

# I AND WE

## The Individual and the community

Edward W. H. Vick

‘What do we believe?’ ‘What do I believe?’

‘Tell me what we believe so that I can be sure what I believe.’

‘It does not matter what we say we believe. This is what I believe.’

Anyone who has in some way identified themselves with a community may well have opened their mouths with each of the above sentences. Sometimes the identification of the individual with the community is so complete that there is no room for personal opinion, no room for disagreement with the beliefs of the community, no scope for alternative actions to those the community demands. Then it is that individuality is swallowed up in the adherence to the demands of the community, be they demands for belief or for action.

If obedience is the price for loyalty, then so be it. I sacrifice my opinion to that of the community, the collective, call it what you will, whether it be a religious, a scientific, political, professional, business, or other group. ‘This is what I do’ then becomes ‘This is what we do.’ ‘This is what we believe’ becomes ‘This is what I think.’ An identity exists between ‘I’ and ‘we.’ The price one pays for acceptance is the sacrifice, and so the loss, of personal distinctiveness.

Of course we are every one of us dependent upon the opinions of others. We must rely on others for our development. But as and if we come to maturity we cannot simply rely on the beliefs and opinions of others. Simplicity and simple reliance often go hand in hand.

But someone or some group has thought out the beliefs, has figured out a programme for action, has worked out guidelines for ethics. That is usually with some particular aim in view: preserving the unity of a religious community; maximising profitability in a business group, ensuring the conformity that produces the right votes in a political community, keeping the family together! The motto is: ‘This and that is what we believe. This and that is what we do. This and that is what we do not believe. This and that is what we do not do.’

It easily becomes a way of thinking or a way of failing to think. Encouraged always by the unwillingness to contemplate the alternative.

It is comfortable to belong when one's loyalties are simply taken for granted and no questions asked, either by one or about one. One is comfortable and one is accepted. One is comfortable because one is accepted.

For the fact is that to reject the accepted and acceptable way of thinking and acting is to risk rejection. There are structures of authority. There are some kinds of sanction, hidden to the simple minded who sometimes never experience them in any explicit way. So all is well.

But the more sinister aspect of the situation is that, knowing the structures and the possible sanctions, one professes belief and agreement to gain acceptance. It's the Vicar of Bray syndrome:

'Whatsoever king may reign  
Still I'll be the Vicar of Bray, sir!'