

# Revitalizing Democracy



by **KIRTLEY F. MATHER**

**N**O UNUSUAL amount of clairvoyance is required to ascertain the fact that the star of democracy is no longer in the ascendancy. Large numbers of persons in America as well as in Europe have abandoned of late the democratic ideals which seemed such a desirable goal for social organization in the years following the war which was fatuously supposed to have made the world safe for democracy. Within the last two years two powerful European dictators have completely intimidated their peace-loving and more democratic neighbors. The United States faces today the most serious situation with regard to international relations that has arisen in all our history. And at the same time our internal problems are so complicated that grave doubts are being expressed concerning the possibility of solving them without a drastic change in our governmental structures and procedures.

It is obvious that there is imperative need for a revitalizing of the spirit of democracy. If government of the people, by the people, for the people is not to perish from the earth, there must be a new birth of loyalty to the democratic way of life, an increase in the vigor of our desire to resolve the age-old paradox of the individual in society in terms of freedom for the individual in the midst of restraint conducive to the common welfare of all.

If autocracy in business and industry through the domination of small controlling groups is to be replaced by more co-operative procedures, with a lessening of the tension between employers and employees, there must be a widening spread and deepening hold of the desire to organize our economic structures for production and distribution on a basis which recognizes the necessity for sharing resources and profits in an equitable manner. Above all, there must be an inherent willingness to discover the consequences of social actions of all sorts and a new sense of individual respon-

sibility for the welfare of all members of the human family.

## II

**T**HE REAL reason for the present partial eclipse of the star of democracy is, I believe, the fact that our souls have grown weary of the struggle. As a nation we are collectively tired from the long and unsuccessful battle against odds that are well-nigh overwhelming. As individuals we are on the verge of despair when we compare the vast dimensions of the task with the puny accomplishments of those who are trying to use their brains to find the way out of our difficulties. The low potential of the dynamic for democracy which has made possible the rise of dictators, whether in industry or government, is largely a consequence of spiritual exhaustion. Our vitality has been drained by a sense of frustration and the crushing weight of responsibilities which seem too great for us to lift. It is emotional fatigue which causes the people to abdicate in favor of supreme commissars or a Reichsführer or Il Duce.

To strengthen and invigorate the dynamic for democracy is therefore an inescapable part of the task of education in this second third of the twentieth century. If we are to make any progress in that direction, we must mobilize all the resources that we can find or can create. We must be idealistic in our aim but realistic in our practice. Above all we must have the courage of our convictions and the fearlessness which arises from a supreme faith in the essential worth of human nature.

First of all, there must be a clear definition of the democratic procedure sketched in outlines so bold that all may see and understand. The drafting of a constitution and the construction of ballot boxes are not enough. Even within the framework of a representative government there may be no abiding place for the

## THE FORUM

spirit of democracy. Unprincipled demagogues have all too often fattened on the very people who have chosen them as their representatives in the political arena. In a true democracy there is no room for passion or prejudice. Only through education may passions be controlled and prejudices eliminated.

There must, of course, be leaders in a democracy. But the difference between such leaders and those in a dictatorship is unfortunately not yet clear to the great majority of our fellow men. The dictator seeks and seizes power *over* people; the democratic leader seeks and gains power *with* people. The distinction is not a subtle one, and is readily recognized once it is brought into sharp focus. If the significance of that difference between power over people and power with people can be adequately presented to the consciousness of a weary world, it will go far toward revitalizing the will for democracy.

In the second place, those of us who are wholeheartedly committed to the democratic way of life must improve every opportunity to make plain the real nature of the only alternatives to that way which are available for mankind. Perhaps no more poignant picture of the most likely alternative now threatening the nations of the earth has been drawn than that contained in the words which H. M. Tomlinson puts into the mouth of Old Talbot in *All Our Yesterdays*:

"My church is down," I hear him saying. "My God has been deposed again. There is another god now, the State, the State Almighty. I tell you that god will be worse than Moloch. You had better keep that in mind. It has no vision; it has only expediency. It has no morality, only power. And it will have no arts, for it will punish the free spirit with death. It will allow no freedom, only uniformity. Its altar will be a ballot-box, and that will be a lie. Right before us is its pillar of fire. It has a heart of gun metal and its belly is full of wheels. You will have to face the brute, you will have to face it. It is nothing but our worst, nothing but the worst of us, lifted up. The children are being fed to it."

Those words written in 1929 have a prophetic ring, verified by the recent history of the majority of European countries and worthy of close attention here in the United States. The Black Legion, compulsory flag saluting, teachers' oaths of allegiance, myopic worship of the Constitution are straws which show the direction in which the wind is blowing. Flag-

ging zeal for democracy may be stimulated with new energy if the searchlight of understanding is turned on the pits that are at the end of each road which we are tempted by expediency to take in other directions.

### III

**T**HE THIRD and most important of the suggestions which I would offer as a procedure toward giving new vigor to the dynamic for democracy is the development of an adequate perspective concerning the relation between mankind and the whole process of creative evolution. Here I make bold to speak with the authority derived from my study of the development of life during geologic time. The pages of Mother Earth's diary reveal an amazing and thought-provoking record of the progress of living creatures throughout the long eras of earth history. Again and again, in the procession of the living, dynasties of animals or plants have arisen from a humble origin to a position of world supremacy — maintained for a comparatively brief period and then lost forever. Some have disappeared entirely as their paths have led them off into blind alleys. Others have sunk to a low level and have continued a degenerate existence to the present day. A few have given rise to other and more efficient forms of life which have superseded their predecessors as leaders in the procession. Gradually we are discovering some of the reasons for success and failure along the path of life. Beyond question man may profit from these experiences of the past, if he uses the intellectual and moral resources which are available for him.

For mankind is in the midst of the procession. We may be the latest product of the creative forces displaying themselves in the organic development taking place in this particular portion of the cosmos but we have no reason to assume that we are the last achievement of those forces. We are subject to many of the same cosmic regulations which have ordained the rise and fall of dinosaurs and three-toed horses, of trilobites and saber-toothed tigers. The expansion of modern scientific knowledge has not given to man the power to conquer nature, statements to that effect notwithstanding; it has simply helped man to humor nature more successfully than before. Still is it necessary for man to order his life,

## REVITALIZING DEMOCRACY

individually and collectively, in harmony with forces over which he has no control.

To be specific, the fact that man has arisen from a lowly origin through processes of evolution does not mean that he will necessarily continue his progress to still higher levels of activity. Evolution does not guarantee progress; it merely guarantees change or stagnation. The change may be for the better or the worse, depending on the conditions of time and place and the vitality of the individuals concerned. All of which is to say that, from the point of view of geologic life development, man has today a unique opportunity to gain continuing security for himself and his progeny on the face of the earth; but whether or not he takes advantage of that opportunity is to be determined largely by himself. So far as we can tell, man is the first animal possessing the power to determine his own evolutionary destiny, but there is nothing in the record which guarantees that he will use that power wisely.

There is, however, more than a suggestion in the record of the past as to the way in which man must continue his evolution if he is to take full advantage of the opportunity to make himself secure as an inhabitant of the earth. Time does not permit me to develop fully the many ideas which are pertinent here. Suffice it to say that there seems no escape from the conclusion that man's only hope for the future rests in his ability to use the common resources of the earth for the common welfare of all mankind on a co-operative basis. To commit himself to a policy of selfish competition — "dog eat dog"; "every man for himself, and the devil take all but a few of my most intimate friends"; and that sort of thing — is to commit collective suicide. In short, from the vantage point of the observer of the long procession of living organisms during geologic time, it appears that the ideals of democracy are the very ones demanded by the cosmic administration as a prerequisite for man's continuance as a ruling dynasty of earthly creatures.

### IV

**I**T SHOULD BE noted, however, that an effective dynamic cannot be imposed from without; it must be a result of growth from within. Knowledge of the cosmic demand should be a stimulus to such growth; there should be no attempt to force or drive reluc-

tant or recalcitrant individuals. This is another case of "whosoever will, may come." Knowledge reveals the opportunity; the opportunity may be taken or left, as individuals and groups decide.

This is of course the very essence of true education, through which one breathes the invigorating air of freedom, so essential to the spirit of democracy. Such education must be available for adults as well as provided for youths. Too many generations in America have vainly thought that the problems of democracy could be solved by the universal education of youth. The fact is that it is adults who must be revitalized and brought into balance in order to gain the dynamic force necessary to deal with the situation. It is adults who need the creative ability and the energy to carry the heavy responsibility which rests on mankind.

Indeed, the most encouraging element in contemporary American life is the high tide of interest in adult education which is even now sweeping across the land. In the healthy growth of adult education there is found the strongest hope for the creation of an adequate dynamic for democracy.

During the last few years we have been deeply concerned with the problem of physical undernourishment and starvation. We ought to be even more distressed by the greater starvation in the mental and spiritual areas of human life. The latter is directly responsible for many social ills, but, even worse, it robs the nation of the ability to deal constructively with any social evil. Paradoxical though it seems, the expenditure of mental and spiritual energy results in the acquisition of greater vitality in those areas. Just as food and sleep rebuild the weary body, so mental activity revitalizes the weary brain. Worn out and discouraged by our failure to develop a truly democratic system in our economic and political life, we may gain new energy through thinking about the structure of the atom or the history of ancient Greece or by giving vent to our latent creative desires in the field of art or music. In short, to achieve a potent dynamic for democracy we must invigorate ourselves through education. From intellectual and artistic pursuits there comes, all unaware, a new urge to throw oneself recklessly and creatively into the high adventure of building the new world established securely on the foundations of democracy.

# Must We Have Sermons?

by BRUCE BARTON



**L**AST SUNDAY was warm and sunny, and I was up early and drove the maids to seven-o'clock Mass. A Protestant of the Protestants — and sitting there in the back seat at Mass. One might ask: "What right have you to go sliding off to a Catholic Church at seven o'clock in the morning? Your own church needs you. It is not doing any too well. Don't you suppose it must be discouraging to the preacher?"

My mother would not have been happy about last Sunday's performance. She would have felt that it was somehow cheating the Almighty — getting up early and giving Him an hour that wasn't good for anything else and then going out to the golf club.

A friend once remarked that the Protestant Church serves table d'hôte, but the Catholic Church à la carte; he mentioned this as one of several evidences that the Catholic Church is smarter. Said he: "You can go to the Catholic Church any time from five o'clock in the morning to noon. The spiritual meal is ready. You can kneel and listen, and you are fed. But the Protestant Church plants its feet firmly on the very best hours of the day, deliberately to compete with mundane pleasures, and says: 'Eat at this time or you don't eat at all.' Both the morning and the afternoon are ruined." To which my mother would have replied that, if by giving that time to the Almighty we spoil the day for other pleasures, why, what is religion anyway but sacrifice? And where is it written that those who have faith are entitled also to pleasure?

Besides, she would not have liked the idea of

one of her sons being in a Catholic Church. Her spirit was tolerant; Catholicism was all right for Catholics. But surely her boy did not believe their creed! Besides, the service was in Latin; he didn't even know what was being said. What kind of worship was that?

Such questions from her would have been difficult to answer. If her son had said, "I do not care about their creed or about any creed," that would have hurt her. A creed was comfort to her. Everything had been settled; she did not have to think or question. But creeds are not so much comfort to her son. She would have been bewildered to hear him say: "One reason I like to go to the Catholic Church sometimes is just because I do *not* understand what is being said."

Sitting there in a back seat with closed eyes. Thinking how this drama of worship was going on in tens of thousands of churches all over the world — had been going on for 2,000 years and, in different form, for other thousands before. Stirred by the wonder of it, that from the very start of the race there should have been a consciousness of a *something within* and a relationship of that *something* to the *Something Great Without*. The *something within* forever trying to put itself into contact with the *Greater Something*. Blindly, blunderingly, humanity seeking for ways by which that contact could be brought about. Like the search for conductors of electricity. Copper and silver are conductors; wood is not. Music is silver, a conductor. One may shut his eyes and listen, and the *something within* is stirred. Incense, too, is a conductor, and the dim light of candles. Silence under the stars, the sunshine through the trees in spring — all these conduct a current to that *something within*. But not logic, not argument — not sermons. These are not addressed to that *something*. These are addressed to the mind, and the mind is not that *something*. These are not a conductor. These are wood.