused into the soul with Grace, but since Grace perfects nature and without the natural virtues the supernatural life is resting on quicksand, we shall devote our attention to the natural acquired virtues as the necessary dispositions for supernatural life.

The virtues then are the perfections of the human intellect, will and sense appetite, which raise man above the level of the beast and perfect him as the image of God. The life of God consists in divine knowledge and love; the perfection of human life consists in knowing and loving well, and the virtues help man know and love what will conform him to the image of God. He needs these tools that nature has provided to resolve the conflicts that arise between himself and the people around him, between

his ideals and those of the group. It is not a question of Either/Or, the Social ethic or the Protestant ethic, but a middle course between the two extremes. But to steer a middle course requires a great deal of knowledge, skill and courage. In a world where our ideals and our way of life are being challenged daily in the newspapers, motion pictures and even from the pulpits, our only sure defense is a good offense: the knowledge, yes, but even more, the use of the intellectual and moral virtues. These are the tools that the God of nature provides for coordinating all of our thoughts and actions in our relations with Him, our neighbors, the people we meet in the super-market, the men in the organization office, the women at the bridge club. Only the intellectual virtues will enable us to know whether the image that Hollywood and Madison Avenue is fashioning of man is a true or false one of man. Only the moral virtues can give us the needed courage and strength to turn away from that image if it is not true to the image of God within us. The intellectual virtues will make clear the interplay of our own personal interests with those of the group; the moral virtues will help us control our emotions and give each his due.

We can no longer find our way in the confusing maze of contradictory beliefs and ideals in the modern world by clinging for dear life to a negative ethic. We cannot be content with not breaking the commandments and the precepts, with knowing just how far we can go without committing sin, with doing only the very minimum that is required. The challenge of today is too crucial for that. Virtue is the positive answer to that daring charge that faces us at every turn. The practice of virtue has no limit; it is a window opening on the infinite. These wonderful means ordained by nature for our perfection as persons and social beings as well, deserve more of our attention. Unless we know that the virtues exist, that it is possible to make such good use of them, that they are so necessary for the good moral life, how can we begin to try to acquire these precious habits? This is not to insinuate that knowledge is virtue, that merely being aware of their existence and the possibility of acquiring them will be enough; nothing could be farther from the hard truth that only by painful effort on our part can we become proficient in the practice of the natural virtues. But this increasing awareness of their importance and the vital role they play in our natural and supernatural life, will urge us on to make valiant efforts to attain the virtues.

Without virtue we will be forever stumbling in the dark, and

far from steering that safe middle course, we shall be ever bumping against the extremes. With virtue we can easily recognize the true image of God from the false image of Madison Avenue. With the true image and the moral virtues we direct our relations with the group, the organization and the community, conforming in keeping with our ideals and beliefs and resisting when necessary. And by perfecting the image of God within us, we shall be urged to go out to others to advertise the peace and joy we have attained. All of our problems will not be solved, but we will realize more and more that the web of modern existence is of God's spinning, and that the virtues are the spools on which we wind and sort the tangled strands that will lead us to our home in heaven.

—J. D. Campbell, O.P.