

The Political Animal

The Social Philosophers, by Robert Nisbet, *New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1973. 466 pp. \$10.*

The Idea of Fraternity, by Wilson Carey McWilliams, *Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1973. 695 pp. \$14.95.*

WHAT IS COMMUNITY? What impells men to enter into society? Is society natural or artificial? Such questions have agitated the interest of men ever since they began pondering the riddles of life and the universe; but these questions are of especial and urgent interest today. When we speak of "community," observes Robert Nisbet, we usually use the word in its oldest sense of "relationships among individuals that are characterized by a high degree of personal intimacy, of social cohesion or moral commitment, and of continuity in time." Closely related to the idea of community is the idea of anticommunity, that is, of the fear of the "social void, of alienation, of estrangement from others, even from one's self, of loss of identity, of great open spaces of impersonality and rejection." Balzac spoke truly when he contended that man possesses a horror of mental, emotional, social and spiritual isolation; and it is this

fear of aloneness, argues Professor Nisbet, that motivates our intense craving for community—for “the sense of relatedness to others as persons that transcends all momentary isolations, separations, and other trials of life, endowing one with the sense of identity that can never come from germ plasm or from internal consciousness by itself.”

It seems that our own age is obsessed with a quest for community; the evidences are everywhere around us. We observe them in the various political, ethnic, economic and social groupings, in increasingly communal styles of living, and in the literature and philosophy of our times.

Our search for community, suggests Wilson Carey McWilliams, is a reaction to the atomistic individualism which permeates contemporary American society, and which is traceable to the Lockean foundations of our civil social order. According to Professor McWilliams, the influence of the liberal, Lockean tradition on American social, economic and political life is manifest in our inordinate emphasis on self-interest based upon the belief that man is by nature a private, asocial and apolitical being; the belief that “politics is the result of scarcity and conflict,” and that “the logical aim of politics lies in limiting conflict” while we pursue material well-being and our private, selfish interests; and the conviction that the “checks and balances” of the competitive process are the mechanism for pursuing our selfish interests.

In previous times, argues Professor McWilliams, religious tradition tempered the harshness of the Lockean foundations of our civil social order. The religious tradition emphasized the importance of fraternity and provided a sense of genuine community based upon shared values and goals. Unhappily, the older institutions and customs which furnished a social base for the religious tradition have been slowly eroded. And though the cultivation of fraternity and a sense of genuine community, Professor McWilliams tells us, is “a permanent social and psychological necessity of human

development,” it is “discouraged and inhibited by the institutions and processes of our modern industrial society.”

Although we have had a strong religious tradition in this country, our public institutions, as Professor McWilliams notes, “have been based on the assumptions and theories of the liberal Enlightenment.” Our social, economic and political systems contain “a bias toward individualism, a hostility to communities, an assumption that material well-being and technological advances are in the high interests of man.” The liberal, Lockean tradition “proposed to discard fraternity as a means to human perfection and a norm in everyday political and social life.” Indeed, this tradition “set aside the premise that man was a political animal who required civic relations for his perfection.” With the erosion of commitment to the old religious tradition, so the author believes, the liberal tradition and its emphasis on competitive ethics, the concern for material power, and an atomistic individualism have come to permeate all aspects of American life with disastrous consequences. One such consequence is the sense of isolation—social and spiritual—that is felt by increasing numbers of Americans.

It is obvious that the author of *Idea of Fraternity* rejects the notion of the “omni-competent individual,” the notion that the individual—if unfettered by government—is, in the words of John Dewey, “competent to frame policies, to judge their results; competent to know in all situations demanding political action what is for his own good and competent to enforce his idea of good and the will to effect it against contrary forces.”

Implicit in the atomistic individualism that Professor McWilliams rejects are the twin assumptions that society and government are artificial. From the individualistic vantage point, men enter society out of fear; they enter society as a means for self-preservation; society and government, at best, are necessary evils. In sharp contrast to this view of social life is the Thomistic notion that society and government are nat-

ural, that they emanate from the intense demands of man's higher nature. Men have natural inclinations toward social life; they do not enter society merely from fear and a desire for economic well-being; they enter to share friendship, love, knowledge, and the pursuit of the common good.

Professor McWilliams comes very close to saying man is naturally social when he points out that fraternity is "a permanent social and psychological necessity," and when he suggests that man is a "political animal" who requires "civic relations for his perfection," yet he does not seem explicitly to say so. Professor McWilliams would perhaps be offended by the suggestion that he sounds Thomistic, but when he talks about our need for fraternity, he is just restating Thomas' recognition that man is by nature social. The author of *Idea of Fraternity* is sensitive to the intense demands of the spirit; he recognizes, as Thomas recognized, that men need one another, and that sociality appeals to one of the intense demands of our higher nature—its demand for love, friendship, family. He knows—as Thomas knew—that social life can help to satisfy these demands, and thus he stresses fraternity as a necessary means to human development.

Clearly, Messrs. Nisbet and McWilliams have provided us with a much-needed view of man and society that has been long overdue. But their view, it seems to me, needs the support of a philosophic recognition that while society exists to promote the common good, the common good itself is a necessary means to a still higher end—namely, to know God and to enjoy him forever.

Reviewed by HAVEN BRADFORD GOW