

*Religion NOW*

A Paper for Post-Modern Religion

Volume 6 November 1996 Issue 3

*BEING ALIVE IN A DEMOCRACY*

*Democracy is the only truly revolutionary  
creed because it alone recognizes that  
change is a constant factor in human  
affairs.*

- Northrop Frye

As we face the new millenium we are undergoing changes in the distribution of control. Though individualism is on the rise, individual power is threatened. John Ralston Saul in his CBC Massey Lecture last year entitled, "The Unconscious Civilization" pointed out he could "identify only four real possibilities in Western history as the sources of legitimacy, God, King, Groups, Individuals." (Page 30). He added, "Now, the peculiarity of the first three sources - God, king and the groups - is that, once in power, they automatically set about reducing the fourth, the individual, to a state of passivity. The individual citizen is reduced to the state of a subject."

Saul draws attention to the fact that in our society today "Serious, important decisions are made not through democratic discussion or participation but through negotiation between the relevant groups based upon expertise, interest and the ability to exercise power." (page 31).

"If we are to build a real democracy, our most serious attention will have to be given to the foundation" declared the Rev. James J. Tompkins, priest and co-op founder, back in 1938. He said, "We must build from the bottom up and not from the top down. We must, in other words, build on the foundation of the average common person."

"Social justice and freedom both now increasingly depend on how each society deals with three issues: education; information technology (including the media); and freedom of expression" states the sociologist, Alvin Toffler, in his book, "Power Shift", 1990, page 268. Toffler argues that the fight for free expression has become a matter of concern to all who favour economic advance. I would add to that concern for all areas of human

activity.

I learned early in life to stand up for personal control of events that may be changed from my father, Irvine Readhead. Though having had to leave school before finishing senior fourth class (grade 8) to work the farm because his father was crippled by scarlet fever, dad continued to educate himself. He was an avid reader and a keen observer. He became chairperson of the school trustee board. Anyone who knew him later in life knew him to be an educated and informed person.

I remember the occasion when I was a young man, just at the conclusion of World War 11, when I

(Democracy, continued)

worked on the farm with my dad. We were very poor, with a poorly equipped farm of hilly, middling productive capability. It was a constant struggle to make enough to look after the basic needs of the family and the farm.

A canning factory set up business in the no longer needed hangers of the air force at the Brantford airport. Under the business name of Wentworth Cannery, this business approached the farmers in our community to contract to grow sweet corn for them. Though our land was not good for corn production dad decided to try a crop and signed a contract.

Dad found an old corn planter in a junk yard and we patched it up and seeded our corn. I remember the hours of work we put into cultivating and weeding the corn. At that time sprays were not used to cut weeds, and this work was labouriously performed by hoe and two-row cultivator. When the harvest was ready mother, dad, myself and a hired-hand picked the corn cobs by hand, loaded them on a wagon, and transported them to the barnyard to be loaded by hand onto a large stake-body truck to be delivered to the cannery. Working all day and into the night we got the truck loaded and sent off to the factory.

To dad's dismay he soon received a telephone call from the trucker that he was stuck in a three mile long lineup at the cannery waiting to unload. He said the word was he could be there for days. Was dad willing to pay him to sit there and wait.

Dad got in the old 1928 McLaughlin Buick which was our car and drove down to the cannery. He went straight to their office and learned that the cannery had over contracted for corn and was slowing

the intake to a crawl so as to prevent delivery of the corn. They told dad they were sorry but they couldn't take his corn. When asked about the contract they simply said, too bad.

I can remember dad arriving home and the anger he felt. Long distance telephone calls were a rarity in those days but dad went straight to the telephone and called the Minister of Agriculture, Ottawa. We couldn't believe it. Eventually the Minister returned dad's call and dad told him of the injustice this company was inflicting on him and the local farmers. Dad received a promise the Minister would look into it. Not enough, dad declared, we want you down here, immediately.

Dad's power was not great enough to move Ottawa, so dad started visiting the farmers of the community and in a few days had a large enough petition to arouse Ottawa and, lo and behold, the Minister arrived on the scene. He informed the cannery they must legally respect their contracts.

The next thing dad learned was that the cannery was quietly sending agents around to the farmers offering them fifty dollars each for their contracts. Dad was enraged. It was on the road again to try and organize the remaining farmers not to accept this paltry offer but to stand firm for their rights. He got a majority and with the help of the federal government the company was taken to court and had to pay the farmers who still held contracts.

Somehow none of this made dad popular, but he showed us kids that we are important, even if poor, and we can fight for control of our lives and not be walked over by corporations and governments.

This is a characteristic of the Readhead family still and most of us are active believers in democracy.

(Democracy, continued)

It is of interest to note that the Wentworth Cannery no longer exists as they thought they could cheat the farmers and ride roughshod over them despite signed contracts.

Today we have a provincial government which is modelled on the same concept of corporatism and treats citizens as serfs. Decisions are made behind closed doors and public input is discouraged, even rebuffed. Surprisingly many citizens are accepting it. More and more are becoming restless and resisting it.

To quote John Saul again, "What the corporatist system is telling us in various ways is that the democratic system is no longer appropriate. This attitude involves the active or passive agreement of large parts of our elites." Saul reminds us that democracy is concerned about legitimacy and whether the depository of that legitimacy, the citizens, are able to exercise the power its possession imposes upon them. Thus we have seen the coalition of labour, churches and faith groups, the disabled, and the various disadvantaged groups of our society grouping for the protest marches in some of our main cities. They are speaking up to an undemocratic government. Eventually they will have to be listened to.

Democracy is a means of making freedom possible. From religion's point of view democracy provides a way to encourage moral freedom and security. It stands against external standardization and protects not liberty but liberties. It prevents the squeezing of humanity out of people and forcing them to conform to dominant patterns of the powerful. It seeks to protect the weak from the strong, the disadvantaged from the privileged. Over the years we have fought for a country where individual rights will be respected. The religious community has fought for a more humane society. Today

these goals and achievements are threatened as never before. But there are those of us who will not be content with the arbitrary rule of absolute government and we will accept the disciplines which democracy imposes.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### YES AND NO

*Yes is a no word  
a destructive word  
a seemingly-positive, negative word.*

*A yes-person is no person.*

*Saying yes to unlife  
wearing a guise of acquiescence  
I plus myself to minus.*

*No is a yes word  
a creative word  
a double-negative, positive word.*

*I am what I am not.*

*Saying no to unlife  
sloughing off the skin of false masks  
I negate myself to essence.*

by David Hillen

\*\*\*\*\*

#### CONSCIENCE MUST BE SEEN AS A VERB

Who decides what is good and what is evil?

Could the answer be "ourselves" - the fact of value, the presence of goals (and of humankind's self-transcendence). In conscience we recognize the value which is our meaning and reason for being.

Conscience must be thought of as a verb. It is the process of reason making moral judgements. We

(Conscience, continued)

not only enact the values of our culture but we also create and refashion our culture to fit evolving ethical norms. Norms that remain static may become outdated and inadequate in the light of continuing knowledge and experience.

An aboriginal man once told me the conscience is like a square wheel inside a person; when the person does what they believe or knows is wrong, the wheel turns and the person feels intensely uncomfortable. If the person keeps doing the wrong thing the wheel wears off the corners, stops hurting, and the conscience is lost.

We must always remind ourselves that in a democracy, where society controls the policies of a nation, the problem of corruption of the public conscience becomes our problem. Within the average person there is a moral judgement faculty that is difficult to compromise. We find ourselves compelled to act on this value, put it into practice, and make it more so.

Moral conduct cannot be reduced to a code of ethics or a set of rules. What is demanded of us is character built upon knowledge and conception. One has to live with one's conscience and sometimes that means one has to move from the common position. Indeed, conscience cannot be given too high a place in ourselves and society.

\*\*\*\*\*

LET'S YEARN FOR FUTURE, NOT THE PAST

There is a joke which claims it takes five persons today to replace a light bulb - one to screw it in, the other four to say how much better the old one was. We are beset these days with nostalgia, but having in mind our well-developed capacity for self-deception, one might be wary of wallowing in such sentiments.

Being homesick for the past, to

long for things as they used to be, is a very selective process. We fondly remember the "good old days" when prices were cheaper, life was less hurried, and society was more personal. We tend to forget the penurious incomes, the limitations of educational and medical programmes to help us. A lot of things weren't good about the "good old days."

Today we need a renewed desire to long for the future. Our word "future" derives from the Latin "futurus" meaning "about to be." Perhaps we should coin a word, "futorialgia", to look forward with hope and expectation, as a word to go with nostalgia, to look back with yearning for the past.

After all we stand on the threshold of an intriguing future, beckoning us to what may be the greatest and best days humankind will ever know. There is a possibility to use the helpful resources and technology we now have to create an ideal place and life for generations to come.

The rapid pace of change in our lifetime has sometimes seemed frightening, but the possibilities for betterment we face today can be exciting and enlivening. As a New Testament pastoral letter exhorts, "For God has not given us a spirit of cowardice, but a spirit of power and love and a sound mind."

We are in position today to make gigantic leaps forward for the good of all humankind.

\*\*\*\*\*

Religion Now is published in limited edition for family and friends by the Rev. Ross E. Readhead, B.A., B.D., Certificate in Corrections, McMaster University