

FORWARD TO BASICS

by Kenneth Noble

INTRODUCTION

'Back to basics' has boomeranged, and led to back-peddalling in high places. The call for more 'traditional teaching, respect for the family and the law', we are now told, was not concerned with personal morality.

The dilemma for the Government--or for anyone--is that to call for higher levels of morality makes you vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy. The media are capable of finding sleaze in the life of almost anyone. We may never have fathered a child on the side, but none of us would be particularly pleased to see our past wrong-doings written up in the tabloids. The 'great and the good' have proved to be as fallible as the rest of us. So is personal morality a taboo subject, to be left out of the public debate?

That would be comfortable, but a great mistake. For, as I hope to show in this booklet, a general decline in individual morality must inevitably lead to the breakdown of our democratic way of life. While people who find their way to moral and spiritual renewal can strengthen the democratic process.

If basic moral values are to be taken seriously in Britain, it will not be through the election of a government of saints. It will be through many of us deciding that how we live matters, and having the courage to set about matching our lives to our ideals. Moral standards, such as total honesty and complete unselfishness, give you a target to aim at and a means of measuring your performance. Vague ideas of 'being moral' may yield in the face of the passions and allures of the real world. Of course we won't achieve perfection. But as GK Chesterton observed, if a thing is worth doing, it's worth doing badly.

DON'T BLAME ME. I VOTED FOR THE MONSTER RAVING LOONIES!

'Of course I'm a democrat. I vote in every election; I'm patriotic; I have a responsible job; I watch the news on telly and I obey the law--in short, I do everything that a responsible citizen should do. Right?'

E for effort, certainly--but not necessarily I for imagination.

'What do you mean?'

Have you ever stopped to consider what the threats to democracy are?

'You mean the communists? But their days are over, aren't they? Oh, I get it. You're on about recession, racism, that sort of thing. Don't worry. I thought carefully about all that before I voted.'

You're getting nearer the mark. But these aren't just matters for the government, you know. The way you live affects all these issues.

'Now don't get personal. Anyway these questions are far too complicated for me to work out; that's what the government is paid to do.'

However much voter and conscience may argue, the point is that government 'of the people, by the people, for the people' has to depend on us, the people.

There must be a limit to how much selfishness and dishonesty, lawlessness or power-grabbing a country can take before it becomes ungovernable.

How do you get people to live responsibly when many think that you have to be selfish to survive, that moral values are a luxury they cannot afford? 'Back to basics' is OK for the other guy, but count me out.

If morality is not exactly 'in' at the moment, democracy seems to be. Over the last few years there has been a sea-change in world politics. The Berlin Wall's fall under popular pressure; the fact that white South Africans began to take black hopes seriously; moves towards democracy in other African countries; 'land for peace' talks between Israel and her Arab neighbours--many countries have glimpsed chances to make a fresh start. In 1990 the success of the UN-sponsored action against Iraq, made possible by the ending of the Cold War deadlock, even had President George Bush speaking about a 'new world order'.

Yet already the mood of heady optimism has passed. All sorts of new problems are surfacing. Hate-torn Yugoslavia, factionalized Somalia, 'divorced' Czechoslovakia, confused Russia--it takes more than the collapse of communism and the presence of the UN to produce a workable democracy.

In Britain, we tend to feel that we are experts at democracy. After all, we've been working away at it since the barons cornered bad King John on Runnymede eight centuries ago. Our freedom is so much part of our lives that it's like the air we breathe--we only appreciate it when it's cut off or polluted. So, in theory, we have what the world is clamouring for. Indeed, some of our best brains are already at work, helping the emergent democracies set up stock-exchanges, free markets and all the trappings of western-style economies.

Like any other democracy, Britain's must constantly deal with new challenges. Will the Westminster parliament find the right blend of generosity and clear-headedness to meet valid Scottish, Welsh, Muslim and other aspirations without sacrificing the overall national interest? Will we rise to the challenge of answering the needs of 'the underclass', those without hope, jobs or homes who have dropped out of the system? How will we work out our future as part of Europe?

It's a sobering thought that our record at bequeathing democracy to our former colonies is patchy at best. With hindsight we can see that it is not enough to write a constitution, organize elections and appoint a governor-general. The roots of democracy have to go far deeper. For no structure, however carefully conceived, is self-sustaining.

Churchill's words are worth recalling: democracy is the worst form of government--except for all the other forms. He was surely thinking of the enormous struggle and sacrifice needed to make democracy work; and contrasting this with the even greater cost in misery, lost lives and poverty of alternative systems.

A democracy is only as strong as its component parts, the men and women who make it work or foul it up. For the system which gives the most freedom to the individual also puts the most responsibility onto him or her. That is democracy's strength, but also its weakness. Freedom is easily exploited; and freedom without responsibility is anarchy.

There are plenty of books about democracy as a political system, explaining how laws are framed, debated, amended, approved and proclaimed. They talk of the essential checks and balances in a democracy--the need for an independent executive, legislature and judiciary. There are tomes on how to organize parliament, elections and the civil service.

All these questions are vital to the smooth and fair running of democracy. But there is a less tangible aspect which is not always dealt with--how the moral choices that each of us makes either build up our democracy or grind it down. Surely this is what 'back to basics' should be about. As a London newspaper stated in its advertising campaign, 'Everyone needs standards'.

The problem is that morality, so desirable in theory, seems to have so little sex appeal. Are basic moral values as boring as we think? Or has their public relations exercise been badly mismanaged?

CORRUPTION--WHO PAYS?

The person who lifts a packet of crisps in the corner shop or doesn't pay for his TV licence is clearly not a scourge of democracy. Yet multiply 'petty' dishonesty across the nation and you're talking megabucks. A cocktail of corruption, tax evasion, fiddling and fraud causes a nasty case of wastage of the public purse, adding to the dreaded budget deficit--in plain language, government spending cuts and tax increases.

The Economist (14 August 1993) put Britain's black economy at around 7 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). 'If so, more than £40 billion-worth of economic activity escapes government statisticians, and the treasury is robbed of perhaps £10 billion in taxes,' the magazine states.

Fraud costs British business £9bn a year--while fiddling of pensions and other state benefits costs some £5 billion. It is estimated that the National Health Service loses £600 million through theft and a further £400 million in absenteeism. Shoplifting and fare-dodging cost millions more. This puts prices up for everyone, fuelling inflation--which leads to job-losses, cut-backs, and Britain becoming less competitive. A weakened economy means stresses and strains for almost everyone.

Burglaries and car-thefts put up insurance premiums, further stoking inflation. More crime means that money has to be spent on the police rather than the homeless, the old, the unemployed and the mentally handicapped.

Democracy is endangered by the social tensions which result from financial insecurity, high unemployment and large numbers of people who feel badly done by. When crime seems to be rising uncontrollably, people start taking the law into their own hands. Any instance of fraud, sharp practice or dishonesty can start a chain-reaction of such problems.

Corrupt police or unfair prosecutors undermines people's faith in the legal system. Civil servants or MPs who are economical with the truth create cynicism. As do businessmen who resort to bribery, price-fixing or illegal share-deals. When people lose faith in public figures and institutions, they will soon stop respecting the democratic system.

Anyone can decide to be honest. It can be an up-beat experience. I once paid some money to Manchester United Football Club to make up for paying at the schoolboy rate when I was too old. I also straightened up a few things with my Dad. A clear conscience is a great tonic--especially when it's not just due to a bad memory.

A Swiss businessman saved himself weeks of work when he decided to stop keeping a separate set of accounts for the tax-inspector.

Honesty can be costly, of course. In India I met a businessman named Suresh. He had been managing director of a factory which made steel castings for blast furnaces. Inspectors found these to be faulty but offered to pass them if Suresh paid them five per cent of their value. 'Others supply worse castings,' they assured him. When Suresh refused to pay the bribe, he felt he had no alternative but to close the factory.

Suresh has long struggled to live honestly in a country where bribery is commonplace. He has had successes as well as set-backs. In 1986 he started a factory in South India. He needed electric power but people told him he would not get one kilowatt without paying bribes. After much hesitation he decided to visit the offices of the power company. Before meeting the official he prayed. Somehow he managed to convince the man that India needed cleaning up and that this depended on people like them as much as on Rajiv Gandhi, India's Prime Minister at that time. Suresh got his electricity supply.

'Society would not be in such a mess if people did not avoid doing difficult things,' says Suresh.

In the early 1970s a firm of East African chartered accountants decided not to take bribes to pass accounts dishonestly. 'We lost a lot of clients,' said one of the partners. 'Our income started dwindling and we began to wonder whether we had taken the right decision. There was harassment every day: our own books and affairs were investigated.'

Then the government brought in overseas auditors to inspect the files the tax assessors had already approved. 'The hospitals that week were full of very worried businessmen,' he joked. Not one of his clients was investigated 'because we had done our work right and refused to be a party to corruption'. As a result clients started returning to his firm, and their income has gone up one hundred times in 21 years.

Honesty can include speaking out when it is safer to keep quiet. A senior civil servant in Finland decided to say what he really thought when issues came up, however his superiors might react. He has served under several ministers. 'I have had to decide again and again not to care a damn what happens to me,' he says. 'Then you become free of fear and are able to think clearly.'

One minister asked him to approve a plane ticket so that his wife could go with him on a foreign trip. Snellman said 'no'. 'At the time, I felt pretty awful,' he says, 'because I had just applied for a higher post, which the minister would have to present to the cabinet.' He adds with a laugh, 'Needless to say, I didn't get it.'

Speaking out for your beliefs is usually far riskier in non-democratic countries. But the Solzhenitsyns, the Sakharovs, the Aung Sang Suu Kyis and the countless unnamed ones who have bravely stood for truth have inspired the forces of democracy.

TWO INTO ONE WILL GO

To a great extent, democracy depends on how people get on with each other. Broken relationships have so far hindered any political solution in Northern Ireland. And it's not unknown for industrial strikes to owe more to 'personality clashes' than to disagreements over working conditions and pay.

Damaged relationships damage the fabric of society. Democracy needs people who are willing to compromise their self-interest for the benefit of all, who will put their full hearts and minds into playing a constructive role in society. Unhealed hurts and bitter feelings can be greater handicaps than any physical disability.

Family relationships may be even more important to a democracy than political or industrial ones. The break-up of one marriage seems insignificant, perhaps, except to those directly involved. But hundreds of thousands of broken families add up to a national tragedy.

Research suggests that the children of a broken marriage are often the innocent victims—their education may suffer and they may be less likely to enter a stable marriage themselves.

It is often argued that divorce is preferable to a miserable, perhaps violent, marriage. But divorce is seldom an easy option. Olivia Timbs writes in *The Independent* (1 September, 1992), 'Divorce is bad for your health, bad for your purse and particularly bad for your children.' Ms Timbs, who with Fiona Shackleton wrote *The Divorce Handbook*, states: 'Many couples who divorce later regret the decision.... For their own health and the well-being of their children, they would have been better off still married.'

In Ms Timbs' view, the vast majority of divorced couples with children face years of financial difficulties, on top of all the emotional upheaval that the legal process, single parenthood, remarriage and step-families cause.

A few days after this article appeared, the same paper carried a letter from a woman who had got back together with her husband after 18 months apart. Dora Paul wrote: 'The suffering we have both endured, and the efforts we have had to make to live comfortably together again, have been an enriching and strengthening experience. We have had the richer and the poorer; the better and the worse; the sickness and the health; and I feel confident that now we can hold to our original vow and stay together till death us do part.'

Ideally, the family should be the place where children, and adults, learn how to make relationships work. As the saying goes, example is better than precept. Children nurtured in a loving home have the best chance of finding stability in adulthood and of not bringing hang-ups into their own relationships. Parents who work out differences as they arise get their children off to a flying start.

Do such parents exist? If so, I can hear many young people saying, can I trade mine in? Of course, no one is perfect, especially not parents. A friend of mine gave his parents a penetrating critique of all the places where they had failed him. His father replied, in effect, 'I'm sorry. But you see we are learners. We've never been parents before.'

One of the things that impressed me as a child was when my father apologized to a gardener in a Manchester park whom Dad felt he had talked to rudely. I would not have been impressed if Dad had told me how right he was! Children quickly recognize pomposity in their parents. This vital lesson in recognizing and admitting where you are wrong, if applied more widely in society, would end arguments without number. It's an idea few disagree with—but how often do we apply it?

Marriage has its ups and downs like any relationship but you learn as you go—and the more you learn the closer you feel, and the more rapport you have. No doubt just living together can be enjoyable, too, but it can lack the commitment needed to work things out when difficulties arise.

Bill and Jennie's experience suggests that the cause of strains in a marriage⁴ may lie hidden deep in the past. Not long after their wedding, they started having rows. After a particularly bad one, which ended with Bill hitting Jennie, Bill thought, 'What is going on inside me? I can't control myself. How long is our marriage going to last?'

Jennie asked him, 'If you are like this and we have children, what is going to happen to them? Are you going to pass this on?' For Bill himself came from a home where there had been violence.

Shaken, Bill went out and sat on a hillside for a long time and prayed. 'I let God shine the searchlight on me, instead of always pointing the finger of blame at my father, my wife, or

someone else,' says Bill. 'Some things which should have been obvious to me began to be illuminated.'

There had been a mystery in the family about Bill's grandfather. Bill's father, Roy, said little about him, and his grandmother nothing. Bill's mother clearly knew nothing. It now dawned on Bill that Roy probably never knew his own father. He must have had a difficult childhood, especially at a time when there was a stigma attached to one-parent families.

Then Bill had a clear thought, which he felt came from God, 'Whatever you feel about your father, however wrong he has been towards you, you have never tried to help him.' Bill also remembered a long forgotten incident. When he was about ten, his parents had had a violent row. Roy had lost his temper. Bill had gone into a corner and said to himself, 'I'll never forgive him. One day I'll get even.'

Bill asked himself: 'Are you going to pass this chain of bitterness on to your children or are you going to break it?'

'I had never got on with my father,' says Bill, 'but I realized that in many ways I had treated him no better than he had treated me.' Bill decided that he could at least take a step towards Roy, so he wrote him about the situation with Jennie and, for the first time in his life, asked for his help. 'Could we start again?' Bill asked.

A week or two later, Bill visited his parents. Roy just said, 'I got your letter. I was shaken.' Later he told Bill and Jennie, 'You mustn't have rows,' but nothing else.

The following week, Bill and Roy were alone when, quite out of the blue, Roy said, 'I never told you about my father, did I?' he then explained that his mother had had a child by a man whom she loved but who then disappeared abroad. All she ever got was on postcard. But she remained faithful to him for the rest of her life.

Bill was 29 at the time, and the conversation was the start of a firm friendship between Bill and Roy, a real father-son relationship. Both their tempers began to subside.

I can't say that I never lose my temper,' says Bill who now has children of his own. 'A single remark can bring an emotion flooding back from the past and I react unreasonably. But now if things go wrong between Jennie and me we can quickly sort it out, and I can ask for God's help and forgiveness. It has transformed our marriage. The chain of hurt, which began with a grandfather I never knew, is broken and will not be passed on to our children.'

Marriage is a learning and a testing ground for one of society's most vital ingredients, love—how to give it and how to receive it. There are many sentimental ideas about love—and any marriage needs romance—but love involves, if nothing else, commitment. Treat your partner in a caring way, even when you least feel like it, and you won't go far wrong.

Not that there's a pat formula for a happy marriage. If marriages are made in Heaven, they may need a little divine help to make them work properly. Most of us benefit from seeking help on occasion—whether from 'abnove' or from trusted friends or counsellors.

Sadly, many couples look for outside help too late. Britain has the second-highest divorce rate in the European Union, with over a third of first marriages ending in break-down (though this may be partly due to Britain's relatively high marriage rate). This could explain why many people opt to live together without marrying. But those discouraged by the high number of failed marriages should note that over 60 per cent of first marriages hold together.

One couple who came ‘back from the brink’ were Hugh and Christine. Christine was in a desperate state. Her own parents were always fighting and were on the verge of divorce. Her mother-in-law thought her son had married beneath him. Christine had to take barbiturates because she suffered from epileptic fits. She was also trying to hold down three part-time jobs. And then there were the rows with Hugh. How had they started? ‘I don’t know,’ says Hugh. ‘Partly the in-laws I suppose. To disagree became habit-forming. We just fell into that trap.’

‘The biggest problem was we didn’t talk,’ adds Christine. ‘When we did communicate, it was in anger. It gradually built up till you were emotionally raw. There was just no forgiveness.’

Finally, just after their second child was born, Christine had a nervous breakdown. The doctor put her on valium. Soon she became addicted.

Then Hugh began to fancy to a secretary at work, though he didn’t tell her about his feelings. ‘I thought I was justified at the time,’ he says. ‘My marriage didn’t mean anything to me any more.’

Christine sensed there was trouble brewing. ‘He didn’t laugh any longer, he was sullen, something was terribly wrong.’

Hugh ceased caring what Christine felt. So when she asked him if he was in love with someone else he said, yes. That was the last straw for Christine: ‘I just fell apart.’

Hugh began to pack his bags to leave though he didn’t actually go.: ‘I’d just about had enough.’

That night Christine went downstairs to end it all. ‘Suicide seemed the only way out. I had no one to turn to. Hugh didn’t love me. The children’s lives were on the same unhappy path as my own childhood. Neither the psychiatrist nor the marriage guidance councillor had helped and all the doctor said was, “Keep taking the pills.” So I was going to, all in one go, to get out of the misery.’

At the bottom of the stairs she cried out: ‘If there’s a God up there and you’ve got a son, as we learnt at school, I need him now.’ Then she sat on the floor and said the only prayer she knew, the Lord’s Prayer.

It was as if a voice was talking to her: ‘If you take those pills it will be worse where you’re going than what you leave behind, because your life is such a mess.’

‘I cried my heart out--in anger as much as anything--put the pills away and crashed out in sleep. The best sleep I’d had in years. It was just heaven.’

When she woke up next morning, Sunday, Christine’s first thought was, ‘Get up, tidy yourself and go to church.’

The children thought she was leaving for good but she instructed them, ‘Tell you dad I’ll be back to cook the dinner.’

The next weeks saw the beginning of a new calm in Christine, and in the house—an ‘uneasy calm’, she admits, as Hugh was still suspicious of the change in her. But the children, sensing a new atmosphere, became a little more relaxed and outgoing.

Hugh began to think of the young offenders he had been teaching engineering once a week as part of their probation service. Many of them, he recognized, had come from broken homes and had lacked love and understanding. Two of them had been glue sniffing. He began to feel ‘more than just a bit uncomfortable’ about what might happen to his own children.

Eventually Hugh agreed to go with Christine and the children to church—though it ‘presented challenges that weren’t easy to face’. For one thing he needed to forgive his in-laws for the effect they had had in his home, not to mention the forgiveness he needed from Christine.

Christine saw that she had blamed Hugh for everything. In a time of prayer she had had the thought: ‘love Hugh more, not less’. Just because he had not loved her didn’t mean that she should stop loving him. The children, too, needed more love and attention.

The doctor helped Christine come off the valium, after eight years. Her epileptic fits have become less frequent. As for the children, they have ‘ended up being well-balanced—I don’t know how’, says Christine.

Some of the ingredients that help a husband and wife form a deep relationship apply more widely. We all have friends we naturally take to. And we often treat them as they would like to be treated without even thinking about it—though there’s doubtless room for improvement. But we also have to deal with people we don’t like—often for quite good reasons.

Richard, an American professor, had three colleagues who resented his position as Academic Dean and took every opportunity to make things difficult for him. He felt he ought to love them but however hard he tried he could not. He says he prayed for love but ‘they would not let me love them’. Then the thought struck him, ‘You cannot always be responsible for how you feel about people, but you are always responsible for how you deal with people.’ Richard decided to treat them as if they were his best friends. At first the men, and his own friends, thought he was crazy. But within a year, two of the men changed their attitude and started treating Richard with respect.

‘If your mind is hurt and bruised it can’t reason,’ says Julie, warden of a hostel for young people in Manchester. She has provided a home for arsonists, victims of physical and sexual abuse, people with a history of violence and the emotionally damaged. ‘Not one of them has come from a stable home,’ she says. The people she cares for are extreme cases. But far too many of us carry wounds that, unless healed, will stop us reaching our full potential—and that is society’s loss as well as ours.

Julie tries to care for the ‘problem’ young people in the hostel with love. The hostel is, in fact, her own home, and she has ten living with her at any one time. She treats them as ‘family’ and expects them to pay their way and to play a full part in running the home. ‘People are always made welcome no matter what they’ve done,’ she says. In the few years that most of them stay, many find healing for their inner hurts.

Andrew, for instance, came to the hostel one Christmas Day on bail from Strangeways prison. As a two-year-old he had been abandoned by his mother. His father was criminally insane. Not surprisingly, Andrew became very difficult.

At 18 he was put into a flat by the authorities, but he couldn’t cope and he was plagued by drug-pushers. He kept asking the authorities to find him somewhere else, without result. Finally he burnt down the whole block of flats.

Julie recalls, ‘At dinner time all the items of food he wanted were put on his plate but he just sat looking at it, unable to eat. I could see he was expecting me to be angry. But I knew he wasn’t just being awkward; he couldn’t cope with all the hurt and rejection that had happened to him.’

She said to him, ‘I’m sorry, Andrew, you’re overwhelmed. I couldn’t eat if someone did that to me.’ She gradually came to see how distraught he was inside and built up a rapport with him.

At his trial the judge did not send Andrew to jail but put him on probation. He moved into the hostel. His healing was not quick: 'I've seen him pick up the fridge and chuck it across the room,' Julie says. 'But when you understand him you can meet him with your own calmness.'

Few of those who come to the hostel after being in trouble with the police offend again. 'Most of them have never been loved,' says Julie simply.

'If you approach someone with their best interests at heart and they reject you, you'll feel a stab of pain,' she goes on. 'But you've got to keep going, even if they reject you ten or 20 times. You've got to reach out to them so they know you feel some of the pain they've got.' At such times, she says, it is her Christian faith that gives her the strength to keep going.

There is no guarantee that treating someone else in a loving way will produce a response—but there's only one way to find out.

ALL ARE NEEDED

When things go wrong in society, looking for a scapegoat seems a likely way of cutting down the hassle.

Some white British find the minority communities handy in a crisis. 'They're taking our jobs; they're destroying our way of life...' Such complaints are sweeping generalizations and overlook some uncomfortable facts.

For a start, in the 1950s and '60s British employers persuaded many people from Commonwealth countries to come and do the jobs that white British were not applying for. The contribution to British life of these new British has been considerable. All may not be well with the National Health Service, but where would it be without the dedication of many from the racial minorities?

Also, it's convenient to forget that over several centuries Britain exploited the ancestral homelands of many of her minority citizens. The Opium Wars are remembered far more keenly by the Chinese, who were forced at gun-point to import opium that did them great harm, than by the British, who profited from the trade. And the West Indian down the road may well have ancestors who were taken as slaves from West Africa on British ships. Even today, the global economic system is weighted to benefit the rich nations of the North at the expense of those of the South.

White British who refuse to get to know their neighbours of other races are missing out on a wealth of openness and hospitality. Such friendships, at home, at work or at school, are enriching—and they destroy stereotypes. Saddam Hussein is no more typical of Iraqis than the Yorkshire Ripper is of Englishmen. Fear and mistrust feed on ignorance.

Those who fear that their way of life is being threatened by the ethnic minorities should ask themselves whether they are being guided by reason or prejudice. The British way of life has never been static nor free from outside influences. Most of us have taken happily to CD players, tandooris, Nintendo games and American football on TV—and, more generally, successive groups of immigrants have been introducing new strands to British life ever since the days of the Roman occupation.

Of course there are some values which we tend to call 'British' that we should be determined to hang on to—fair-play, supporting the underdog, love of country, freedom of speech and 'my word is my bond'. Ironically, the greatest threats to most of these are the attitudes of superiority and blame that typify the racially prejudiced. A belief that all men and women are equal is basic to democracy. Cold-shouldering the minority communities is hardly likely to bring the best out of them. They must be given every chance to play a full part at all levels of national life.

This is not to belittle the challenge of enabling hundreds of thousands of people from Asian and Afro-Caribbean traditions to integrate into British society. At a time of high unemployment and 'negative equity' in house values it is all too easy to resent people of whatever background who are better off. But no incident of racism is acceptable.

Considering the rapid change in Britain's racial make-up, problems have probably been fewer than many would have predicted. If this is so, it is due to a great deal of work by official bodies, such as the Commission for Racial Equality, and numerous private groups.

In 1980 a white youth was killed in a racial attack in Croydon, a London borough where one in eight people belongs to an ethnic minority. Amid the ensuing tension, people of different races started meeting informally. This developed into the Croydon and South London Bridge Builders. Their regular gatherings now include people of many ethnic groups.

Two of the founders, Reggie and Joan, discovered that one of their neighbours, George, had worked for Dorman Long, international bridge builders. George's view was: 'All blacks should go home.' Yet the idea of being a bridge builder in human relationships caught his fancy. He went to a birthday party at Reggie and Joan's where he met Asians and West Indians. He got to know some of them, one by one. They no longer seemed a menacing black and brown mass, but individuals. Soon it was not 'that Indian girl' but Deepa, a Sikh. When a play was put on as part of 'One world in Croydon week', George was at the door as chief welcomer to the multicoloured, multicultural audience.

Another early breakthrough involved Pam, a West Indian mother. Incensed by police harassment, she had started the Black People's Action Group. After two years of friendship with the Bridge Builders, she met a senior police officer for the area face to face. He listened to her accusations and gave his side. Pam gradually concluded that he was serious about stamping out evil practices in his force, and that he needed her help more than her criticisms.

In 1984 Sikh extremists killed India's Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. Communal riots followed. Independent Television News showed Sikhs in New Delhi living in fear of further reprisals. As she left for Mrs Gandhi's funeral, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher expressed 'deep concern' about Sikh-Hindu tensions in Britain. The next news item showed Hindus and Sikhs meeting in Croydon for prayer and reconciliation. This was arranged on the initiative of Binoth Singh, Chairman of the South London Indian Council.

On another occasion Binoth Singh helped heal relations between Asians and West Indians in the Croydon Council for Community Relations. Asian members of the CCCR had walked out after a row. Later, at a meeting with some of the Bridge Builders, Indian Jag Kharbanda apologized to Andy Johnson, the West Indian Vice-Chairman of the CCCR. Kharbanda and the other Asians returned.

When there was an election for the chairmanship of the Community Relations Council, Binoth Singh and Johnson both stood. But Singh generously stepped down to let Johnson be elected unopposed, saying that he as an Asian would be glad to serve under a West Indian.

By 1990, Croydon's MP and Speaker of Parliament, now Lord Weatherill, was able to congratulate Bridge Builders on 'ten years of productive endeavour and achievement'. He described them as 'often acting unseen, meeting and talking through difficulties, always ending in friendship'.

'If you are not mixing you are not healing,' comments Miguel Richards, Bridge Builders' West Indian Chairman.

In Newcastle upon Tyne, Nitin Shukla works in the careers advisory service. Shukla's family is Asian. They moved to Britain from Kenya when he was 12. At one point a brick was thrown through their window and they got hostile phone calls. When such things happen to him or other immigrants, Shukla goes back to a decision he made to be part of the whole community, not just the Asian one. 'I have decided that Britain is my home,' he says.

Through his work, Shukla hopes to help answer prejudice in young whites. He spends much of his time talking individually with those approaching school-leaving age. 'Sometimes when the student first sees me, I get funny looks,' says Shukla. 'I try to do my best for them because I know that a lot of the abuse happens through ignorance.'

Nitin Shukla's father, Hari, won an MBE for his work as Senior Race Equality Officer for Tyneside until his retirement in 1993. With his support and encouragement, the leaders of all the ethnic groups in Newcastle met regularly with the police, political figures and people from industry. They attend each other's religious festivals. On one occasion whites and Indians worked together to produce curry for 1,000 people in a Sikh Temple for Chinese New Year.

This close trust between community leaders has allowed potential problems to be anticipated and defused. So when a Muslim was fatally stabbed one night, the police immediately alerted a leader of Newcastle's Bangladeshi community, and asked him to go to the police station. He was able to talk to some Bangladeshi witnesses, whose English was limited. They were shocked and frightened. He reassured them and helped interpret. 'When a coloured person is killed some immediately think in terms of inter-racial violence and it can become very explosive,' he says. Where race is not involved he is able to calm things down.

FREE OR HOOKED?

Fish aren't the only things that swallow a harmless-looking morsel and then find themselves hooked and netted. Most of us know what it is to crave a drink, a cigarette, sexual excitement or a sniff of glue. Yet it seems contrary to want to live in political freedom while being a slave to some habit.

The received wisdom of today is that almost anything done in private between consenting adults is a personal matter. And the last thing we need is a snooping society where we are each other's moral policemen. But is it true that what I do in private affects no one else, as some politicians seem to believe?

It is patently untrue of alcoholics, who become a headache to their families and a liability at work. Smokers and over-eaters risk diseases—and these make them a burden on others. And there is growing concern about the dangers of 'passive smoking', breathing air polluted by smokers. Some children of promiscuous parents may feel that they have not been given the best start in life, no matter how well they are provided for financially.

Of significance to democracy is the fact that people who are unfree rarely reach their full potential. This cannot be proved—any more than you can give a 'correct' answer to: 'What would have happened if William the Conqueror had been defeated at Hastings?' But would you want as your prime minister a person who had a string of mistresses or lovers? It might suggest that he or she was not giving as much to running the country as needed—and that loyalty was not his or her strong suit.

There are people who have discovered a new vitality and success at their work or studies after getting free from some self-indulgent habit.

When a Liverpool businessman decided to cut out his drinking binges, he arrived home with a clear head each night. One evening he got an idea for a new method of printing photos and artwork which greatly improved the quality of newspaper advertisements. He now has franchises worldwide.

Enormous imagination and initiative will be needed to pull Britain out of recession and tackle our social problems, let alone work out what we can do to help with the much greater problems of eastern Europe and the developing world. Those who can free themselves of debilitating addictions will be better equipped to take on such challenges.

How? The dangers of glue-sniffing, promiscuity and alcohol abuse are well known. Yet fear seems to have little effect on people's habits. There is no magic formula for breaking free, and where the habit makes the body chemically dependent the struggle becomes almost superhuman. But those who admit their need and seek help can make it.

John, an American former Olympic gold medallist became a heavy drinker. It changed his personality. 'I became a critical, verbally abusive individual, especially to my wife and kids.' A row in 1985 ended with him throwing dishes at his wife. The police arrested him. 'It was a long way down from the Olympic victory podium.'

He agreed to go for treatment, realizing that it was the only hope of keeping his family together. 'The basic philosophy behind the treatment was the Alcoholics Anonymous *Twelve Step programme*: you admit you are an alcoholic and are powerless to change, and you turn your life over to God as you understand him. It also means taking a fearless and honest moral inventory of your life, putting things right where you can, living one day at a time and listening daily to your "inner voice" to give you direction.'

John says that his 'spiritual reawakening' laid out 'a method of living that can guide you through the rest of your life'. The benefits went further. His oldest daughter, who had left home at 15 and had been deep into drugs and alcohol for several years, visited him. She, too, graduated from a treatment centre. John's family life has improved and he now runs a non-profit organization that restores wild salmon runs. He puts its success down to the involvement of people recovering from alcoholism.

Habits of thought can also be hard to break—the negative attitudes that jaundice your outlook on people of another class or culture and make you indifferent or callous towards them. Apathy is also a tough habit to break out of because it is often the product of disappointment and bitter experience. What about the dangers of 'passive apathy', an attitude of 'why should I bother when nobody else does'?

Few subjects arouse such excitement as sexual morality. 'Is masturbation anything to worry about?' 'Do adult movies encourage assaults on women?' 'Is a gay relationship OK?' 'Can suppressing your instincts lead to psychological problems?' Whatever dos and don'ts churches, or other religions, lay down about sexual matters, many people do what comes naturally, and give little thought to questions of right and wrong. Yet you don't get the impression that a more permissive society is a happier one.

Those who are freest in their spirits seem to be those who serve others—not only the Mother Teresas but the woman who does voluntary work at the local senior citizens' home or the man who is always doing jobs for other people, for whom nothing is too much trouble.

It may be relevant to remember the old adage about 'when all else fails, read the manufacturer's instructions'. All the religions put great value on purity. According to the Bible, the Creator of sex saw that all his creation was good. But to become a slave to sex is as limiting as being a slave to

any other instinct. What would we think of someone who was completely run by his instinct to avoid danger and would take no risks at all?

Saying 'no' to casual sex is no more psychologically damaging than saying 'no' to drugs, or to fear when it would make us do the wrong thing. Of course sex is a wonderful thing and of great value—just as fear is—in its proper place.

A woman who broke off a relationship because she came to believe it was wrong said she was giving up the thing she cherished most. 'When something is taken away,' she said, 'it has to be replaced by something, and for me that was the forgiveness and love of Christ.'

As the woman implies, just saying 'no' is hardly the route to fulfilment. Life is about saying 'yes' to something worthwhile. A clear, worthwhile purpose in life brings satisfaction, perhaps even adventure. Old habits are missed less when better ones are acquired.

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

Ivan Boeski coined the much-quoted phrase, 'Greed is good.' He's since been jailed for insider share dealing. Perhaps his views remain the same. But anyone taking a global view would find it hard to agree with them.

Greed has certainly not helped the environment, wildlife or many of the indigenous peoples of the world. Tropical hardwood trees are disappearing at an alarming rate. Yet they are used to make disposable 'formers' for pouring concrete when satisfactory alternatives could be found at a slightly higher cost. Whole peoples have been moved onto 'reservations', or wiped out altogether, because their lifestyles got in the way of 'progress'. Fortunately, not all the news is bad. A recent agreement appears to have stopped the exploitation of minerals in the Antarctic.

The rights and wrongs of environmental issues are usually complex—oil revenues from Antarctica could finance development projects worldwide, if the rich countries could ever agree to it. Would food for starving people be a higher priority than the well-being of whales and penguins? In Britain, there are fierce arguments between conservationists, worried about the destruction of the countryside, and those who feel we need better roads or more houses.

A balance has to be struck between people's needs and the environment's protection. But ultimately we depend on the environment for our survival. Policy-makers—and in a democracy we can all influence policy—need considerable wisdom as they pick a path through the choices. Greed is bound to distort judgements as it puts short-term gain before other considerations.

The environment is not the only casualty of greed. Ask anyone who was expecting to benefit from the Maxwell pension fund.

It could be argued that the greed of capitalists in the 19th century gave rise to the greatest evil in the 20th. Certainly the Lancashire factory-owners who ruthlessly exploited their workers fanned the fire in Marx and Engels. They formulated the philosophy that produced Stalin and Mao. Several countries are only just 'coming to' after being dealt knock-out blows by the Red Army and the KGB in the 1940s.

Is greed bad for a modern democracy? If all the city institutions and share-owners didn't demand that companies make ever higher returns on their investments wouldn't Britain become less competitive? Do we want inefficient industries, reduced exports and high unemployment? Of course not. It is a question of finding the right balance between profits and such factors as workers' needs, environmental protection, long-term research and so on.

Where does need end and greed begin? An Englishman visiting India for the first time was troubled by the poverty and suffering he saw. 'The thought that kept going round in my mind was: how much in the way of resources (money, possessions, food, energy, space) am I justified in using for myself?' He came to the conclusion that he should 'maintain a downward pressure on my expectations and estimation of my needs'.

Greed is a product of materialism, the worship of material things. Things are to be used and enjoyed. Yet society cannot be sustained indefinitely on the basis of everyone saying, 'I don't want much, I just want more.' St Paul talked about people who, instead of worshipping the Creator, worshipped and served what the Creator had made. It's an easy trap to fall into, especially when your friend has just bought a new computer or booked a holiday in Kenya. But material things can never give true satisfaction. Most of us have experienced the 'if only I just had a.... I'd be happy' syndrome. It's remarkable how soon the excitement wears off once we've got the object of our desire.

Deciding that greed is 'bad' will change nothing unless we do something about it. An epidemic of self-denial might be desirable—but it's about as appealing as when the Chancellor announces tax increases in the budget. What is needed is a satisfying alternative way of life, which puts first non-material, that is spiritual, values. Many people have found that this is the true path to satisfaction. As St Augustine put it, 'Our hearts are restless till they rest in You.'

People who have inner contentment, though easily tempted to greed, dishonesty and all the other things which undermine democracy, have a key to living differently.

But contentment sounds passive and lacking in thrills. Where do I get some action? This comes when I not only let God satisfy me but let him tell me what to do with my life.

'You cannot be serious,' to quote a well-known tennis player. Yet Abraham Lincoln, who saved the largest democracy of his day from disintegration, once said, 'I am satisfied that when the Almighty wants me to do or not to do any particular thing, he finds a way of letting me know it.'

Is God a democrat? Serving him is, paradoxically, said to be 'perfect freedom'. It does seem that democratic ideals are dear to him—the worth of each individual, honesty, service, care of the sick and love for one's neighbours. Many who are committed to God (rather than just to some church or religious group) lead the sort of lives and work for the sort of changes that make democracy work.

Take John Wesley, for instance. He and those he inspired helped thousands of people to become Christians, not only in name but in deed. This paved the way for many important reforms such as the abolition of slavery and the gradual improvement of the working conditions of men, women and children. Home life improved, as did business life. Wesley's quiet revolution probably explains why Britain did not experience the sort of violence which saw France guillotining its aristocracy.

Another shining example is Mahatma Gandhi, who helped get the British out of India without using violence and gave his all to reconcile his country's Hindus and Muslims when they turned on each other.

Of course, sincere believers often have their blind-spots. Look how long it took the church in South Africa to condemn apartheid—though when they did, it was a major nail in apartheid's coffin.

Democracy is a system—but it depends on a quality of living. This is tied up with the choices we make and what we put our faith in.

A LIFE THAT IS RELEVANT

A plumber who was going through a rough patch asked a parson, how do I get a faith?

‘Remember when your son was old enough to go about with you?’ said the clergyman. ‘You took him here and there. You looked after him. As he grew older and people questioned him on some things your boy could no doubt say: “Oh, my Dad will do this or that.” Why? Simply because he had faith in you, his father. He had built up step by step, a trust, a faith.’

The plumber got the point.

Faith means putting our trust in god, taking it as part of the deal that he wants the best for us, and for everyone else in the world, too. It is the decision to act on our deepest sense of what is right, despite the fact that we cannot be certain that everything will work out well, trusting that God will not let us down.

Those who so decide find that faith operates at many levels. God will help us find a relationship with him and peace of heart; he will help us overcome character weaknesses or free us from habits we’re ashamed of; he may show us the way out of personal problems or answer prayers about things that are worrying us.

Faith becomes a more exciting prospect, and more of a force in society, when we let God give us a purpose in life—often challenging, even daunting, tasks to take on and goals to aim for.

An example which happened many years ago in Denmark seems surprisingly topical today. In 1938 Denmark had 100,000 unemployed—over 20 per cent of the workforce. Some Danes who had become committed Christians started a national campaign to create jobs. Among them were Valdemar Hvidt, a Supreme Court barrister, and Alfred Nielsen, owner of a large sawmill business. Nielsen had recently given his workers an unexpected payrise: having first said the company could not afford it, he then admitted that he was really thinking of his own pocket.

The idea behind the campaign for jobs, said Hvidt, was that ‘when a stone is too heavy to move, break it into small pieces and get many to carry it’. Unemployment, he added, was a matter of conscience for everyone, where each town and village should take action to find work for its own unemployed.

Soon the Prime Minister responded to the various local efforts by setting up a National Association for Combating Unemployment (known as LAB). It’s board of 15 included Hvidt as Chairman, Nielsen, prominent farmers, employers and trade union leaders. At the inaugural meeting in October, 1939, the Prime Minister expressed his gratitude for the surge of voluntary effort ‘which has brought to work together men from all camps and classes who previously found it most difficult to cooperate on anything’.

Hvidt and his team spoke in many towns and persuaded people to set up local branches. Within six months every principal town had one. The branches were more or less independent of the central body. The stress was on local initiatives, and many jobs were created. In Vejle, for example, there were 25 unemployed painters. People who had been postponing the upkeep of their houses, put them to work. Soon carpenters and joiners had to be brought in from surrounding towns.

The German invasion of Denmark in 1940 gave new urgency to LAB as unemployed men were liable to be drafted to work in German war industries.

LAB was active in what today would be called ‘recycling’. They organized collections of waste materials that were previously considered worthless. Workers in some 50 towns earned good money by making regular tours of houses, offices and institutions, collecting metal, cork, waste paper, rubber and enough food for 20,000 pigs. By 1942, this created 250 jobs in Copenhagen alone. They also dug up tree-stumps, which would previously have been left to rot, for fuel.

LAB was wound up in 1965 when, due to the strength of the Danish economy, unemployment was only 3.7 per cent.

Another, more recent, example might usefully be studied by those concerned with Northern Ireland's problems. As part of the treaty which drew Italy into the war on their side, France and Britain agreed that Italy should have sovereignty over the Tyrol region of the Austrian Empire. Without being consulted, the quarter of a million German-speaking inhabitants of the South Tyrol found themselves a small minority in post-war Italy.

Many Italians settled in the area. The German-speakers felt that their rights were being infringed. In 1959 Austria asked the UN to tackle the problem. Talks between Italy and Austria made little progress and by the late Sixties, tension increased and there were bombings.

At this point a TV journalist who was covering the conflict felt that there was much goodwill in people who wanted to solve it although their negotiations had not made much progress. Returning to Rome, his programme complete, the reporter continued to ponder which side in the conflict was right. Then he recalled some words he had heard spoken at a conference centre for Initiatives of Change in Caux, Switzerland: 'It's not a question of who is right, but what is right.' He felt a strong conviction that God could resolve the chaos in South Tyrol and wrote an article to that effect. This prompted a businessman who had previously tried to work for a solution to visit Caux. He was followed there by a delegation representing both language groups.

Karl Mitterdorfer, a German-speaking MP in the Italian parliament, left Caux inspired by the thought that 'a solution to our small problem could possibly give an example for the solution of larger problems'. He later commented, 'For me the significant point was when I accepted personal responsibility and was ready to admit honestly where I had done something wrong.' He went to the leader of the opposite wing in his own party and 'apologized for the many wrong things that had been between us. The result was remarkable. My attitude and relationship with this opponent became quite different. This affected our relationship with politicians and parties outside our ranks.'

Guido Bernardi, an MP from Rome, said, 'Through coming to Caux we Italians realized we had to respect the uniquely German character of the majority in South Tyrol.'

In this and subsequent meetings an atmosphere was created in which most leaders of South Tyrol were ready to accept a 'package deal' put forward by the Italian government. This gave a degree of autonomy to the German-speaking minority and legal protection for their rights. For their part, the German-speakers gave up their demands for independence or reunification with Austria. The foreign ministers of Italy and Austria issued a joint communiqué saying that a new era of constructive teamwork was beginning. But much still needed to be worked out. This took 20 years of detailed negotiations, with occasional setbacks and some renewed violence.

In June 1992 the Austrian parliament finally declared that Italy had fulfilled all the conditions of the 'package'. The main German-speaking party of the South Tyrol agreed that every last point of dispute had been resolved.

Dr Mitterdorfer, who has been advising the post-communist Hungarian government on how to protect minority rights, suggests something is needed beyond legislation, respect for human rights and even reconciliation. He refers to the example of Nikolaus von der Fluë, a 15th century Swiss saint. Convinced that God could show him how to heal the bitter quarrels between the Swiss cantons of his day, St Nikolaus saved his country from civil war. 'We need this prayer today, and the search for the divine plan, which is itself a part of prayer,' says Mitterdorfer.

Such examples do not offer blueprints for solving Britain's problems. Our society is different. Their relevance lies in the fact that they only happened because some had the courage to let God tell them what to do, and because many people of goodwill put in a great deal of hard work.

Deciding to live in obedience to God—handing him control of your life, your money, your instincts, all that you hold most dear—is radical in the extreme. How do you know that you can trust him? Or those who claim to speak for him? After all, many Christians seem hardly distinguishable from non-believers apart from the fact that they go to Church now and again.

It was realising that calling myself a Christian wasn't enough that made me face what was missing. It wasn't belief in God. It was giving him the chance to guide my life.

When I did so, I saw that I needed to straighten out various relationships and put right some past dishonesties. I started making time to seek God's will, listening in silence for the inner promptings of the Spirit and reading the Bible and other inspirational books. I began to glimpse a new vision of society, the sort of world that everyone could enjoy living in because enough men and women had found the courage to start the needed changes with themselves.

Through trying to obey God, learning to say 'no' to anything our conscience says is wrong, reading and working with others with the same commitment, we can learn a great deal about this non-materialist life-style which is democratically desirable and environment friendly. And God is always ready to help us start afresh when we make a hash of things or, worse, don't even try to do what he wants.

Archbishop William Temple once stated that when he prayed, coincidences happened. That has been my experience, too. For example, I had a clear sense during a time of prayer one morning that I should apologise to another student with whom I had had a distinctly cool relationship. I had not seen him for months, but on my way into college that morning he was practically the first person I saw. I was able to say my piece.

People with a genuine faith develops several qualities which are needed in a democracy. They will be concerned for other people. They will take responsibility, in an attempt to reflect something of God's love for the world. They will stand for the things they believe in, whatever the pressures and whoever is against them. They also know where to turn for the help which is often needed to work with others.

Even more important, they are aware of the need to get themselves out of the centre of the picture. How many of us vote, or make decisions on the basis of what will suit me best, rather than what would be best for the country? 'How would a Labour government affect my income?' 'If I vote for the Conservatives will they build a railway line near my town?' Important as such questions are, they may not be the whole picture.

Democracy and basic values are inextricably linked. That doesn't mean that politics can be boiled down to a few simple formulae. No two people will agree on how to apply even the values they agree on. How do you balance 'freedom' with 'equality'? How do you decide what to spend on overseas aid when pensioners are hard-up or when hospital beds are in short supply? Or reconcile the apparently irreconcilable interests of the various communities in Northern Ireland? There will always be a great breadth of opinion on all political questions—and democracy would be dull if it were not so. But where there is agreement on certain fundamental values—as there is to a great extent in Britain—a basis for discussion, compromise and policy formation exists.

DEMOCRACY FOR EXPORT?

‘So we get our act together, lead nobler lives and bolster our democratic institutions. Then we can relax, stop being so high-minded and enjoy the good things our country has to offer.’

Hold on a minute. Is that adequate? And isn't it rather unrealistic?

‘Oh no! Not my conscience again. Shut up, for God's sake.’

What about the rest of the world?

There are an awful lot of problems in the world. We can probably choose to ignore some of them without doing ourselves much harm. But even from a selfish point-of-view, few can safely be ignored. Environmental issues, such as the rupture of the ozone layer or the threat of global warming, remind us that no country is insulated from the effects of another's actions. The same is true for economic and political issues.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was a reminder that seemingly distant disputes have a nasty habit of escalating and involving us. An international trade dispute could seriously damage our economy. No responsible government can afford to ignore such issues.

In a democracy, providing its citizens remain alert, an irresponsible government will not be looking forward to election time.

Most non-democratic governments have a poor record. Chernobyl and the Gulags; the sabotage of the Kuwaiti oil-fields; aid money being spent on arms; dictators amassing immense fortunes while their countrymen starve; people ‘disappearing’ under right-wing military juntas; ‘re-education’ of dissidents—the list of abuses by non-accountable governments makes chilling reading.

Granted, the democracies are not paragons. They have been slow to act on pollution, homelessness, redressing unfair terms of trade with developing countries, decolonizing Africa and curbing excesses of many kinds. At least concerned citizens in a democracy have a chance of exercising a positive influence on public opinion and, ultimately, government policy.

We cannot export democracy by force, but we can aim to inspire other countries by our example. Just as we are inspired by the courage and persistence of those in central and eastern Europe who have ousted totalitarian regimes. And, though it can be a two-edged sword, judicious pressure can be applied to bring about change—through the UN, through trade sanctions or by offering moral and practical support to the democratic opposition to dictators. It might also help our cause if we were as quick to sort out our own failings as we are to pass judgement on other countries.

Britain's future may not lie in becoming a superpower once again. But we could make a valuable contribution to the world by creating a free and fair country which all its people are glad to call home, and which is responsive to the needs of others.

The true democrat has a life-time's work ahead. He or she could do worse for a motto than: forward to basics.

Some of the names in this booklet have been changed. Many of the examples have been taken from For A Change, the magazine for people who want to make a difference. For a free introductory copy write to the Marketing Manager, For a Change, 24 Greencoat Place, London SW1P 1RD, (email info@uk.initiativesofchange.org), mentioning this booklet.