

## ON BECOMING HUMAN AND THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL STRUCTURES\*

### Some Basic Principles of Social Evolution

This paper will attempt to illustrate, firstly, how organizations and communities evolve and, secondly, how they react with the individuals who compose them to create, as it were, two kinds of interacting and inseparable self - the individual and the group self. Our identity and sense of self is largely what has been given to us by the different social groups to which we belong, and the groups themselves have an identity created from the sum of the values and feelings of all the individuals that make them up. The social group is an organism with an identity and will of its own, which sociologists recognize clearly in mob behaviour but, curiously, not in the behaviour of those who come together for religious purposes and form a community.

As new types of social structure evolve, so too do new kinds of human groups and, what is vital to remember, new kinds of human beings. From this evolutionary perspective the accepted notion of humanity as a fixed quality of the species *Homo sapiens* is seen as a misconception that has acted as an unconscious brake on social and spiritual evolution. Once that brake has been removed, there is no doubt that the development of the species can surge forward. What the social anthropologist might see as an improvement of the species, the theologian will see as self-transformation, that fundamental principle of Christianity which is recognized in the use of the Greek term *metanoia*. It should be apparent, then, that in order for this developmental process to go forward most rapidly and effectively we need, first of all, a clear vision of what kind of psychological change is required - what exactly is

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this *metanoia* for which we aim? - and, secondly, a clear vision of the kind of social structures best fitted to bring it about.

Since we are concerned with deliberate change, we should be aware of general principles by which social organisms change through time, focusing on what might be called “laws of change” because they are found universally and follow from the nature of human beings and the demands, opportunities and temptations made by any organization upon the individuals who must operate the structures. Without awareness of these laws, organizations invariably tend to decay and become dysfunctional; with awareness of them, we can plan consciously to harness human strengths and neutralize human weaknesses, so that the organization functions as near to the ideal as is possible, given that they will always be made up of very imperfect human beings.

The most elementary law is that the goal of an organization determines its corporate strategy, and the strategy determines its structure. This cause and effect sequence means that the evolution of the social groups follows various broad patterns in which goals, strategies and structures evolve by interaction. Very few organizations, perhaps none at all, remain in their original primitive form. A healthy group is a system in steady state, with dynamic tension between changing goals, strategies and structures, but such tension is hard to maintain, almost by definition, for the need to change a goal will not be apparent to an executive whose expertise has been acquired in pursuing something different. It is said that when the Wright brothers came to Britain to sell their newly invented, and proven, airplane to the Ministry of Defence, they were told, so the story goes, that the master of the battlefield was the cavalry horse. This sort of strategic blindness afflicts most established experts, from business corporations to churches, and since the structures of all major religions were laid down long before it was known that we belong to an evolving species, it will be no surprise if the “leaders” are unable to see their responsibility to help bring about spiritual evolution. More usually they see their role as conservative, handing on a “deposit of faith”.

At the other extreme, the goals of an organization can change in an imperceptible and unplanned way because the membership may so alter over a long period that a change in corporate purpose happens without any decision having been taken at any level. Many of the ancient

guilds of the city of London - mercers, salters and cordwainers, etc. - still exist in the form of corporations and livery companies, no longer involved in trade but as educational charities and unofficially as dining clubs. This kind of entropy is a law always at work in any organization, and poses problems of many kinds. On the one hand, enthusiasts for the initial cause will find themselves marginalized and feel forced to resign and found a new group in order to achieve the aims for which they had originally joined group. On the other hand, as with the extreme example of trade guilds just noted, unwillingness to dissolve the association and forego many secondary benefits creates a natural inertia. It might not be a bad thing if every goal-oriented group were founded with a "review by date" or, perhaps better still, with a stipulated "wind-up date", which could only be extended for given and constitutional reasons. In the real world, however, we can do little more than recognize that organizational structure, once in place, tends to become permanent - as the term "structure" would imply - with the obvious danger that when a change in strategy may be required, the structure is in danger of becoming counter-functional. In fact, the single word "structure" is somewhat misleading, since it is made up in practice of sub-groups with executive structures that can develop goals of their own, and these can rapidly interfere with attainment of the wider goals of the organization that they supposedly serve. The principle is familiar in Britain through the television comedy series, "Yes, Minister", in which an unelected civil servant continually subverts the plans of the elected minister with his own. (Some years ago the newly elected prime minister of Denmark gave a copy of the book of the series to all his cabinet colleagues, to be used as an instruction manual.) A somewhat different danger arises from the fact that the executive arm of any group usually sets the agenda as well as executing it, sometimes unwillingly. This assumption of power is acceptable because members are willing to delegate this responsibility on the quite logical grounds that the governing body are experts by the mere fact that they are in a governing position.

Most groups have an instinct for survival which is stronger than any idealism or often of logic, and the instinct grows in proportion to the size of the body, so that when one has churches with many millions of members, and salaried staff in proportion, it is extremely difficult to

generate awareness of contradiction between goals, strategies and structures, for once it is clearly seen that the organization is either not fulfilling its role or has no useful role left to play, there will follow an upheaval that few could contemplate. Better, it is universally thought, to alter the goals to match what is there than put oneself out of a job. The corollary of this slow erosion of the dynamics of the group is that labels become self-justifying to the extent that most people will accept the most extreme mismatch between the historical aims of an organization and what it actually does in practice. The shares of a large department store chain, for example, will command a high price, despite low profits, because it has become a “national institution”, the Inquisition of the Roman Catholic church practiced torture routinely, without any sense of discrepancy with the ideals that brought the church into existence and, closer to our time, the Nazi Christian Church in the 1930’s attained some degree of legitimacy simply because “Christian” was considered an all-purpose legitimation, even when it included a Christ whose main message was anti-semitism. The fact that Jesus told his followers that his mission was solely to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 15:24) was conveniently overlooked.

The way in which religions, and particularly Christianity, metamorphose is a vast theme, which requires a far broader canvas than this short paper, but the principles at work can be simplified and telescoped by looking at the way other organizations change, and for this purpose it would be instructive to look at the present Football League, which has become a specialized structure for making money but which had its origins, or an important part of them, in religious special interest groups.

### **The Metamorphosis of Trinity Church Cricket Club**

In the late nineteenth century Trinity Church, Bordesley, an area of Birmingham, had a recreation club which played cricket. The club, like thousands of similar church clubs was, in effect, a special interest group of the Anglican church. The looseness of its structure was demonstrated when in 1875 its members decided to play football to fill in the winter gap between cricket seasons. This was the first step in a metamorphosis which was to change its nature and to structure it for the world of business a century later. Within a year or two of Trinity Church Cricket Club’s

decision to play football as well, a separate team was spun off which was given the name of Small Heath Alliance. The new offshoot, by now with only tenuous Anglican connections, offered no hint of greatness to come: half the team was made up from two families and games were played on waste land. In due course it prospered, however, and when the time came that the city of Birmingham felt the need for a football team to carry its name, Small Heath stepped into the gap, changed its name to Birmingham City F.C., and later became a limited company, no longer in subordinate relation to the vicar of the parish which had founded it but to the shareholders. It is now owned by a millionaire who has made his fortune by selling pornography.

Not far away in the same city an almost identical metamorphosis was happening at Villa Cross Wesleyan Chapel. Their cricket club was, in fact, so plastic in purpose and strategy that when the football team was formed from it in 1873, the first game, against Aston Brook St Mary's, was played with the first half as rugby and the second as soccer. Their confused identity was only sorted out when a Scottish soccer enthusiast, George Ramsay, joined the club in 1876. With his drive and vision, the club, now named Aston Villa, went on to become within ten years one of the top football clubs in the country, and a household name.

The same process was happening all over the country. If one looks at the history of the Football League one will find the same evolutionary trend evident in nearly twenty of today's League clubs: Charlton Athletic grew out of East Street Mission, Everton out of St Domingo's Sunday School, Fulham out of St Andrew's Sunday School, Bury F.C. out of a union of the Wesleyan and Unitarian football teams, and so on. Like all the other League members today, these clubs are now joint stock companies, and though on the surface their form and function are determined by the sport of football, in reality they are money-making organizations. They could subsist without playing football, but not if they stopped making money.

The lessons to be drawn from this latter day parable are several. It exemplifies a law of growth governing all living organizations by which secondary activities alter the original structure and in so doing alter its primary aims and strategies. Once an organization is in existence, there is a changing symbiosis between its goals, strategies and structures which can result in virtually any alteration to any of these factors happening,

if it is desired by the members, or by the governing body, or sometimes even comes about by chance. As with the football teams used here as an example, the alternations can happen in small steps as a response to changing needs and circumstances. There is probably no clear point when what started as an extra-church activity turned into public entertainment but, in the case of some clubs which have opted for Plc status, it was that decision which launched them officially into profit-making. The potential for any organization doing a U-turn is almost unlimited if the circumstances are right or the leaders persuasive enough or the members passive enough.

Having looked briefly at the processes of social micro-evolution at work, attention will now be directed to the growth of large social and political structures and their relation to the evolution of religion.

### **The Religious Significance of the City**

Of all the social structures which have affected the evolution of religion, the city is the most influential and the least appreciated today. A city is not just an agglomeration of people, it is a social grouping with a structure and a purpose that were stable some four or five thousand years after its creation but which have changed dramatically in the last two centuries. From its origins the commercial, cultural and religious functions of the city grew together inextricably, and the fact that the city is in crisis today is largely due to the fact that these three strands of human activity have become separated. We take the city very much for granted as a natural social form, but when it first emerged in history it was as a completely new type of social organism and an essentially religious one. It was a social cell with a religious nucleus, namely a temple which was the home of the protecting god of the community. The temple had its protective membrane in the form of the citadel, a fortified centre within the city wall. The citadel was not just the last redoubt within the city, it contained all the government offices and the palace of the king, who was usually regarded as having divine authority and status. The citadel's deepest religious significance came, however, from the fact that it housed the temple dwelling of the god to whom the city was dedicated and whose capture was felt as the destruction of something vital within each individual, a unifying force. It can be compared to the nucleus of a cell, but can even more literally be seen as the brain of a

social body. It created a type of psychology and a kind of human being quite different from the village. Unlike the village, which was essentially dwellings built close to each other for mutual convenience, the city was a socio-biological organism.

As happens so often in evolution, the city was not consciously created with this purpose in view but emerged as a response to a more immediate need. Its role as a living centre of religious consciousness was an overlaid function on a settlement which, without doubt, originated as a centre for trade, for most of the great ancient cities were ports or crossing points on trade routes, where barter could take place most effectively. The exceptions to this tend to prove the main point, for they are the great temple cities of the Mayan civilization in Central America and of the Hindu-turned-Buddhist cities such as Angkor Wat in Indo-China and, on a different level, some of the cathedral cities of the late Middle Ages in Europe. These were effectively “designer cities” built for specifically religious purposes: whatever commerce there was tended to develop as an extension of the religious centre, rather than vice versa.

That the city always had a religious function can be inferred from a mass of historical data and from the linguistic evidence that pagans (*pagani* - country dwellers) were recognized as those who were less religiously evolved. We tend to think, naively, that a city is defined by size, but in fact its definition as a specific centre for religion only faded when mediaeval Christianity created thousands of such centres in towns and villages. A hamlet was effectively defined not by the fact that it was smaller than the village but by the fact that it had no church. With Roman Christianity there occurred a continent-wide standardization - of theology, of ethics and liturgy - which had the effect of making any church a religious nucleus, and any place with a church a socio-religious organism. Furthermore, the smallest village church was equal to the greatest cathedral in being a literal house of God, for both contained the consecrated species from the Mass. In any Catholic church today, and often in the Anglican and other Episcopalian churches, there is a tabernacle which contains in the form of bread what the faithful believe to be the “body, blood, soul and divinity” of Jesus Christ, the second person of the divine Trinity. When any village church could house the Son of God in this way, the religious distinctiveness of the city faded. The city’s religious significance faded further as science and technology

expanded, for the worship of the Christian god now gave way to the dedicated pursuit of manufacturing, distribution and profit-making.

Technology has taken the religious heart out of the city, replacing it in two great movements, first with factories surrounded by concentric rings of housing, from slums to suburban estates, and then with offices. The connection between the city and religion has been effectively severed in the west as the city has sprawled amorphously into conurbations, and it has been totally destroyed in developing countries through the phenomenon of favelas and shanty suburbs, devoid of anything like the churches of old. London is a particularly interesting example of the decay of the city as a socio-religious organism, for what is called “The City”, the central “Square Mile”, is now so devoid of residents that the parish church of St Lawrence Jewry, where Thomas More once worshipped, actually closes on Sunday. Its function has become to serve a transient daily population of stockbrokers, bankers and office workers during the week.

Because it is the conurbation that we are most familiar with, and because the city has had its socio-religious nucleus removed by various economic factors, we are not accustomed to see the city as an essentially religious grouping. This is a gap in common awareness that urgently needs to be filled, for otherwise we shall tend to assume that religious structures are by definition separate, and should be kept separate, from social, political and economic structures. That social and religious structures existed with little separation in the past does not necessarily prove that they ought to do so in the future, but the phenomenon of social alienation which has so concerned sociologists for a century is surely *prima facie* evidence that this line of thought should be pursued. Lewis Mumford’s classic, *The City in History*, (first published in 1961) is a good source book for data on this issue, and it is not without interest that on its opening page he asks the question that any religious revival must first address: “Can the needs and desires that have impelled men to live in cities recover, *at a still higher level*, all that Jerusalem, Athens or Florence *seemed to promise*? [emphasis added] Is there still ... the possibility of building a new kind of city that will, freed of inner contradictions, positively enrich and further human development?”

Mumford’s introduction is worth quoting again in his anticipation of the overarching theme of this paper, that religious renewal cannot

happen within existing social structures. Though he writes as a secular historian, he recognizes the inseparability of social progress from religious vitality in saying of his historical panorama, "When we finally reach our own age, we shall find that urban society has come to a parting of the ways. Here, with a heightened consciousness of our past and a clearer insight into decisions made long ago, which often still control us, we shall be able to face the immediate decision that now confronts man and will, one way or another, *ultimately transform him*: namely whether he shall devote himself to the development of his own deepest humanity, or whether he shall surrender himself to the now almost automatic forces he himself has set in motion and yield place to his dehumanized alter ego .... *That second choice will bring with it a progressive loss of feeling, emotion, creative audacity, and finally consciousness.*" [emphasis added]

Thirty years after these words were written, the world appears to be moving down the second path, towards dehumanization and loss of nerve, and there is no organization in existence to turn it back and redirect it, as once the Christian church was able to redirect and reconstruct the shattered civilization of Rome. If such a catalyst for rebuilding the present is to appear, it must start with a vision that will probably be more attacked than welcomed, since the very fact that it must by definition be new, unfamiliar and untested will set it against those existing institutions which grew out of a vision of civilization that must be displaced by the new.

### **Critical Mass in the City and in Future Community**

Of the social changes that the future will require, two things can be said with some certainty. Firstly, some new socio-religious grouping must be deliberately constructed to replace the old community of the city, which is no longer a living social organism – though the new will doubtless be embedded in the old. Secondly, whatever new community is planned must have the critical mass that enabled the city to become such a force in history. The concept of the city originated in the Greek *polis*, and when Aristotle famously said that man was a *zoon politikon* he meant that the highest human development came from living in cities. Rarely has any famous phrase been so badly mistranslated, for the common understanding that man is a political animal misses his point altogether.

We, who take the city so much for granted as a social unity, too easily forget that the Greek city was really a city state, a self-contained unit big enough to provide all the cultural functions that were needed for human growth - the temples, academies, gymnasia, etc. - as well as the economic components of markets, coinage and internal taxation, but small enough to enable every free male citizen to play a political role. After Alexander's imperial conquest came not a proliferation of the independent city state but of the *metropolis*, literally the "mother city", which was the administrative and cultural centre for a wide region. What we would recognize as the city today, in London, New York, Tokyo, etc., is really the metropolis, and does not have the self-containment of the Greek *polis*. There is really nothing to compare with the Greek city state, if we make a few exceptions like Singapore or perhaps the Swiss cantons. It has been replaced by the nation state, which itself is in crisis. The point at issue is that where the Greek city was once a self-conscious community with aims and functions that could be controlled by its inhabitants, and which deliberately moulded them to a unified ideal, no similar community exists today. If we want it, we must now create it within the context of a world which is becoming a global market, if not McLuhan's global village. Insofar as a community is defined by communication, we are now facing a challenge and an opportunity on a scale that could hardly have been foreseen a generation ago. It can be understood as the creation of a new kind of community - perhaps several new kinds - which will perform the social, economic and religious functions that can be seen most clearly harmonized in the city state. To do this it must have critical mass, that is to say, sufficient members to enable all functions to be carried out expertly. This, in turn, creates the pre-requirement for the internal structures - administrative, legal, commercial, etc. - that these functions will demand.

Critical social mass is also required to generate a corporate consciousness, what one might call a critical temperature in matters intellectual, emotional, theological. In the past, if one wished to share in this liveliness, one had to live in the city, for village life, or even small town life was limited and stultifying in many respects. Modern communication, however, has the effect of generating an intensity of consciousness through the interchange of ideas, without the participants needing to live close together in a city. One cannot live by the internet

alone, and face to face meeting is also important, but the existence of the internet, satellite communication, DVD and video-conferencing offers new opportunities and challenges in creating community, and these remain totally unexplored. Once the most effective mix and balance has been found - a task that may well take a couple of generations - the need for the city in its historical form will disappear. This will be a social advance long overdue, for the city has in many respects degenerated into a pathological and counter-evolutionary unit. I will not say "community", for the city which in ancient Greece was the human community *par excellence* is now a kind of anti-community, made up of individuals all doing their own thing. Where once the heart of the city was the heart of civilization, it is now the locus of the "inner city problem". About two hundred and fifty years ago Samuel Johnson could say that the person who was tired of London was tired of life, but the London he knew has become dysfunctional, and life there today, as in most large cities, has become an increasingly exhausting, frustrating and apprehensive way of life.

Each succeeding step in the evolution of larger social groups has been more "unnatural", more demanding of rational persuasion and compromise, and more reliant on artificial, non-genetic bonds arising not from family or blood relationships but from common history, language, religion and defensive interests. We have had to learn how to live in cities, and we shall have to learn how to live in the communities of the future: bonding will be a much more self-conscious and rational procedure than it has ever been in the past. As against the family or "blood" bond, the rational bond first became an integral part of community consciousness with the creation of the nation state, and the logic of the national community still struggles to overcome the "gut" feeling that makes the clan or tribe or tribal nation intensely and unreflectively aware of its identity and its members "naturally" hostile to those of other tribes, who are seen, and felt, as "them" and not "us". The process by which tribal consciousness has been transcended will be looked at more closely below. It will be seen to be in most respects highly artificial, but the next steps which will take us towards a true global community - however distant that prospect - will be the most artificial and unnatural of all.

## **The Evolution of the Nation State**

If the ancient city is a social organism that can be compared to a living cell, with the temple as its nucleus, the nation state may be seen as a social body made up of many kinds of organs, like the human body. We take it very much as part of the natural political order, but in fact the concept of the nation state, and its materialization is a fairly recent development and in many ways unnatural. Whereas the city originated (by and large) in an unplanned way when individuals came together physically to trade, and the nation originated in tribes and clans of common ancestry coming together naturally into a bigger unit, the nation state was created deliberately when large political groupings, usually the size of a kingdom, deliberately chose to give up some of their sovereignty and amalgamate. The reasons for this choice are so diverse that the definition of the nation state has always been vague. Within it there are cross currents of identity factors - people who have the same religion but speak a different language, or vice versa, people of different ethnic stock who have a common commercial interest, and so on. It can be seen, then, that the nation state is not a particularly stable grouping, except in war, when survival makes brothers of many different kinds of bed-fellow. Many nation states began as the outcome of dynastic marriages which brought different nations into the same kingdom. Almost all are held together by economic and defensive factors. In this latter sense the nation state has a negative identity. In practical terms it is defined by the loose criterion put forward by Woodrow Wilson after the First World War, that it is a political grouping with the power of self-determination. Max Weber's definition, that it is the social unity which has a monopoly of legitimized violence, is complementary to this.

There is an inherent ambiguity in the nation state as community, for each of its component parts, which are culturally homogeneous, feels a more powerful and natural sense of community than with the whole. At the same time there is an evolutionary pull towards the state widening its boundaries and merging into a superstate by pooling its sovereignty in exactly the same way that the original nations did when they become part of the nation state. Great Britain shows these two opposed tensions very clearly today, with the original nations calling for, and getting, devolution of political powers (while still sharing defence, taxation, immigration and other matters), while Britain as a

whole is moving towards becoming a member of some kind of European federation. Perhaps the most visible sign of what this will ultimately entail is not the common currency but the common police force which the French Prime Minister recently called for. The thought of a British bobby in a kepi concentrates the mind wonderfully on the cultural-emotional issues that do not appear in the documents about integration and harmonization.

Given the globalization of trade and communications, the trend towards larger groupings is eventually going to overcome the trend towards devolution and, in fact, construction of a Great Europe, as Great Britain was once welded together from its constituent nations, will probably depend upon a deliberate process of "regionalization" which will take devolution down to a lower level than that of the component nation states. Thus we can see the future emerging out of seemingly contradictory processes of breaking down and building up. What will in the end emerge cannot be foreseen, not least because the next step of merging a "Great Europe" with a notional "Great America" or "Great Asia", etc. to form a global political entity is fraught with problems at every possible level. At present we can barely see what the questions are, let alone the answers, but it is surely true to say that we must first find out how to make a European federation work before embarking on any kind of global community based on closer cooperation of nations or cultural blocs. One can be sure that unless a new "spiritual" ideal is found as a uniting force, the European dream will be dangerously unstable. Underlying a very complex picture of different national interests, defensive security and economic stability is the concept of an historical entity called "Europe" which grew out of both a religious and intellectual ideal - Christianity and the Enlightenment - and unless two similar ideals can somehow be found to animate the new political-economic body to be called Europe, it is hard to see what is to prevent old national tensions ultimately breaking down a future superstate as ethnic tensions destroyed the theoretical unity of the former Yugoslavia. I turn now to the spiritual force which contributed most fundamentally to the development of the ideal and the historical reality of Europe.

## **The Benedictine Revolution**

After the panoramic sweep of the last section, I would like to return attention to the Roman empire in ruins and the details of one process by which it was reconstructed over a period of about six centuries into a new kind of civilization, the Middle Ages. Broadly, there were two social forces at work during this period, political and religious, which eventually supported each other in more or less intermittent harmony, but in the beginning there was nothing that could be called political, for the superb Roman administration had been swept away in the barbarian invasions and replaced with only the whims of marauding bands that stayed in the territory they had first invaded for booty.

The religious system in very large part filled the political vacuum, with regional bishops and archbishops taking over many of the functions of the now non-existent Roman governors, prefects and administrators. Significantly, when Attila the Hun arrived at the gates of Rome in 452 AD, there was no civil leader to negotiate with him and it was left to Pope Leo I. This pattern was to be repeated on different scales until some three centuries later, by which time Charlemagne had assumed political control over the heart of Europe, and thenceforth the twin powers of church and state worked together. The moral support of the Church was given to the Holy Roman Empire in exchange for the protection of its interests, but in some ways the Church was the dominant partner, since it had inherited the stable structure and global mindset of ancient Rome. The diocese, for instance, was originally a civil administrative unit initiated by the Emperor Diocletian, whereas the petty kingdoms of Europe were *ad hoc* territorial units, constantly changing through regional conflict and dynastic marriage. In almost all matters of territorial dispute, the Pope was accepted as the ultimate arbiter. From this sharing of secular and religious power grew the culture of the Middle Ages. The religious reformation which was to end it was equally a political revolution, for, as may be seen from the example of Elizabeth I in England and Luther and the German princes, a change in doctrine served as an adequate pretext for throwing off the pervasive political power of Rome.

The administrative structure of Roman Christianity was as hierarchical as that of the imperial structure which it had inherited, but alongside it - or, rather, in the interstices - grew up a religious

microstructure which was to have a fundamental effect on Western civilization and calls now for re-examination as a partial model for religious reform in our time. This was the monastic and conventual movement, an establishment of communities which began with Benedictinism, but branched out into other forms. The Benedictine movement is not usually called a revolution, but it most certainly was. Starting from the most inauspicious of beginnings, it grew into a civilizing force which quietly, unintentionally and almost despite itself, changed the face of Europe. What began as one man's escape from the world, and from the debauchery and civil chaos of Rome was to transform the social debris left over from the Roman empire into a dynamic and humanitarian culture. One thinks of Emerson's epigram about men beating a path to the inventor of a better mousetrap, for Benedict's desire to live as a hermit in the forest resulted in his attracting, by the force of his wisdom and personality, a group of young men who wished to imitate him. From this small beginning grew a system of independent religious and educational communities, from the very small to the very large, which at its peak is estimated to have numbered about 30,000. After the Bible, the Rule of St Benedict had a more formative influence on Europe than any other book. It became, as it were, the accepted DIY handbook for organizing a community.

From the political point of view, this system of communities was important because it was autonomous within the fixed hierarchies of the time. This is a simplification of a complex situation, but essentially true: neither the local bishop nor lord had jurisdiction over the monastic house nor within its grounds. With this anomalous degree of freedom the monastic tradition was able to grow by its inherent dynamic and this revealed more than purely religious influences at work. An economic aspect developed, for instance, as the larger monasteries became to a large extent self-supporting communities and eventually took their place within the wider economy. In England Cistercian monasteries, which were an offshoot of Benedictinism, became major wool exporters, and in general the monasteries were centres of best agricultural practice. Because of the advantages of being economically self-sustaining, there was constant pressure on a small house to become larger, and with increase in size came socio-political effects, so that from the humble beginning of the movement emerged lord abbots to take their place

alongside the lord bishops, who too had a humble beginning in the elected overseers (*episcopi*) of the early Christian church. For several centuries the monasteries were the only places of education, had the only libraries, and were oases of learning in a general darkness of cultural devastation. Most of the nobility sent their children there to school, if only because there were no other schools to go to, and thus the civilizing influence of an ordered and spiritually based life affected all ranks of government. Christian practice may have been often honoured in the breach, but it was recognized as a norm because so many rulers had experience of it during their formative years.

The most central fact of the Benedictine revolution was, however, that it was a planned environment where personal transformation could be pursued most effectively. The monastery was to be, in Benedictine's words, a "school of the Lord's service" and its function was to facilitate a changed way of life (*conversio morum*) which both witnessed to and brought about a change of religious consciousness and, it is no exaggeration to say, a slow but perceptible change in human nature. At the very least it can be said that the taken-for-granted moral values of the high Middle Ages were a world away from those of the age which preceded it. It is easy to romanticize the past - and the very word "romanticize" is a witness to the enduring power of the Roman age to do just that - but the effectiveness of a dedicated spiritual community to transform society is exemplified in the now almost forgotten achievement of the Benedictine movement.

It raises both a question and a challenge for the present. The question is whether or not a reform of our current civilization, degenerating and collapsing around us as once the invincible Roman empire fell apart, can be achieved without a spiritual reform and a new kind of communitarian revolution. If the answer is in the negative - i.e., if we cannot advance or build anew without new forms of spiritually inspired community - the challenge is to find the form that is appropriate for our age as the Benedictine revolution was in its time, a form that will necessarily combine religious, educational and economic functions, and perhaps a specific socio-political function too.

### **The Hyperstate as Community**

The speculation and conclusions above on the need for a new kind of micro-community must go hand in hand with the developments in macro-community in which the planet is now irreversibly embroiled. Beneath a swirl of political and economic forces can be detected two deep currents which are driving events. The first is the decay of the nation state as a viable, self-contained and meaningful unit, and the second, closely related, is the rise of the transnational corporation. The TNC, as it is usually abbreviated, in cooperation with the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund, is activating a global agenda which entails the dismantling of national tariff barriers and national identities in the pursuit of profit. The sheer size of the great TNC's - and all are by definition bent on growth - makes them economic rivals to the nation state: there are probably not more than twenty states which have a greater gross national product than the profits of General Motors Corporation. Where globalization will end remains to be seen, but we can be sure that a corporation whose sole end is shareholder profit (and increasingly the directors' opportunity to loot it) will try to neutralize any social factor that would decrease it. Thus, as TNC's gain influence in government, as has been dramatically illustrated in the case of George Bush's "government-free" America, matters of social justice and care for the environment will be downgraded or even omitted from the national political agenda.

The situation from the viewpoint of nation states in process of amalgamation is hardly less depressing. If one abstracts artificially the socio-economic aspects of the future, which will increasingly escape from the electorate's control, and concentrate on what might be called the spiritual consequences of ever widening political union, it can be seen that formation of a hyperstate (such as the European Union) will call for unknown and untried forms of social structure that will have a profound effect on the kind of human being that will live within them. Though it is easy to forget, we are shaped by our communities far more than we shape them. What follows after the nation state could eventually produce a variant of *Homo sapiens* as different from what we see around us as we are different from mediaeval man. What the Nazi government could do in Germany in one generation should be a lasting example of the power of a future European government to shape the emotions and

behaviour of our descendants. In theory the danger of “big government” is balanced by applying the principle of subsidiarity, which determines that every political decision is taken by the smallest and most locally based group possible, thus ensuring that decision-making is kept close to the needs of the individual and the community. Subsidiarity is a grand principle but suffers from two fatal weaknesses when it comes to practice. In the first place, there is no slightest evidence that any central government will actively implement the principle in a genuinely democratic spirit. No general, it has been cynically but truthfully observed, ever wished to have a smaller army, and that is true of bureaucrats too. The history of the American federation shows a continuing struggle to maintain “states rights” even within a constitution that was specific in guaranteeing them. Subsidiarity runs clean counter to the creeping extension of power that happens in all administrative structures if not counter-checked. The emerging new Europe needs what the political commentator Larry Siedentop has called “subsidiarity with teeth”, but unfortunately when this concept of independence goes against the principle of unification, there is little doubt as to which one will win out. After all, the whole purpose of the venture is unification.

Can the principle of “regionalization” resolve this fundamental problem? In some respects perhaps, but it too runs counter to the force and the reality of community enlargement. If the hyperstate is to keep its genuine advantage of being a common market, it can only do so by demolishing internal tariff walls which exist in practice to protect the particular interests of regional communities. To take a concrete instance (and there are very many already that could be cited), a thriving market garden in Scotland, which provides so-called “satellite employment” in the area, could well be wiped out by imports at prices which would previously have been considered as dumping by large scale growers in more favoured climates. The fact that this produce may have to be trucked a thousand miles, with all the environmental consequences, carries no weight in such a discussion - or perhaps one should say “non-discussion”. Unification on an economic basis may mean marginally cheaper tomatoes in Scotland, a gain which is visible from the price sticker, but the destructive social effects have an invisible price tag. One is drawn to the logic of supporting a global or continental free market as one does a national free market, but there is an implicit and

profound contradiction between the ideal of freer trade and that of social community.

This contradiction cannot be emphasized too strongly, for if we are talking about a genuine community - that is, one which shapes us as human beings and enables our human potential to be realized - rather than about creating the most favourable environment for goods to be marketed at their cheapest price, regardless of hidden social costs, then we must reject the idea of a community united essentially by a common desire to have the cheapest material goods. In its place we must put some other ideal. Hence, in planning for some grouping wider than the nation state, we must be as clear as possible about what idea of community we are aiming for and whether the ideal is going to be plausibly achievable. There is no point in planning utopias that are beyond the strength of human nature to sustain. One we start to hypothesize any sort of federation beyond the nation state we are, whether we realize it or not, expressing a view about the kind of person we ourselves would want to become and the kind of human being we would want to see come into existence. The future course of human evolution is thus in our hands or, to be more accurate, in the hands of our elected politicians. On the basis of current European legislation, a visiting Martian would draw the conclusion that although we are ostensibly legislating for human beings who want environmental and other benefits, our political leaders' main purpose is to create a world for those who get their greatest satisfaction in life from pushing a trolley round a supermarket.

### **Metapolitics**

If there is one overarching principle to be drawn from the many historical considerations in this paper it is that the community of the future must be a learning community on a new scale. Where not very long ago the state was satisfied in bringing its citizens to a minimal level of literacy and numeracy - and before that had no necessary interest at all in educating the general populace - if the political process is concerned with helping everyone to release their full human potential, a radically new approach to life-long learning will be forced upon us. We have left behind the brute needs of a community of economic survival, in the West at least, and must now concentrate our attention on the power of

the community to shape us and on the need we have for communities that shape us as our best instincts would direct and tap our hidden potential. The paradox in this is that we need a community to reveal to us what our best instincts and hidden potential are. This function was fulfilled in the Christian West for many centuries by social structures of various kinds, but in a very limited way, simply because so much energy was concentrated on survival. What Darwin's theory of evolution has made us aware of is the curve of humankind's development, which can be traced backward through the study of history, and thus logically can be projected forward. To advance towards a higher and happier kind of human, to discover and fulfil our latent potential, we shall need social structures that both reveal it and assist us in making it actual.

This being accepted, the whole nature of political philosophy is brought into question, and a new metapolitical issues come to the fore. The purpose of politics is now seen as a choice between the complex socio-economic ends which we now take for granted and transforming the human species through political structures. The choice is put here too starkly, for even if the latter choice is accepted, political policy will be inseparable from socio-economic ends in the traditional way, even to the extent possibly of engaging in defensive warfare. Nevertheless, to see the long term aim of the state as enabling its citizens to change as human beings is clearly a break with the past. From Aristotle, through Thomas More and John Locke, to Marx, no political philosopher has thought in these terms, the highest goal of politics being assumed as the good life for the average human individual, whereas here we are talking of a deliberate attempt to change the concept of "being human", and this is likely to seem at best a task for religion or sheer pie in the sky. This paper does no more than raise the issue, pointing out that communities do change but the capacity for change is always limited by the human material within them, and that if we seriously seek change, we must write some provisions for it into our political constitutions. If the Founding Fathers of America could hold "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" as "self-evident truths", what kind of constitution would emerge from taking our evolutionary history as a self-evident truth and projecting a future stage of human evolution as a long term goal for which to aim?

Sociobiologists often err in the degree to which they make a direct comparison between human evolution and the rest of the animal world. Darwin found the most convincing evidence for his theory in the variety of finches of the isolated Galapagos Islands. From this variety he concluded that originally one species had been by chance introduced to the islands, with a couple of individuals blown in on a storm from the South American mainland. What had then happened under the influence of natural selection and, to a lesser degree, mutation was that each island had developed its own population of finches, four distinct genera and fourteen separate species, adapting their way of life and their shape, particularly their beaks, for eating seeds, shellfish, grubs, etc., one species becoming almost a kind of woodpecker. According to simple evolutionary theory, the human species should have diverged in the same way, but *Homo sapiens* opened a new chapter in evolution. The primate order certainly diverged, to produce gorillas, baboons, chimpanzees, etc. as well as humans, but the human species, while it has diverged in many ways under natural influences, just like the Galapagos finches, has not only maintained a great degree of uniformity (and the ability to interbreed) but manifests the convergence and unifying instinct which is seen at work in the nation state and the emerging new geopolitical blocs.

With the advent of global communication and rapid transport, the idea of a global family of nations becomes in theory achievable, but the theoretical possibility throws up the need for radically new thinking at every level, from historical to imaginative to logistical. However unreal the thought of improving the species might seem, the alternative is a future of increasing social strain and civil war within the newly emerging hyperstates and the possibility of war between them, a possibility made the more likely as precious resources like water and petroleum become scarce and great political blocs polarize around different religions, creating geopolitical fault lines. Samuel Huntington's influential work *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1997) regards these fault lines based on religious identity as quasi-permanent features, overlooking entirely the possibility of religious perception evolving in the future as it has done in the past, and thus tacitly condemns the planet to endless war. As the political unit – one cannot call it a community – becomes larger, so too will future wars become more

destructive, a point which has been made by many commentators. Einstein once said that World War III would be fought with nuclear arms, and World War IV with bows and arrows, and Leopold Kohr warned almost half a century ago in *The Breakdown of Nations* that any peace based on the balance of power was a global disaster waiting to happen, for sooner or later an accidental instability in one party would occur to break the balance.

If only for this reason we must re-examine the principles and assumptions on which the political community is constructed, in order to encourage convergence to a higher humanity. The only alternative is to leave the species in the state it now is, assume that human nature does not and cannot change, and wait for the inevitable disaster. Unification at the level of the heart, if it may be put so simply, will ultimately be necessary, and this will be a very long term project, measured certainly in generations, and will depend on many decisions great and small to promote or support it. As a first step, we must promote a global means of communication, a *lingua franca* which will be everyone's first or second language. This will be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for genuine communication. If proof were required, we need only look at the instability of nation states with more than one language, and it might be noted that the one obvious exception to this rule, Switzerland, is taking steps to introduce English as a common second language in the schools of the different cantons.

Community is all about communication, and the new communications technology enable us to overcome the inescapable territorial dimension that has until now shaped and driven the evolution of community, for a community had by definition to be made up of those occupying a particular region. The only exception to this are the transnational communities based on a common ideal such as religious belief or science, and these will provide the strongest clue to planning for a future global community. Leaving these aside for the moment, so long as the community-defining region was small, clearly defined and not over-populated, it was possible for the community to evolve unplanned through the extended family to the clan and tribe, each being a self-contained "natural" unity, related by blood and unified by a common language, history and religion. It is only when population pressure pushes communities to extend their historical boundaries that

the need for a new kind of composite community, operating under different rules, comes into existence. At the extremes, the new type of community can be seen in the administrative unity of the Roman empire, essentially monolithic in ideal and practice, and the pluralistic United States of America, which launched itself upon the experiment of “a nation of states under God”. Although models of both types are promoted today, particularly with regard to the European Union, neither is appropriate to modern conditions. Leopold Kohr argued passionately for regionalization in a return to ancient territories, nations, kingdoms, dukedoms, etc. which are the still visible historical and geographical entities to which people feel a natural affinity. My point, however, is that we must seek a new kind of non-territorial affinity, one not based on blood or common mythology but on some common ideal. We must contemplate an evolutionary leap, and evolutionary advance cannot be made without giving up some ways of thinking and behaving that seem “natural”. The advance of the human species can be plotted by the decisions that were made to abandon what seemed natural. Perhaps the most unnatural thing of all demanded of our forebears was giving up walking on four legs.

The future of the human species depends now upon sufficient individuals agreeing upon what kind of human species we want to bring into existence. Once we are clear about that we can set about the task of constructing communities to nurture it. Profiling the ideal new human is by no means a simple task, but that is the starting point.