

News from Nowhere – and from India.

William Morris was one of the great Victorians. Born in 1834 and dying in 1896, the greater part of his life was passed during the reign of Queen Victoria. At the same time, he was not in the least Victorian in his attitudes. By his own admission, he hated the world in which he lived and Victorian England, industrialised and philistine, was in the forefront of that world. In *News from Nowhere*, his utopian novel, he compares the England of his day with the socialist England of the future, when privilege and inequality would be swept away in the fires of revolution.

Morris was a socialist but it is difficult to say what kind of socialist he was. He was equally critical of state socialism on the one hand and anarchism on the other. Nor was he a Fabian. He was also critical of the intentional community which, like the monasteries of the Middle Ages, separated itself from the wider society and had as little to do with it as possible. FWBO/Triratna has been described as an intentional community but it is certainly not one in Morris's pejorative use of the term. Whether or not the monasteries of the Middle Ages separated themselves from the wider society, Triratna certainly does not. Through its urban centres, its country retreat centres and team-based Right Livelihood businesses, it seeks to make the Buddha's teaching available to as many people as possible. As I went through *News from Nowhere* recently, I was not only struck by what Morris says about work but also reminded of what I had said about livelihood in *Vision and Transformation* and elsewhere. It should do no harm to other living beings, nor should it be boring or repetitive or injure one physically or mentally. Morris goes much further than this. In his ideal society everybody works, both men and women, and they enjoy their work and it does not take up the whole of their time. Unpleasant or dirty work that cannot be done by machines is shared among them.

For Morris, work is a human need, and if the inhabitants of his ideal society are afraid of anything, they are afraid of there being a shortage of work – not because they are afraid of starving, as they would have been in the England of Morris's day, but because they would not be realizing their full potential. In Morris's ideal society, some men and women work with their hands, producing beautiful objects for everyday use, and we are reminded not only of Morris's critique of the economy of 'planned obsolescence' but also that he was associated with the Arts and Crafts movement of the late 19th century.

In *News from Nowhere* Morris paints an attractive picture of the England of the future. People are healthy and happy. They wear simple, colourful clothes, and live in attractive houses surrounded by gardens. Children are free to move from one social group to another, for Morris does not believe in the nuclear family, and everybody is friends with everybody else, addressing one another as either 'neighbour' or 'friend'. There is no army, and no police force and any differences are settled by friendly discussion. Yet Morris is no facile optimist regarding human nature, admitting that even in an ideal society sexual jealousy may lead to homicide.

The picture that Morris paints is indeed an attractive one. But how does the transition from the old unequal and unjust society of Morris's day to his happy, socialist England take place? It takes place neither gradually nor peacefully. It takes place as the result of a revolution, and that revolution involves violence and bloodshed, for Morris believed that, human nature being what it is, a non-violent revolution is not possible. He puts his account of that revolution into the mouth of Hammond, an old man who lives in what remains of the British museum and is interested in history. Hammond, who is imagined to be living two centuries after Morris's own time, describes the revolution which he says took place in 1952 in response to a question from Guest, a man from Morris's day, who has somehow found his way into the England of the future. Guest has already questioned others about this strange new society, so different from that from which he has come, and this is the most important of his questions. Hammond's lengthy account of the revolution is the most powerfully written part of *News from Nowhere*, and one feels that Morris's heart is very much in what he writes. He believes in revolution and he believes that revolution must be violent.

But must it? The answer comes not from Morris in England but from Ambedkar in India.

On October 14th 1956 (four years after Morris's imaginary revolution), Ambedkar, took the Three Refuges and Five Precepts from a Buddhist monk, thereby fulfilling his vow that though he had been born a Hindu he would not die one. Having become a Buddhist, he at once administered the Refuges and Precepts to some half a million of his followers, who had flocked to Nagpur, central India, at his call. In this way were they too converted from Hinduism to Buddhism. Thus began what was to become known as the Dhamma Revolution. It was an entirely non-violent revolution, and one that by the end of the decade had touched, and transformed, the lives of millions all over India.

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) grew up in a society dominated by the system of hereditary caste, and he and his community were at the very bottom of the heap. Untouchables, as the Dalits were then called, lived in separate quarters outside the village, often in unhygienic conditions, and were subject to a wide variety of restrictions and prohibitions. Despised and exploited by members of the higher castes, they did the dirtiest and most demeaning work, typical occupations being the removal of dead cows and the disposal of human excrement. There was no question, of course, of marriage between an untouchable and a caste Hindu, and social contact was minimal. The young Ambedkar was a brilliant student and with the help of a liberal-minded maharaja he became a highly educated man, devoting himself not to his personal advancement but to the uplift of his people. Realizing that there was no hope for them as long as they remained within the Hindu fold, he decided that they would have to change their religion – a radical and revolutionary step. For years he studied and compared the different religions, rejecting the Communist option, for he believed that religion was the basis of society. Though he admired the Jesuits for their educational work, Christianity was after all a foreign religion with no roots in Indian culture. The same was true of Islam, with the additional consideration that if his people converted to Islam it would seriously upset the demographic basis of India and could well lead to conflict and violence. He therefore opted for Buddhism, which was of Indian origin and not in conflict with modern knowledge. Though Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity were Ambedkar's ideals, and though he often spoke of them, he always insisted that he had taken them not from the French Revolution but from the teachings of his master the Buddha.

After Ambedkar's untimely death, I spent much of my time travelling from one group of converts to another, teaching them the Dhamma and encouraging them in its practice. The biggest of such groups were in Nagpur, Bombay, and Poona, each of which I visited a number of times and where I made a number of friends, with some of whom I remained in contact with even after I returned to England in 1964. I had not forgotten them and they had certainly not forgotten me. Years later, Order members visiting India made contact with some of these friends, and this eventually led to the formation of a wing of the Order in India.

News from Nowhere is still read, and there is much that we can learn from it. Morris has an honoured place in the history of English socialism. But those who would bring about radical social change without violence will turn for a model not to Morris but to Ambedkar and his Dhamma Revolution.

Sangharakshita
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