

# THE LIMITS OF SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

By Alan Price

On August 20, 1964, I was in the English port city of Southampton. I was there to meet a ship which was to carry me back to this country, and with my nervous attention to the details of punctuality I had managed to arrive twenty-four hours early. After I had exhausted the local museums, department stores, and city parks, I came upon a small monument near the docks. The inscription read:

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In Memory of the Heroic Death of Mary Anne Rodgers, stewardess of the Stella, who on the night of Mar. 30th, 1899, mid the confusion and terror of shipwreck aided all the women under her charge to quit the vessel in safety, giving her own lifebelt to one who was unprotected.

Urged by sailors to make sure her escape, she refused lest she might endanger the heavily laden boat. Cheering the parting crew with the friendly cry of "Good Bye, Good Bye" she was seen a few moments later as the Stella went down lifting her arms with the prayer "Lord have me," then sank in the waters with the sinking ship.

Actions such as these, revealing steadfast performance of duty in the face of death, ready self-sacrifice for the sake of others, reliance on God; constitute the glorious heritage of our Eng-



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lish Race, they deserve perpetual commemoration, because among the trivial pleasures and sordid strife of the world, they recall to us forever the nobility and love and worthiness of human nature.

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The important aspect of the inscription is not the heroic act of Mary Anne Rodgers (though I respect it); the important part is the tone of the second half which places her act in the wider perspectives of "the glorious heritage of our English Race" and of human nature. It is this tone of "let's all join hands and give a cheer for the greatness man is capable of" that I want to call "self-righteousness."

"Self-righteousness" is a word which has acquired a very nasty connotation. We speak of old women who sit in church and condemn we wicked sinners as "self-righteous." This connotation is unfortunate because we all need a certain amount of self-righteousness to get by in the world. Call it "pride" or "confidence," we need to think that we (the self) are right. Nations depend on the self-righteousness of patriotism to insure the social fabric of the country. The Memorial Day Parade and the Fourth of July speech all say, "the nation is great; the nation is right." Therefore, this pride or patriotism or, as I choose to call it, this self-righteousness is very important to us as individuals and as social units.

Much of what is going on on the American campuses today is the product of self-righteousness. Moreover, to the extent that the individual student develops a sense of dignity and confidence in his moral judgements, self-righteousness is a good quality. On the other hand, when students become so caught up in the private and public immorality which confronts them that their only solutions are violence and disruption, then the time has come for them to get down off their high horse and grovel with the rest of us toward some more reasonable alternative. Many of the student demands such as revised curriculums and better teaching are justified, but

this attitude of "you do it my way, man, or I'm going to shut it down" is not justified, especially in an academic community.

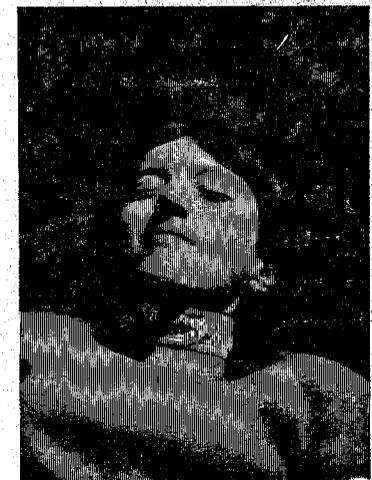
One of the problems of growing older is that one realizes that the realities of life are less desirable than the strict moral fantasies of youth. For example, all people should be nice to each other, but they are not. Love should be a constant tenderness; it is not. People in positions of authority should be godlike; they are not. Mothers and fathers should practice what they preach; they do not always. There should be no more war; unfortunately, there probably will be.

We are living, of course, in a time of great social change. I do not think college students notice this change quite as much as their parents do. Furthermore social changes on so large a scale as a nation of 200 million people take time and inevitably cause some unfortunate social dislocation. The pressures applied by students and Negroes can accelerate change, but it will not be accomplished quickly no matter how much pressure is applied. The country is like a mule. With a mule you have to get him started in the right direction and keep him going. However, if you try to make him go too fast, he will stop. We have some good social legislation, and we are, I think, moving in the right direction, but the changes will not be overnight miracles in any case.

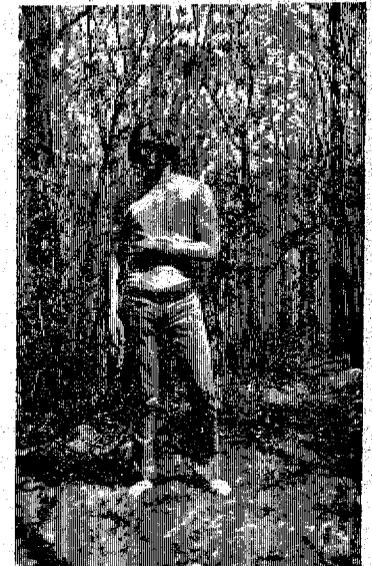
In conclusion, much of the self-righteous indignation of college students is justified. However, one must ask whether students are using the right methods to insure social change. Violence and disruption within the university community may give them an immediate sense of relief, but the long range effects may be disastrous. Moreover, a realistic attitude toward social change is one which allows time for the change to take effect. The students will have to learn to temper justice with mercy. It seems to me that one of the obligations of being right is to realize the limits within which one is able to act.



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