

A new kind of person?

by Walter H. Capps

Do new styles of life and worship indicate the emergence of a new sort of person?

Can current changes in religious belief and attitude, particularly among youth, be understood as birth pangs? And the new forms of religious expression and devotion — are they simply signs of a larger creative event? If something is yearning to be born, might that something be a new sort of person?

Such is the suggestion of Dr. Robert Jay Lifton, Yale University psychiatrist, who proposes that we are witnessing the birth of a new kind of person in our time, a new style of being human. Surprisingly enough, Lifton came to this view after interviewing Japanese survivors of the atom bomb attack on Hiroshima. His impressions have been confirmed more recently by testimony of returned Vietnam War veterans. And while he doesn't spell out all the religious implications, he gives us much to reflect upon.

Lifton calls the new person Protean Man, choosing a name from Greek mythology. In Homer and elsewhere, the figure Proteus is depicted as the elusive, prophetic old man of the sea who knew all things past, present, and future but was reluctant to tell what he knew. Those who wished to share Proteus' wisdom had first to find him before they could put questions to him. Their best chance of seizing him came about noontime, when he frequently took a nap in a cave by the sea.

But Proteus was protected by his ability to assume all sorts of shapes. He could escape by becoming a lion, snake, leopard, boar, tree, and some-

times even fire and water. Having once assumed one of these forms, he could shift back quickly into one of the others. But when seized by his captor, Proteus was obliged to assume his proper shape and give the requested answer. Then he could plunge back into the sea.

Capacity for change

Proteus is Lifton's model because of his capacity for never-ending change. Protean Man changes viewpoints quickly and readily. He is fluid, always on the move, never really fixed. Lifton describes him as a self-concept in motion. He came into being because the usual ways persons gain some sense of the distinction between life and death were shattered by Hiroshima, the Nazi holocaust, Vietnam, and the psychological shock waves which followed all of these.

For those who didn't experience these cataclysmic events firsthand, the threat of a third world war, with its extensive destruction of life, creates and intensifies the same inner awareness. Where there is no clear way of maintaining differences between death and life, there is no hold upon lasting stability.

Lifton suggests that we have become susceptible to Protean Man, too, by our mobility and the ease with which we change locations. Little by little, we have lost our sense of place. We have no permanence. We are unable to recognize home.

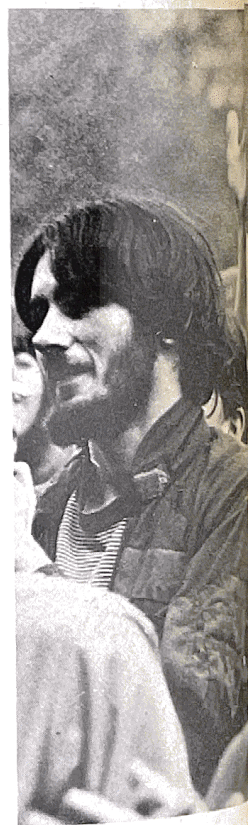
Our experience of homelessness has been accelerated by television and the flooding of media imagery. During the

course of a single television newscast, for example, we are seduced into participating in the crucial goings on within a variety of locations without having to stay there or form lasting commitments. The next night we can do the same, and the next, and the next. The process becomes so habitual for us that we are lulled into thinking that it doesn't affect us.

But it does. For the product of these moods and habits is a person who is capable of shifting his life's orientation easily, frequently, and repeatedly, but never once for all.

For example, in an earlier era, religious conversion was experienced as a decisive spiritual and emotional turn-

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about. It happened once usually, and it was decisive. But now Protean Man is open to conversion all the time, without great inner struggle.

He can move fluidly from Zen to yoga to transcendental meditation to Christian Pentecostalism, back and forth, in and out, up and down, creatively mixing the teachings and practices of Eastern and Western religious traditions. He absorbs ideas from wherever he finds them, without being bothered by whatever inconsistencies there are between them.

World views, life philosophies, and religious stances—in great numbers—are there to be embraced, modified, withheld, abandoned, and perhaps embraced anew. And this self-serving eclectic process can go on indefinitely.

Of special significance to persons in the church is Protean Man's attitude toward parents, teachers, and elders. Protean persons labor mightily to inform elders about worlds of experience and sensation which the latter can hardly grasp and for which they have no enthusiasm. For their part, elders find that their recommendations about cardinal truths, great books, moral precepts, and religious absolutes fall on deaf ears.

But this is predictable: In Protean Man's view, no teachings hold any

conviction unless they can be verified through personal experience, and then only if they enhance psychic awareness or lead to heightened levels of consciousness. Such an attitude is bound to affect relationships between parents and children. It will also be reflected in classrooms and churches.

Romantic and idealistic

In all of his tendencies toward novelty, Protean Man is romantic and idealistic. He feels nostalgia for the earliest period of human history, when life was harmonious and simple.

At the same time, he wishes to make everything new. He craves new experiences. He is fascinated by new things. He cultivates new sensitivities. He is eager to announce the birth of a new world, asking everyone to share in it. And he wants to be youthful, regardless of his calendar age.

The clue to Protean Man's attitude is to be found in this attempt to bring the immortal and the new together. As Protean Man views it, anything of any lasting value, for any era or place, can be reduced to an experience which can be shared by anyone who has been initiated into the world of heightened self-awareness.

Protean Man feels himself capable of participating in Buddha's experi-

ence of enlightenment. He claims to be able to know firsthand what mystics of an earlier era were attempting to describe. Even Jesus' expression of oneness with the Father is an experience he too can share. All such events describe a manner of inwardness which isolates and certifies one's true self.

Lifton wants to be sympathetic, but he knows Protean Man is both embryonic and fragile. As he sees it, Protean Man is acting out a "symbolic form of fatherlessness." And the psychiatrist questions whether anyone can go very long without a father, or very far without authority.

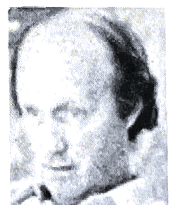
He praises Protean Man for seeking to discover deep-seated inner personal instincts, impulses, and desires. But he knows that psychological wholeness cannot tolerate the overdevelopment of any one layer of consciousness if any of the others are sacrificed in the process. Some day Protean Man will need to recover authority to enable him to achieve fuller inner awareness.

Yet, as one listens to Lifton, he cannot help but suspect that Protean Man is necessary to correct previous imbalances. It is possible, isn't it, to identify being religious with holding correct religious beliefs to the extent that persons obey authority without ever discovering who they are? This would be impossible in the world of Protean Man. And if Protean Man makes us aware of this, whatever else he does, he also prompts us toward greater religious maturity.

This is a time of birth pangs. Perhaps someday post- and pre-Protean persons can help each other to a more mature religious attitude. Then, as Maurice Blondel prayed, the religion of external authority will be joined to the religion of inner freedom. ■



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my family again . . ."*
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Cover: Running through a field in slow motion is an "ideal" family as it is popularly pictured in TV commercials. Beginning on page 8, John Drescher provides advice on moving family life toward a pleasant ideal — without slow motion.

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Consumer's report

by Hiroyoshi Okada

Sometimes it's lonely, being a Christian in Japan.

To the Japanese, Christianity is a foreign religion. When we received new children into our little Sunday school, I picked up a picture of Jesus and asked the children if any one knew who this was. A little fellow raised up his hand and said, "Yes, that's an American man."

Christianity is foreign to the Japanese, especially in that it has an entirely different concept of God. They don't know God the Father. The god they know is the god of production.

Japan used to be an agricultural society. People worshiped gods who would bring better crops, as in