VINOBA BHAVE

BEDE GRIFFITHS, O.S.B.

INDIA is one of the few countries left in the world which still has the capacity to produce saints. One of the most authentic of these was Ramana Maharshi, who died only a year or two ago and whose life by an English disciple, Arthur Osborne, was published recently. He lived a life of austerity equal to that of the greatest of the Fathers of the Desert and reached a state of contemplation which in Christian terms could only be described as habitual union with God. He himself remained a Hindu of the strict advaita (non-dualist) school and maintained simply that his 'self' had ceased to exist and that he had realized his true 'self' in God. I have met many people, both Christian and non-Christian, who have known him, and all of them testify to the extraordinary holiness of his character, which was shown not least in his wonderful compassion and kindness. It can hardly be doubted that the transition from a life of complete silence and solitude in the isolation of a cave to the later life of the Ashram with its constant concern for every human need marks the influence, at least unconsciously, of Christianity on the Hindu mind, but Maharshi remained typically Hindu in his character.

The same must be said of Vinoba Bhave, who continues the tradition of Hindu sanctity in our own day and who has also found an English disciple to write his life. Mr Tennyson has written an extremely good book.[1] He lived and worked, and what is more walked, with Vinoba, and though his actual contact with him was only for a short period, it was obviously the most momentous experience of his life and he has the born writer's flair for revealing the feeling and quality of his experience. The result is a book which not only gives a vivid record of the life and work of Vinoba, but is also able to show something of its historic importance for India and for the world.

Vinoba was born in 1895 of a Brahmin family, but his father was somewhat unorthodox and wanted his sons to have a western education and even to go to England to study. Vinoba showed remarkable proficiency in mathematics and in languages (to this day he says that mathematics comes only next to God in

1 *Saint on the March*, by H. Tennyson. (Gollancz; 13s. 6d.)

his affections, and he speaks most of the Indian languages). But he derived from his mother the traditional Hindu outlook on life and from an early age he wished to become a sunyasi, a wandering hermit. For this reason he took a vow of chastity at the age of twelve, a vow which has never been broken. His first goal as a sunyasi was to learn Sanskrit at Benares and to take part in anti-British agitation. But he was soon disillusioned with the ordinary methods of agitation and found his way to Ghandi's Ashram in Gujerat. Ghandi immediately recognized him not as a disciple but as a master. The next thirty years were spent in hard labour and austerity, until in 1940 he was chosen by Ghandi to be the first to court arrest in the 'individual non-violent movement' against British rule. He spent most of the next five years in gaol, where he learned Arabic in order to study the Koran and acquired a stomach ulcer, which has remained with him ever since and which he called his 'blessing' as it has enabled him to simplify his diet to the utmost limit.

This background of asceticism and austerity, of hard labour and learning, is essential to the understanding of Vinoba's life. Mr Tennyson makes a striking comparison between Ghandi, whom he had also met, and Vinoba. Ghandi was immensely human with the natural imperfections of human character and made politics the work of his life, though he strove to perfect his character and to raise politics to the level of the ideal. But Vinoba is primarily a saint, that is one who has learned to overcome himself and to dedicate his life wholly to God. His political, or rather social activity, for he hardly touches politics, is something which has come late into his life and is nothing but an overflow of his love for God. Again, though one may suspect an evangelical influence in the extraordinary charity and compassion of Vinoba, his religion remains purely Hindu, and though he respects Christianity there is no reason to see any conscious effect of it in his life.

Vinoba's mission began in April, 1951, when he left his Ashram for the first time and went to Hyderabad. Hyderabad after the merger with India had fallen into the power of the Communists who had established a reign of terror there. Vinoba thus met (and overcame) the challenge of Communism at the outset of his mission. This is of the greatest significance, for Vinoba's way represents the most authentic answer to Communism which has

yet been found. Vinoba is as radical in his aims as the Communists. He wants to take over the land and give it to the people, but his method is different. He does not wish to attack the capitalist but to convert him. He goes round the country asking land-owners to give up a portion of their land to the poor, and he has met with an astonishing response. So far three million two hundred thousand acres have been given, besides gifts of wells, bullocks, implements, etc., by people all over India. This is certainly a remarkable achievement and Mr Tennyson shows in graphic detail exactly how it has been done. But this falls far short of Vinoba's ambition, which is nothing less than to give land to all the landless and to create a social revolution.

What, then, are the principles of this social revolution? The first principle is that of non-violence; it is this that sets Vinoba's way in direct opposition to Communism. Vinoba is a disciple of Ghandi and has inherited his outlook. But even more he has inherited that tradition which goes back to the beginning of Indian history and constitutes perhaps the fundamental significance of the Indian outlook to the world. This tradition of non-violence is based, like everything in the Hindu tradition, on a metaphysical doctrine, the doctrine that human life is sacred, because man is made in the image of God and every human being is a manifestation of the divine. As Vinoba remarked on one occasion when he had spent a whole day interviewing villagers, 'To-day I have been visited 2,000 times by God.' Such a view leads not only to a respect for human life, but to a recognition of the fundamental goodness of human nature and its capacity to respond to an appeal to charity, and it is on this that Vinoba works.

The second principle is that of non-ownership. Vinoba believes that every man has an equal right to the necessities of life and that all should share them not by compulsion but freely. In particular, he maintains that land, like the sun and air, should be free for the use of all. Ultimately it would seem that he looks towards a state in which all land would be held in common and each would have what he required for his use; just as ultimately he would seem to look forward to a stateless society in which all would freely co-operate for the good of all. But these Utopian ideas do not lead to any lack of practical wisdom in his immediate plans. The most striking thing in all Vinoba's plans is his firm grasp of the principle that human life must be organized

on the basis of the village community. In India where the vast majority still live in villages this is a natural conception, but it is a matter of fundamental importance for the whole world. The tendency in India, as elsewhere, is to drag the people away from the land and to concentrate them in large industrial towns. This is surely the root problem of modern society and nowhere have we seen it faced and answered with such assurance as by Vinoba.

The fundamental unit of human society is, of course, the family. But the family cannot normally be independent, and the next most fundamental grouping is that of the village community. Vinoba would have each village as far as possible self-supporting both in food and clothing. He believes that work on the land and in such crafts as spinning and weaving constitutes the very basis of human life and happiness. This does not mean that he wishes to ban machinery. He is quite clear about this. It means simply that the use of machinery must be strictly subordinated to human needs. 'Electricity, good communications, irrigation, sewing machines, power-driven spindles and looms in the cottage yard, all these he wants.' He would not object to small factories in the village, but 'industries which require mass production or a high degree of centralization . . . should be restricted to the minimum necessary for the country's reasonable comfort'. It is a question of deliberately choosing a standard of living, which leads not to the artificial life of the big town but to the integrated life of the village community. He believes that 'men should live in associations small enough for them to have a sense of common identity and personal significance. . . . People should be surrounded by objects of love shaped by their own hands or the hands of their neighbours and the fruit of their labour should be seen to have relevance to the community in which they live.'

These are surely the basic principles of a good society. If we look back over the past we can see that this is the way in which human society has been normally organized all over the world. Particularly in the great creative periods of history, as in China and India and Europe from say 500 A.D. to 1500 A.D. this was the pattern of society. It did not exclude small towns and cities, but it was based on village life and everywhere the community was kept within the bounds of an integral social order. On the other hand in the great periods of decadence as in the later Babylonian and Egyptian Empires, and above all the Roman

Empire, the breakdown of society was caused by the centralization and concentration of life in large towns. India stands at present at the parting of the ways. She has been invaded by industrialism and has begun to develop a centralized state, but beneath this still rather fragile structure the traditional life of the villages with its roots in a spiritual doctrine going back to the beginning of history still remains. Can the two be combined? Can the ancient traditional life be developed and integrated without being destroyed in the structure of the new society? This is the question and Vinoba alone seems to show the way in which this can be done.

But it is not only the problem of India. In one way or another every country in the world has to answer this question. Somehow without losing the advantages which modern science and technology have given us and the democratic organization of the state, we have to find a way to recover the spiritual tradition which underlies all our civilization and to integrate this culture, which involves an economic and social order as well as a spiritual wisdom, into the structure of the new world. In the west it is the Catholic Church which is the guardian of this tradition and the responsibility lies with us as Catholics more than with anyone else. But shall we not have to take more seriously those elements in the gospel message which bear on this problem of ownership and self-defence? We have grown so accustomed to defending the rights of property and of self-defence, that it sometimes seems that the Church stands for the defence of capitalism and war. Is it not time that we recognized that the Gospel calls on us precisely to give up these natural rights in the name of a higher law? The call to give up lands and possessions in order to follow Christ is a call which is made to all. It is not a command; it is a counsel, but may it not be that the times are calling for a more generous response? May we not say that the early Church set the model of Christian perfection for all time when 'all the faithful held together and shared all they had, selling their possessions and their means of livelihood so as to distribute to all, as each had need'?

In the same way the call not to resist evil, but when struck on the one cheek to turn the other, to give to him who asks and when someone takes one's cloak to give one's coat also: all this is not, it is true, a command; it is a counsel of perfection; but it

shows how Christ wishes his disciples to act. Communal ownership and non-violence cannot be forced on a people; they lose all their value and become the means of its enslavement, if they are. But the call is there in the Gospel for all who will hear it. Has not Vinoba Bhave shown the way for us to become Christians and to realize the full significance of the Gospel in the modern world?

The development of self-supporting communities is extremely difficult in many countries in the west now, but it is not impossible to make a beginning. Let us not forget too that we have in the life of a monastery just such an ideal community, where the members give up all their possessions and have all things in common, and where the whole community is organized in such a way as to be as far as possible self-supporting. In the Middle Ages it was the monasteries which set the pattern for the whole civilization of Europe. May it not be through the development of monastic life both in the east and in the west that we may look for one way towards the development of such a new social order?

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1957.tb07596.x Published online by Cambridge University Press