EDITORIAL

The Power of the Living Idea

At the heart of every major movement or trend in history will be found some moral truth or living idea. The real history of the world is the story of these great ideas, their impact on human thought, and man's reaction to them.

The outstanding figures of world history are easily identified. Christ, Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tse, Krishna, set their seal on an age. Their thought has a timeless and monumental quality. By their side the generals and revolutionaries, effective and necessary, are of only relative significance.

Within the mainstream of thought initiated by these archetypal men a host of lesser trends and movements are to be found. While many of these have a few great names linked with them—Francis Bacon in science; Napoleon in freeing Europe from serfdom and giving it a code of law; Freud and Jung in psychology; Marx and Engels in Communism;—they cannot in the true sense be regarded as the initiators of an historical trend. Rather do they bring together a number of converging forces and, acting as a catalyst, create out of them an integrated historical movement.

The European Renaissance is an excellent example of an evolutionary movement compounded of many factors and emerging without the assistance of any one key individual figure. Europe of the Middle Ages, hidebound by doctrine, was ripe for change. The Crusaders had opened a door through which Arab knowledge of mathematics, science and medicine entered. The new interest in the literature and thought of ancient Greece had a profound effect in stimulating the spirit of enquiry and interest in the external world. These and other factors "cracked" the rigid structure of medieval life and once this was done the remarkable tide of Renaissance thought did the rest. The influence of Greek thought on medieval Europe illustrates two further facets of the power of the living idea—longevity and universality—for we now know that Indian philosophy had a powerful influence on the growth of ideas in ancient Greece.

We live today in what is probably the most revolutionary moment in human history. Not only is science transforming the external world, but men are searching for a new vision and a new meaning in life. The old Gods no longer satisfy. It is not that they are not good Gods, but that the stream of man's evolving consciousness has moved beyond them. They no longer provide inspiration or the seed of growth. What therefore are the living ideas, from among the many that demand attention, that can satisfy the human mind today? What, if any, are the moral imperatives of our time?

The age of experience

Contrast between past and present can often provide a pointer to the future. The old idea of authority, whether it be the authority of the father, the teacher, the
priest, the husband, or the state is rapidly losing its vitality. In its place people today seek freedom, independence, and the opportunity to learn by direct personal experience. The growth of existentialist thought and philosophy reflects this trend. So does the growth of democratic participation in politics. The reactions of labour against all forms of authoritarian management and paternalism in industry likewise express the realisation that Man has come of age and must “put away childish things.” The fact that we have not yet discovered the “adult” substitute is neither here nor there. This is to be expected in a transition period such as that in which we now live.

Another contrast is that between the emphasis placed in the past on the individual and the growing tendency to give prime consideration to the group or collectivity. Whether this is due to the increasing integration of humanity at all levels, or to the spread of universal education or to other factors, need not concern us here. The trend is obvious and powerful and worldwide. Paradoxically it does not mean the loss of individuality, for, as many thinkers and psychologists are now pointing out, the concept of the individual personality loses all meaning when divorced from its relationship to people and the social group. In this sense the emphasis on the group can be said to provide man with a new dimension for individual development.

There are many other significant contrasts. Ideological and absolutist thinking is being replaced by tolerance and the idea of relativity in every area of human life. The mystical approach to reality is being balanced by the growth of a mental and scientific attitude. The idea that suffering and sacrifice are necessarily virtuous has lost much of its vitality, and the emphasis today is on a vital positivity that welcomes the future and forgets the past. The age of the “miserable sinner” and of negation is being replaced by the concept of the abundant life.

Synthesis

Perhaps the dominant idea that emerges is the recognition of an underlying synthesis and unity in life. In every field of human activity, without exception, barriers are being broken down. Men everywhere feel a growing sense of universality. It will not be long before they will be able to see and understand the nature of the relationships that bind apparently diverse parts into an integrated whole.

The most important symbol of one world today is the United Nations. A little over a year ago Dag Hammarskjöld was tragically killed. To millions of humble people, as well as to statesmen and his closest colleagues, he was a living embodiment of all that the UN stands for. His public work as a statesman, mediator and administrator is well known. But history may record his greatest contribution to be the philosopher-architect of the ideas and principles that should guide the UN in the years immediately ahead. He set his stamp on the UN through his thought, and he embodied his thought in the many speeches that he made. It is to be hoped that these speeches will one day be gathered together and published in book form. In this issue, which goes to press as a new session of the UN General Assembly opens, we print the text of an address by Dag Hammarskjöld in which he discusses the signs of a new synthesis emerging in “Asia, Africa and the West.” Our World Commentary in which we discuss the present position of the UN in the world today, uses material from another speech in which Hammarskjöld makes his own assessment of the United Nations.