THE MOVEMENT TO THE RIGHT

By VICKY COSSTICK

WHAT IS a yuppy? Where have they sprung from? What are yuppy values? In what ways do yuppies encapsulate Thatcher's Britain, and are they a Good or a Bad Thing?

I shall start from personal experience. I would hardly dare, indeed, these days, to begin anywhere else. One reason I was asked to write this article is that I have sometimes been accused of being a yuppy. (No-one would ever describe *themselves* as such, you understand.) Why so? My husband is a money market banker; I live in a modernized Victorian house in a gentrifying inner city area. My house has 'features' (that is, old fireplaces, a dado rail, and a corniced ceiling). I have a live-in nanny and the use of my husband's fast company car. I even have a Gucci handbag . . . *somewhere*. And here in print I will confess the greatest of my crimes: my son was baptized at the Brompton Oratory.

Yuppies, however, must be distinguished from Sloane Rangers, who live in Chelsea and Kensington, in one crucial respect. Yuppies may be relatively rich, but they have earned the money themselves, while the Sloane Ranger is usually at least partly dependent on Daddy's money. And the yuppies' big opportunity to make more money is to invest in property by committing themselves to large mortgages. On high incomes but with low job security, the 25% per annum increase in property prices, with an element of gamble—more to be made in a fashionable area or if you can improve your property—is the most attractive investment open to yuppies.

Why, for our purposes, do yuppies matter? What challenge do they pose to the local Church? *Do* they matter? Let me suggest several reasons why I think they do.

For one thing, yuppies are, if nothing else, a sign of the times, and thus of the world with which we are called to hold a dialogue. Whether a sign of hope or of grief or joy is hard to discern unless we look at the phenomenon a little more closely. The gut reaction

to yuppies that I often observe (that is yuk, money) is not necessarily entirely fair—and it certainly is not helpful. Secondly, whatever else yuppies represent, one thing is style—and now that style is creeping willy-nilly into the Church. I know more than one priest who wears a Pringle cashmere sweater, and several who sport Filofaxes, the universal yuppy symbol (curiously similar in size and shape to a breviary). A meeting among Catholics can hardly begin until all the Filofaxes or their clones are on the table.

Perhaps yuppiness has had its greatest impact on the inner city. Previously exclusively working- and lower-middle-class areas, from which the up-and-coming moved out to the suburbs as soon as they could afford it, are now subject to invasion rather than exodus. Suburbs are out; inner city (and the country for weekends) is in.

Visits to parish priests are fundamental to my work in the diocese of Southwark and I rarely visit a South London parish where the priest does not refer first, with a sigh, to the influx of yuppies to his patch. I have, however, visited one inner city parish where the parish priest predicted the certain demise of the social club—the Catholic social club being an utterly working-class phenomenon. The potential impact on the urban parish is clear.

In another parish, I heard a priest mimic the voice of a yuppy phoning to request baptism for his child: 'Well, we were going to have it done at the Oratory, but really it would be so much more convenient to do it locally, and it really is a very pretty little church . . . Preparation classes? Oh dear, well, surely we don't really need them?! My wife and I were both brought up in the faith and went to Catholic schools. We know what being a Catholic is all about'.

Now, some people might say that the community catechesis that has emerged around the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is the only form of Catholic education tailor-made for working-class adults in this country. Based on oral story-telling and faith-sharing, it is a-intellectual. While adult religious education traditionally meant evening classes in theology and church history aimed at the middle class who could travel to attend, took notes, and boosted their own level of factual knowledge (but not necessarily their faith), the RCIA is now affecting education throughout the parish, shifting the emphasis from content to process, from theology to scripture, from objective fact to story-telling and experience, from private devotion and piety to community worship. This is occurring

in marriage and baptism preparation, first communion and reconciliation, and confirmation programmes as well as the RCIA. All sacramental preparation in the parish is involving longer preparation, a greater degree of commitment, and catechesis within and by the community rather than privately with the priest. Furthermore, the burgeoning of prayer and faith-sharing groups is radically altering the spiritual foundation of the parish community. The potential for clash with the yuppies is clear.

In defence of the yuppy, we must remember that yuppies rarely, themselves, come from moneyed backgrounds. Traditionally, the money market, for example, was peopled by 'barrow boys'—uneducated Eastenders whose street banter adapted easily to the burgeoning trade in money investments. Education was not necessary, just smarts, lots of them, and the easy-come-easy-go willingness to gamble with millions in institutional money. Margaret Thatcher has indeed created in this country an American-style meritocracy in which people without class or formal education can cross the old barriers more easily. The bottom line of profit, profit, profit is the great equaliser. And here we must beware. It is not money *per se* that seems alien to the British, or more particularly the English. It is loud money, obvious money, tacky money which is distasteful. Those who cry 'yuk, money' might be slower to exclaim 'yuk, racism, classism or sexism' in the face of other social evils. The truth is that yuppies are young, bright, energetic and ambitious achievers, a potential gift to any institution. And they have caused permanent cracks in the seemingly impregnable British class system.

No longer does it matter with whom you have lunch, because no longer do you have time for lunch. (Working breakfasts are in, however.) No longer does the 'old boy' network count for everything: more significant are the shifting daily relationships between customers and sellers in any given market. The subtle secret signs of shared membership at a given level of the extraordinarily complicated British class system have been replaced by the blatant flag-waving of the designer label and the foreign car.

Yuppies may be advertizing executives, in PR or in any area of the media. They may be in insurance, accountants, or lawyers or even work for meritocratic firms like Marks and Spencer. But the image derives in the first place from the stockbrokers who have been making it big since the computerised and deregulated free-for-all of the Big Bang in the stock exchange, or the bond, money

and foreign exchange markets, where it is not unheard of for salaries to be in excess of £100,000 per annum for those aged under thirty.

In *Bonfire of the vanities*, the ultimate New York novel by Tom Wolfe, Sherman McCoy is a 'Master of the Universe'—and let not the theological implications escape you—who works for Pierce and Pierce on Wall Street:

> He turned the corner and there it was: the bond trading room of Pierce and Pierce. It was a vast space, perhaps sixty by eighty feet, but with the same eight-foot ceiling bearing down on your head. It was an oppressive space with a ferocious glare, writhing silhouettes, and the roar. The glare came from a wall of plate glass that faced south, looking out over New York Harbor, the Statue of Liberty, Staten Island, and the Brooklyn and New Jersey Shores. The writhing silhouettes were the arms and torsos of young men, few of them older than forty. They had their suit jackets off, were moving about in an agitated manner and sweating early in the morning and shouting, which created the roar. It was the sound of well-educated young white men baying for money on the bond market.[1]

And the expectations of Sherman McCoy and his colleagues are exaggerated, but they accurately illustrate the yuppy model:

> Make it now! That motto burned in every heart, like myocarditis. Boys on Wall Street, mere boys, with smooth jawlines and clean arteries, boys still able to blush, were buying three-million dollar apartments on Park and Fifth. (Why wait?) They were buying thirty-room, four acre summer places in Southampton, places built in the 1920s and written off in the 1950s as white elephants, places with decaying servants' wings and they were doing over the servants' wings, too, and even adding on. (Why not? We've got the servants.) They had carnival rides trucked in and installed on the great green lawns for their children's birthday parties, complete with teams of carnival workers to operate them. (A thriving little industry.)[2]

Sherman McCoy, who has himself just bought an apartment on Park Avenue for $2,600,000 and is mortgaged for $1,800,000 of it (repayments of $21,000 per month!), here answers his daughter, Campbell, who 'was trying to piece together the greatest puzzle of life':

> 'But there *is* a God, sweetie. So I can't tell you about "if there isn't".' Sherman had tried never to lie to her. But this time he felt it the prudent course. He had hoped he would never have to discuss religion with her. They had begun sending her to Sunday school at St James' Episcopal Church, at Madison and Seventy-first. That was the way you took care of religion. You enrolled them at St James', and you avoided talking or thinking about religion again.[3]

But Mrs Thatcher would be deeply hurt by the implication that her philosophy lacks an ethic. The 'theology' of the new meritocracy was embodied on Mrs Thatcher's speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland of June 1988, in which Mrs Thatcher takes the Ten Commandments, the injunction to love our neighbour as ourselves, and the importance of observing a strict code of law from the Old Testament. The New Testament, she observes confidently, is a 'record of the Incarnation, the teachings of Christ, and the establishment of the Kingdom of God' and she goes on to say that, taken together, these key elements in the Old Testament and the New Testament offer a 'view of the universe, a proper attitude to work and principles to shape economic and social life'. She goes on, 'we are told we must work and use our talents to create wealth'. She then outlines the centrality of individualism and individuality to her theology. 'Intervention' by the state in the areas of health, education, the sick, the disabled and the elderly (she does not mention the poor) must never effectively remove personal responsibility. And having further elucidated the relevance of the Judaic-Christian heritage for her philosophy of wealth creation and individualism, she goes on to say, curiously, that 'we parliamentarians can legislate for the rule of law. You the Church can teach the life of faith'.

Why is Mrs Thatcher's idiosyncratic exposition of the spiritual basis of her philosophy so disturbing? Because, apart from the sheer dubiousness of some of her conclusions, in speaking of 'Christianity' so generally she clearly cannot be credited with any ecumenical or interdenominational intention. By 'speaking personally', but unavoidably as Prime Minister, she divorces her interpretation of scripture from the authority, the worship, and the tradition of any denomination and steps into the resulting vacuum herself, thereby appearing to speak *ex cathedra*.

What are the yuppy values implied in Mrs Thatcher's speech and what makes them so dangerous? Firstly, the overwhelming

stress on individualism and individual responsibility which fly in the face of the Church's clear mandate to be community and to build community. In Mrs Thatcher's view, the poor, the unemployed and racial minorities are not among those who may benefit from the 'intervention' of the state; and even those groups who do benefit, face more and more limited assistance.

Secondly, the assumption that wealth creation is a Christian priority is also dangerous. Dorothee Soelle writes:

> If life is just a matter of buying and selling, then relationships too become just so many purchasable commodities. Today, many people perceive the world as just such a supermarket. Absent-mindedly, yet at the same time absorbed in what we are doing, we rush our shopping carts up one aisle and down another while death and alienation have the run of the place.[4]

Perhaps the most deadening value implied in the yuppy lifestyle is that of conformity and an unwillingness to take risks other than gambling professionally with other people's money. The old subtle signs of membership in the class system have been replaced by the blatancy of raw, immediate, visible money and so status hangs on others knowing how much money you have. Everyone therefore aims to buy the same make or brand of every item—there is no cachet in doing something different or unusual. Creativity is sacrificed to the safe predictability of conformity.

While ten years ago recent graduates might travel for a year or do a year's voluntary work, unemployment and the race to acquire now force students early into right-wing values and aspirations and into highly-paying jobs. There is little motivation to gain experience or wisdom other than at work and little time to allow fundamental questions about faith or existence to surface. While our parents' generation expected to spend the early years of their married lives relatively penniless—perhaps only achieving a relative level of financial security when the children left home—the yuppies' children are themselves staggering around the playground crippled by layers of designer clothes.

The danger of the yuppy mentality was recently highlighted in a talk given by Professor Kelly Brown, a black theologian from Howard University in Washington.[5] Buppies, or *black* upwardly-mobile professionals, are willing to witness the participation of the few in the dominant system while the majority remain oppressed.

Thus are the ideals of Martin Luther King's vision compromised, again by individualism. In the yuppy value system, the old utilitarian principle of the greatest good of the greatest number has been replaced by the principle of the greatest good of number one.

Similarly, while Thatcher's Britain may undoubtedly be making life materially better for the majority of the population, this is occurring at the expense of the minority and the gap between rich and poor is expanding. In Britain today there is a 'culture of indifference to the underprivileged', the Roman Catholic bishops concluded at the end of their Low Week meeting of 1988. For this is how Sherman McCoy feels about riding on the New York subways:

> Insulation! That was the ticket. That was the term Rawlie Thorpe used. 'If you want to live in New York,' he once told Sherman 'you've got to insulate, insulate, insulate,' meaning insulate yourself from those people. The cynicism and smugness of the idea struck Sherman as very *au courant*. If you could go breezing down the FDR Drive in a taxi then why file into the trenches of the urban wars?[6]

But those whose riches protect them from the realities of life for the majority are not only insulated from 'the trenches of the urban wars'. They are insulated from the greatest privilege of our Christian faith: to be aware of our frailty and brokenness; to see the intimate relationship between death and rebirth; to stand with Mary Magdalene, witnesses to the cross and to the resurrection.

Consumerism is addictive. The right wallpaper becomes the Holy Grail. Shopping deadens us to real values. If earning money is time and energy consuming, then spending, saving, hoarding and investing it, searching for the extra quarter per cent in interest or avoiding a penny in tax are even more so.

In *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1988), Pope John Paul II contrasts the 'miseries of under-development' with the equally unsatisfying 'super-development', which is the availability of every kind of material goods for the benefit of certain social groups. It makes us slaves of possession:

> all of us experience first-hand the sad effects of this blind submission to pure consumerism: in the first place a crass materialism, and at the same time a radical dissatisfaction, because one quickly learns—unless one is shielded from the flood of publicity and the

> ceaseless and tempting offers of products—that the more one possesses the more one wants, while deeper aspirations remain unsatisfied and perhaps even stifled.[7]

For Karl Rahner, Christianity is the answer to the question which humanity is. This is an anthropological statement: for Rahner, fundamental questions about existence are embodied in the human condition. When we experience ourselves as finite, the questions—to which there can only be one answer—are raised and 'in the fact that (man) experiences his finiteness radically, he reaches beyond this finiteness and experiences himself as a transcendent human being, as spirit'.[8]

Rahner also recognized that it is possible for us to ignore those basic questions. Most people:

> live at a distance from themselves in that concrete part of their lives and the world around them which can be manipulated and controlled. They have enough to do there, and it is very interesting and important. And if they ever reflect at all on anything which goes beyond all this, they can always say that it is more sensible not to break one's head over it.[9]

Money, or the getting of it and the spending of it to the exclusion of other activity, can be the cushion which deadens us from experiencing our own finiteness, which prevents the questions from surfacing and requiring an urgent answer. The real danger of Mrs Thatcher's 'theology' is that it appears to give something that is spiritually barren the aura of spiritual and ethical respectability. It whitewashes it in a way that bowdlerizes and deradicalizes the Christian message.

The challenge to evangelize, therefore, in this increasingly secularized society, is to be ready to meet people when they experience, as they inevitably must, their finiteness and to allow their questions to be raised—because to have faith in the ultimate goodness of all humanity means to believe, like Rahner, that the ultimate question lies buried within each one of us.

What alternatives exist, meanwhile, for those who are rich? What can we realistically expect of ourselves as a gospel response? Pope John Paul II, in the aforementioned encyclical, reminds us once again of the relevance of the option for the poor:

> Today, furthermore, given the world-wide dimension which the social question has assumed, this love of preference for the poor,

> and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and, above all, those without hope of a better future. It is impossible not to take account of the existence of these realities. To ignore them would be like becoming like 'the rich man' who pretended not to know the beggar Lazarus lying at his gate (Lk 16, 19–31).[10]

But what does the option for the poor really mean? Does it mean giving up or giving away all our money? Does it mean living with the poor? Or working in service of the poor? Is what is required to be poor or to be poor in spirit? And then, just what does it mean to be poor? The poor may be just as obsessed with money, just as driven by envy and greed as the rich. As Archbishop Worlock of Liverpool said recently, at the heart of poverty lies lack of choice; we might be able to give up our money, but can we likewise give up our power to choose and our ultimate security? Can anyone choose to be poor? That indeed, has been a perennial dilemma faced by the religious orders.

I believe the option for the poor may mean any or all of the above, but I also believe that the greatest trap that the middle-class can fall into when faced with the uncompromised challenge of the beatitudes is that of guilt. When Professor Kelly Brown and I were mere students at Union Theological Seminary in the late 1970s, there was an ethos whereby the blacks made the whites feel guilty; those who were homosexual made the heterosexuals feel guilty; those who came from poor backgrounds made the better-off feel guilty; and the women made the men feel guilty, until you were forced to proclaim, 'Enough already!' That sort of guilt can be crippling and leads, I believe, to a distorted understanding of our Christian duty. It may, I suppose, be useful or even necessary to experience some sense of our participation of necessity if not by choice in the structures of dominance and oppression—but what is required as soon as possible is an understanding of our responsibility to act, free of predetermined patterns of behaviour.

It is fashionable, these days, to stress the need for an adequate lay spirituality—but I would like, for the purposes of this article, to emphasise two aspects of traditional religious life which I believe might have particular relevance for the new young middle classes that we call yuppies, and then go on to suggest briefly the particular way in which I believe they might be seen as offering an opportunity for the local church.

Firstly, I believe that one key to the responsible use of wealth is hospitality and generosity. One plank of Mrs Thatcher's ethic is the idea of giving to charity. But this long-distance giving is not really what I mean. In the miracle of the multiplication of loaves we learn that however little we have when we begin, when we give generously, there always seems to be more. It is only when we count our pennies that we find we have not enough: 'Not even with two hundred days' wages could we buy loaves enough to give each of them a mouthful' (Jn 6, 7). The alternative response is that of the *poustinik*, who:

> must share the food with anyone who comes. They may refuse, but it must always be offered. He may just have a piece of bread, but he will break it in half or into as many parts as there are people. Thus the second aspect of this strange life is hospitality . . . the sharing of what he has . . . the offering of it at any given moment. Hospitality above all means that the *poustinik* is just passing on whatever God has put into his empty hands. He gives all that he has and is: words, work, himself and his food.[11]

And so I would like to propose that yuppies learn to become puppies, or '*poustinik* urban professionals', sharing all they have with those around them without fearing its diminishment.

Secondly, we must find some way of cultivating a detachment from our new-found wealth so that we may focus on Christ at the true centre of all our endeavours. That wealth, as I have suggested earlier, is symbolized above all by the mortgage, which ties young people down in a potentially crippling way. The mortgage can be used as an excuse for not travelling, for not taking a more worthwhile job at less money, for fear of insecurity of any kind. We are not free to follow the will of God when we are trapped in this way. And so the second principle I would commend is the image of the travelling friar with his begging bowl. For Jesus

> began to send them out in pairs, giving them authority over the unclean spirits. And he instructed them to take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no haversack, no coppers for their purses. They were to wear sandals but, he added, 'Do not take a spare tunic' (Mk 6, 8–9).

And so I suggest that yuppies should take on this attitude of detachment (if not the behaviour) thereby becoming *muppies*, or 'mendicant urban professionals'.

The urban parish these days is in ferment. Curates are a disappearing breed; the city priest is a tired, burdened and sometimes lonely man. But fewer priests may mean opportunity rather than crisis for the Church. Increasingly, much of the work of the parish is being shared by the priest with his people, and, ironically, it is when this happens that parishes become busier than ever. Clergy-laity collaboration does not dilute but clarifies and sharpens the role of the priest.

The work of the parish, however, is not just about building 'holy huddles', as they have been called. The task is to proclaim a Christ who came to set the captive free. The parish must be about the task of transformation—and the urban parish's mission is the most sharply defined, surrounded as it is by the debris of the modern greedy world: homelessness, broken families, domestic violence, racism, deprivation, AIDS, unemployment, alcoholism and drug addiction. Urban parishes *need* young urban professionals, who are also committed persons of faith, hope and love. With their energy, spare time, management and communication skills they can be the—sometimes necessary—leaven in any parish. The Church needs to be a place where young people can reexamine their values and discover alternative and more satisfying 'investments'; a place which celebrates diversity and offers to each of us the opportunity to experience and articulate our 'journeys in faith'.

NOTES

[1] Wolfe, Tom: *Bonfire of the vanities* (Jonathan Cape, 1988), p 59.
[2] *Op.cit.*, p 57.
[3] *Op.cit.*, p 50.
[4] Soelle, Dorothee: *Death by bread alone* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1978), p 8.
[5] Unpublished talk given by Professor Kelly Brown, (London, June 24, 1988).
[6] Wolfe, Tom: *op.cit.*, p 55.
[7] *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1988) as reported in *The Tablet*, 27 February 1988.
[8] Rahner, Karl: *Foundations of Christian faith* (Seabury, New York, 1978), p 32.
[9] *Op.cit.*, p 32.
[10] *Sollicitudo rei socialis: op.cit.*, para 257.
[11] de Hueck Doherty, Catherine: *Poustinia* (Ave Maria Press, Indiana, 1975), p 44.