

# The Vital Center

*The Politics of Freedom*

BY

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New introduction by the author

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*for*  
Stephen  
Katharine Christina  
Andrew

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foundations in nature, the political conflicts which obsess us today seem puny and flickering. Unless we are soon able to make the world safe for democracy, we may commit ourselves too late to the great and final struggle to make the world safe for humanity.

## XI

### *Freedom: A Fighting Faith*

**I**NDUSTRIALISM is the benefactor and the villain of our time: it has burned up the mortgage, but at the same time sealed us in a subtler slavery. It has created wealth and comfort in undreamed-of abundance. But in the wake of its incomparable economic achievement it has left the thin, deadly trail of anxiety. The connecting fluids of industrial society begin to dry up; the seams harden and crack; and society is transformed into a parched desert, "a heap of broken images, where the sun beats, and the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, and the dry stone no sound of water" — that state of social purgatory which Durkheim called "anomie" and where Eliot saw fear in a handful of dust.

Under industrialism the social order ceases to be society in faith and brotherhood. It becomes the waste land, "asocial society," in Alex Comfort's phrase — "a society of

onlookers, congested but lonely, technically advanced but utterly insecure, subject to a complicated mechanism of order but individually irresponsible." <sup>1</sup> We live on from day to day, persisting mechanically in the routine of a morality and a social pattern which has been switched off but which continues to run from its earlier momentum. Our lives are empty of belief. They are lives of quiet desperation.

Who can live without desperation in a society turned asocial — in a social system which represents organized frustration instead of organized fulfillment? Freedom has lost its foundation in community and become a torment; "individualism" strips the individual of layer after layer of protective tissue. Reduced to panic, industrial man joins the lemming migration, the convulsive mass escape from freedom to totalitarianism, hurling himself from the bleak and rocky cliffs into the deep, womb-dark sea below. In free society, as at present constituted, the falcon cannot hear the falconer, the center cannot hold. Anarchy is loosed upon the world, and, as in Yeats's terrible vision, some rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born.

Through this century, free society has been on the defensive, demoralized by the infection of anxiety, staggering under the body blows of fascism and Communism. Free society alienates the lonely and uprooted masses; while totalitarianism, building on their frustrations and cravings, provides a structure of belief, men to worship and men to hate and rites which guarantee salvation. The crisis of free society has assumed the form of international collisions between the democracies and the totalitarian powers; but this fact should not blind us to the fact that in its essence this crisis is internal.

Free society will survive, in the last resort, only if enough people believe in it deeply enough to die for it. However reluctant peace-loving people are to recognize that fact, history's warning is clear and cold; civilizations which cannot man their walls in times of alarm are doomed to destruction by the barbarians. We have deeply believed only when the issue of war has reduced our future to the stark problem of self-preservation. Franklin Roosevelt read the American people with his usual uncanny accuracy when he named the Second War, not the "war for freedom," but the "war for survival." Our democracy has still to generate a living emotional content, rich enough to overcome the anxieties incited by industrialism, deep enough to rally its members to battle for freedom — not just for self-preservation. Freedom must become, in Holmes's phrase, a "fighting faith."

Why does not democracy believe in itself with passion? Why is freedom not a fighting faith? In part because democracy, by its nature, dissipates rather than concentrates its internal moral force. The thrust of the democratic faith is away from fanaticism; it is toward compromise, persuasion and consent in politics, toward tolerance and diversity in society; its economic foundation lies in the easily frightened middle class. Its love of variety discourages dogmatism, and its love of skepticism discourages hero-worship. In place of theology and ritual, of hierarchy and demonology, it sets up a belief in intellectual freedom and unrestricted inquiry. The advocate of free society defines himself by telling what he is against: what he is for turns out to be certain *means* and he leaves other people to charge the means with content. Today democracy is paying the price for its systematic cultivation of the peaceful and rational virtues. "Many a man

will live and die upon a dogma; no man will be a martyr for a conclusion." \*

Democracy, moreover, has not worn too well as a philosophy of life in an industrial age. It seemed more solid at the high noon of success than it does in the uncertainties of falling dusk. In its traditional form, it has presupposed emotional and psychological stability in the individual. It has assumed, much too confidently, that the gnawing problems of doubt and anxiety would be banished by the advance of science or cured by a rise in the standard of living. The spectacular reopening of these problems in our time finds the democratic faith lacking in the profounder emotional resources. Democracy has no defense-in-depth against the neuroses of industrialism. When philosophies of blood and violence arise to take up the slack between democracy's thin optimism and the bitter agonies of experience, democracy by comparison appears pale and feeble.

Yet it seems doubtful whether democracy could itself be transformed into a political religion, like totalitarianism, without losing its characteristic belief in individual dignity and freedom. Does this mean that democracy is destined to defeat, sooner or later, by one or another of the totalitarian sects?

The death pallor will indeed come over free society, unless it can recharge the deepest sources of its moral energy. And we cannot make democracy a fighting faith merely by exhortation nor by self-flagellation; and certainly not by renouncing the values which distinguish

\* J. H. Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, London, 1930, p. 93. This neglected work remains one of the most valuable of all analyses of the way in which man gives his assent.

free society from totalitarianism. Yet we must somehow dissolve the anxieties which drive people in free society to become traitors to freedom. We must somehow give the lonely masses a sense of individual human function, we must restore community to the industrial order.

There is on our side, of course, the long-run impossibility of totalitarianism. A totalitarian order offers no legitimate solution to the problem of freedom and anxiety. It does not restore basic securities; it does not create a world where men may expect lives of self-fulfillment. It enables man, not to face himself, but to flee himself by diving into the Party and the state. Only he cannot stay there; he must either come up for air or drown. Totalitarianism has scotched the snake of anxiety, but not killed it; and anxiety will be its undoing.

An enduring social order must base itself upon the emotional energies and needs of man. Totalitarianism thwarts and represses too much of man ever to become in any sense a "good society." Terror is the essence of totalitarianism; and normal man, in the long run, instinctively organizes himself against terror. This fact gives the champions of freedom their great opportunity. But let no one deceive himself about the short-run efficacy of totalitarian methods. Modern technology has placed in the hands of "totalitarian man" the power to accomplish most of his ends of human subjection. He may have no enduring solution, but neither, for example, did the Dark Ages. Yet the darkness lasted a longer time than the period which has elapsed since the discovery of America.

We cannot count upon totalitarian dynamism running down of its own accord in a single generation. Man is instinctively anti-totalitarian; but it is necessary for wise

policies to mobilize these instincts early enough to do some good. Our problem is to make democracy the fighting faith, not of some future underground movement, but of us all here today in the middle of the twentieth century.

The essential strength of democracy as against totalitarianism lies in its startling insight into the value of the individual. Yet, as we have seen, this insight can become abstract and sterile; arrogant forms of individualism sometimes discredit the basic faith in the value of the individual. It is only so far as that insight can achieve a full social dimension, so far as individualism derives freely from community, that democracy will be immune to the virus of totalitarianism.

For all the magnificent triumphs of individualism, we survive only as we remain members of one another. The individual requires a social context, not one imposed by coercion, but one freely emerging in response to his own needs and initiatives. Industrialism has inflicted savage wounds on the human sensibility; the cuts and gashes are to be healed only by a conviction of trust and solidarity with other human beings.

It is in these fundamental terms that we must reconstruct our democracy. Optimism about man is not enough. The formalities of democracy are not enough. The fact that a man can cast a secret ballot or shop in Woolworth's rather than Kresge's is more important to those free from anxiety than it is to the casualties of the industrial order. And the casualties multiply: the possessors are corrupted by power, the middling undone by boredom, the dispossessed demoralized by fear. Chamber-of-commerce banalities will no longer console industrial man.

We require individualism which does not wall man off from community; we require community which sustains but does not suffocate the individual. The historic methods of free society are correct so far as they go; but they concentrate on the individual; they do not go far enough. It would be fatal to abandon Winston Churchill's seven tests of freedom. But these tests are inadequate to create free society because they define means, not ends. We know now that man is not sufficiently perfect to shape good means infallibly to good ends. So we no longer describe free society in terms of means alone: we must place ends as well in the forefront of our philosophy of democracy.

An adequate philosophy of free society would have to supplement the Churchill tests by such questions as these:

Do the people have a relative security against the ravages of hunger, sickness and want?

Do they freely unite in continuous and intimate association with like-minded people for common purposes?

Do they as individuals have a feeling of initiative, function and fulfillment in the social order?

It has become the duty of free society to answer these questions — and to answer them affirmatively if it would survive. The rise of the social-welfare state is an expression of that sense of duty. But the social welfare state is not enough. The sense of duty must be expressed specifically and passionately in the heart and will of men, in their daily decisions and their daily existence, if free men are to remain free.

The contemporary schism between the individual and the community has weakened the will of man. Social conditions cannot, of course, make moral decisions. But they can create conditions where moral decisions are more or less likely to be made. Some social arrangements bring

out the evil in man more quickly than others. Slavery, as we knew well in America, corrupts the masters; totalitarian society, placing unbearable strains on man's self-restraint, produces the most violent reactions of fanaticism and hatred; the unchecked rule of the business community encourages greed and oppression. So the reform of institutions becomes an indispensable part of the enterprise of democracy. But the reform of institutions can never be a substitute for the reform of man.

The inadequacy of our institutions only intensifies the tribute that society levies from man: it but exacerbates the moral crisis. The rise of totalitarianism, in other words, signifies more than an internal crisis for democratic society. It signifies an internal crisis for democratic man. There is a Hitler, a Stalin in every breast. "Each of us has the plague within him," cries Tarrou in the Camus novel; "no one, no one on earth is free from it. And I know, too, that we must keep endless watch on ourselves lest in a careless moment we breathe in somebody's face and fasten the infection on him. What's natural is the microbe. All the rest — health, integrity, purity (if you like) — is a product of the human will, of a vigilance that must never falter." <sup>2</sup>

How to produce a vigilance that never falters? how to strengthen the human will? Walt Whitman in his later years grew obsessed with the moral indolence of democracy. Once he had hymned its possibilities with unequalled fervor. Now he looked about him and saw people "with hearts of rags and souls of chalk." As he pondered "the shallowness and miserable selfism of these crowds of men, with all their minds so blank of high humanity and aspiration," then came "the terrible query . . . Is not

Democracy of human rights humbug after all?" The expansion of the powers of government provided no solution. "I have little hope of any man or any community of men, that looks to some civil or military power to defend its vital rights. — If we have it not in ourselves to defend what belongs to us, then the citadel and heart of the towns are taken."

Wherein lies the hope? In "the exercise of Democracy," Whitman finally answered. ". . . to work for Democracy is good, the exercise is good — strength it makes and lessons it teaches." The hope for free society lies, in the last resort, in the kind of men it creates. "There is no week nor day nor hour," wrote Whitman, "when tyranny may not enter upon this country, if the people lose their supreme confidence in themselves, — and lose their roughness and spirit of defiance — Tyranny may always enter — there is no charm, no bar against it — the only bar against it is a large resolute breed of men." <sup>3</sup>

In times past, when freedom has been a fighting faith, producing a "large resolute breed of men," it has acquired its dynamism from communion in action. "The exercise of Democracy" has quickened the sense of the value of the individual; and, in that exercise, the individual has found a just and fruitful relation to the community. We require today exactly such a rededication to concrete democratic ends; so that the exercise of democracy can bring about a reconciliation between the individual and the community, a revival of the *élan* of democracy, and a resurgence of the democratic faith.

The expansion of the powers of government may often be an essential part of society's attack on evils of want and injustice. The industrial economy, for example, has be-

come largely inaccessible to the control of the individual; and, even in the field of civil freedom, law is the means society has for registering its own best standards. Some of the democratic exhilaration consequently has to be revived by delegation: this is why we need the Franklin Roosevelts. Yet the expansion of the powers of government, the reliance on leadership, as Whitman perceived, have also become a means of dodging personal responsibility. This is the essential importance of the issues of civil rights and civil liberties. Every one of us has a direct, piercing and inescapable responsibility in our own lives on questions of racial discrimination, of political and intellectual freedom — not just to support legislative programs, but to extirpate the prejudices of bigotry in our environment, and, above all, in ourselves.

Through this joint democratic effort we can tap once again the spontaneous sources of community in our society. Industrialism has covered over the springs of social brotherhood by accelerating the speed and mobility of existence. Standardization, for example, while it has certainly raised levels not only of consumption but of culture, has at the same time cut the umbilical cord too early; it has reduced life to an anonymity of abundance which brings less personal fulfillment than people once got from labor in their own shop or garden. More people read and write; but what they read and write tends to have less connection with themselves. We have made culture available to all at the expense of making much of it the expression of a common fantasy rather than of a common experience. We desperately need a rich emotional life, reflecting actual relations between the individual and the community.

The cultural problem is but one aspect of the larger problem of the rôle of independent groups, of voluntary associations, in free society. There is an evident thinness in the texture of political democracy, a lack of appeal to those irrational sentiments once mobilized by religion and now by totalitarianism. Democracy, we have argued, is probably inherently incapable of satisfying those emotions in the apparatus of the state without losing its own character. Yet a democratic society, based on a genuine cultural pluralism, on widespread and spontaneous group activity, could go far to supply outlets for the variegated emotions of man, and thus to restore meaning to democratic life. It is the disappearance of effective group activity which leads toward emptiness in the individual, as it also compels the enlargement of the powers of the state.

People deprived of any meaningful rôle in society, lacking even their own groups to give them a sense of belonging, become cannon fodder for totalitarianism. And groups themselves, once long established, suffer inevitable tendencies toward exclusiveness and bureaucratization, forget their original purpose and contribute to the downfall of freedom. If the American Medical Association, for example, had given serious attention to the problem of meeting the medical needs of America today, Doctor Fishbein would not be dunning his membership for funds to support a lobby against national health insurance. In the short run, the failure of voluntary initiative invites the spread of state power. In the long run, the disappearance of voluntary association paves the way for the pulverization of the social structure essential to totalitarianism. By the revitalization of voluntary associations, we



can siphon off emotions which might otherwise be driven to the solutions of despair. We can create strong bulwarks against the totalitarianization of society.<sup>4</sup>

Democracy requires unremitting action on many fronts. It is, in other words, a process, not a conclusion. However painful the thought, it must be recognized that its commitments are unending. The belief in the millennium has dominated our social thinking too long. Our utopian prophets have always supposed that a day would come when all who had not worshiped the beast nor received his mark on their foreheads would reign for a thousand years. "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."

But the Christian millennium calls for a catastrophic change in human nature. Let us not sentimentalize the millennium by believing we can attain it through scientific discovery or through the revision of our economic system. We must grow up now and forsake the millennial dream. We will not arise one morning to find all problems solved, all need for further strain and struggle ended, while we work two hours a day and spend our leisure eating milk and honey. Given human imperfection, society will continue imperfect. Problems will always torment us, because all important problems are insoluble: that is why they are important. The good comes from the continuing struggle to try and solve them, not from the vain hope of their solution.

This is just as true of the problems of international society. "What men call peace," Gilson has well said, "is never anything but a space between two wars; a precari-

ous equilibrium that lasts as long as mutual fear prevents dissension from declaring itself. This parody of true peace, this armed fear . . . may very well support a kind of order, but never can it bring mankind anything of tranquillity. Not until the social order becomes the spontaneous expression of an interior peace in men's hearts shall we have tranquillity."<sup>5</sup> Does it seem likely (pending the millennium) that we shall ever have an interior peace in the hearts of enough men to transform the nature of human society? The pursuit of peace, Whitehead reminds us, easily passes into its bastard substitute, anesthesia.

So we are forced back on the reality of struggle. So long as society stays free, so long will it continue in its state of tension, breeding contradiction, breeding strife. But we betray ourselves if we accept contradiction and strife as the total meaning of conflict. For conflict is also the guarantee of freedom; it is the instrument of change; it is, above all, the source of discovery, the source of art, the source of love. The choice we face is not between progress with conflict and progress without conflict. The choice is between conflict and stagnation. You cannot expel conflict from society any more than you can from the human mind. When you attempt it, the psychic costs in schizophrenia or torpor are the same.

The totalitarians regard the toleration of conflict as our central weakness. So it may appear to be in an age of anxiety. But we know it to be basically our central strength. The new radicalism derives its power from an acceptance of conflict — an acceptance combined with a determination to create a social framework where conflict issues, not in excessive anxiety, but in creativity. The center is vital; the center must hold. The object of the

new radicalism is to restore the center, to reunite individual and community in fruitful union. The spirit of the new radicalism is the spirit of the center — the spirit of human decency, opposing the extremes of tyranny. Yet, in a more fundamental sense, does not the center itself represent one extreme? while, at the other, are grouped the forces of corruption — men transformed by pride and power into enemies of humanity.

The new radicalism, drawing strength from a realistic conception of man, dedicates itself to problems as they come, attacking them in terms which best advance the humane and libertarian values, which best secure the freedom and fulfillment of the individual. It believes in attack — and out of attack will come passionate intensity.

Can we win the fight? We must commit ourselves to it with all our vigor in all its dimensions: the struggle within the world against Communism and fascism; the struggle within our country against oppression and stagnation; the struggle within ourselves against pride and corruption: nor can engagement in one dimension exclude responsibility for another. Economic and political action can help restore the balance between individual and community and thereby reduce one great source of anxiety. But even the most favorable social arrangements cannot guarantee individual virtue; and we are far yet from having solved the social problem.

The commitment is complex and rigorous. When has it not been so? If democracy cannot produce the large resolute breed of men capable of the climactic effort, it will founder. Out of the effort, out of the struggle alone, can come the high courage and faith which will preserve freedom.

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