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*In this paper, Fr. McInnes relates the "drug mentality" and "The God-Shaped Vacuum" to the counterfeit experience of drugs and to the necessity of religious people and the Church being prepared to reveal to young people the deeper "God" experiences."*

## **Escape — The Struggle Between the Real and the Unreal**

V. Ambrose McInnes, O.P., Ph.D.

All of us have been raised up in what might be called a *drug mentality*. Current drug fads are an accumulation of a mentality which has been in the works for some years. Parents are oftentimes horrified when they find out that their son or daughter is experimenting with things which stimulate, tranquilize, sedate, give psychedelic trips, when, in fact, much of the conditioning for this behavior grows out of the

family atmosphere itself. Above the wash basin in every bathroom is a well stocked dispensary with a glorious array of pills for every conceivable ache or pain which one can imagine. We have grown up in a drug age in which we have been conditioned to pop pills, not only when we have headaches and colds, but for any other problem of emotional distress which might arise. If we are depressed we take something to stimulate us. If we are overly active and hyper we have our tranquilizers. In other words, there has grown up a dependency on drugs in a fashion which we might even call part of the American way of life. Even the pill is symptomatic of the age in which we are living. It all adds up to a type of drug mentality.

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*Father McInnes is director of the Tulane Catholic Center, Tulane University New Orleans, Louisiana. His paper was originally given as part of a panel discussion on youth and drugs at the national meeting of Catholic Physicians' Guilds, November 27, 1971 in New Orleans.*

Two years ago, a young man walked into my office and narrated the following story. He had been on marijuana but had decided to go on some harder things because he felt the need to escape from the boredom of everyday life. He was intelligent, and a gifted young man. He had gotten on to LSD, and became more and more dependent on it until he realized what a struggle between the real and the unreal was developing in him. He said, "The highs were so seductive that I wanted always to live in my psyched up world of imagination, rather than in the mundane world of everyday life." Finally he found this struggle so distressing that he had to make a decision as to whether he was going to go on into the world of permanent euphoria, or back to the world of reality. By the time he came in to see me, he had opted for the real and was gradually coming out of his dependency. He said, "That struggle almost did me in, and I don't want to go through that again."

Similarly, a young lady whom I met a year or so ago had just come back from her communal adventures in California. She had left her home because the family circumstances were, in her words, "unbearable." She found her way into the drug route because she said, "The people I met seemed to show such a genuine concern for me, and they were the only ones with whom I was able to establish a friendship."

In this young lady's case, she went really on to hard stuff and found herself completely dependent and captivated by the drug world. The irony of the situation was that she wanted to be related more to the group, and the more she was on drugs the more isolated she became. In moments of lucidness she wanted to break away, but she had nothing to break away to. Finally, she took an overdose of LSD and went into a deep depression, and became so abysmally isolated that she felt she had lost all contact with reality, and was descending into a hell of her own making. In that moment of physical and mental anguish she reached out for a thread of faith which perdured in her and quite literally decided in that moment, "I must hang on to Christ if I am going to survive." She did.

### **The God-Shaped Vacuum**

As I observe young people in the University Community, I have found that the preoccupation with drugs is very much connected to an attitude which is found both in young and old. This deeper mentality, of which the drug mentality is but a symptom, is what I called the "starved mentality" or the "empty mentality." From the point of view of the faith, I characterize this mentality by the phrase "The God-Shaped Vacuum." Youth have done a great deal to reveal how empty many people's lives are, as well as their own. They have done this to an alarming degree and they have revealed how bankrupt our spiritual and religious traditions have be-



come. It is quite true to say that for the vast numbers of Americans, religion has become a rather perfunctory and meaningless ritual experience.

Students have seen and experienced in their own family situations that religion does not mean much more than a conventional commitment which has no inner vitality or meaning. This was brought home to me dramatically one day when a young medical student, back from his Easter holiday, came in for a talk. I asked him how his visit went, and he responded, "Miserable." I asked what happened, and he replied, "Well, when it came time to go to Easter Service, my mother made such a point of going off to the candlelight ceremony, but gave all the wrong reasons for doing so. When they realized I was not going with them, they became more indignant and self-righteous than usual. Then we fell into an argument about whether or not I was going to Church, and I told them bluntly that it is none of your damn business. How dare you ask me whether I am going to Church or not when you (self-righteous bitches) go only on Easter and Christmas!"

The heart of the problem of religion and this deeper starved mentality is the realization on the part of young people as to how superficial religious commitments have been. This realization engenders much of the disillusionment, frustration, and anger which many young people fall into. We are all destined to be disillusioned, and

even with religion, but we have to be real enough to acknowledge how weak and superficial we all are, rather than pretending the opposite. The inner well springs of family life, of love and affection and religious commitment have been allowed to *become conventional, and in that moment something very profound dies*. Besides, the material propensity of most people has produced a spiritual suffocation, and not finding too many real and spiritual values at home, they start off for the *counterfeit experiences* of the unreal drug world.

### Search for the Really Real

In the searching for new Gods, young people have disclosed how dissatisfied they are. The quest for new experiences, the psychedelic, the new groupism, the search for ecstasy, superstition, astrology, witchcraft, Zen Buddhahism, Pentecostalism, spiritualism, all are phenomena of the religious experience. It takes people from the ordinary into what they call the "really real," which is precisely what religion has always attempted to do. To transcend the finite, the ordinary and confused of everyday experience, and bring man in touch with the basic spiritual realities within and without himself. Whatever else these movements might be, they are basically religious ones, attempting to find the deeper realities of the spirit. What is unfortunate about some of these searchings, especially drugs, is that they leave people more unreal, rather than real. The basis of authentic religious experience

is to make people more themselves rather than less themselves. It is here that many of the searchings for more basic realities become confused and gnarled. But nonetheless, the potentiality for a great religious renewal is upon us.

It would appear that the next ten years will be the occasion of a great religious renewal, if religious people and the Church can *read the signs of the times*, and the sincere desire which many young people have to find a deeper meaning in life. The striving for meaning has become almost an addiction in itself, which has ended in much frustration, alienation and preoccupation with counterfeit experiences, rather than real experiences. Part of the problem has been the Church itself, in not shedding many of the historical accretions which impede rather than express the great mystery of God's presence in our midst.

In fact, just the other morning in one of our prayer sessions in our Community of Priests, we were talking about how simple the early Christian community was. It says in the Acts that the early Christians remained, "Faithful to the teaching of the Apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers."

The signs of the times reveal that man is discontent with the over complications of life, with the emptiness of his life, and with the type of God-shaped vacuum experience which I mentioned earlier.

St. Paul never tires of the mystery that Christ is the one who makes all things new. The "God experience" is an experience which, strangely enough very few people seem to have, even for the religious and practicing members of this or that denomination. Experience is the current word used to describe the only adequate basis on which we can make an appeal to young and old alike. If we are to turn away from some of their counterfeit experiences, we must be prepared to reveal to them the deeper experiences contained within the mystery of Christ, and in the new creation which He came to establish within us.

This experience of searching for God and discovering Him, and how He makes all things new within us, is best exemplified in the life of Augustine. Speaking of God in his *Confessions* he says, "You have made us for Yourself and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in You." Then the Saint regrets, like most of us. "Late have I loved you, O beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved you! For behold You are within me and I outside; and I sought you outside and my unloveliness fell upon those lovely things that you have made. You were within me and I was ignorant of your presence."

This is the type of God experience that all of us seek, young and old. With Augustine it becomes the classic quest of each man, and he becomes the symbol of our searching, of the God-shaped fullness to which all of us have been called.



For those of us who are so-called believers, Christian and Catholic, the Canon of the Mass of the New Creation says, "When we eat of this bread and drink of this cup, we proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes again." And the Canon then goes on to say, "Therefore, Lord our God, we place here these signs of our faith and we commemorate now that Christ suffered and died for us. *But most of all, we recall that Christ is the first born of the dead, the first born of the whole of the new creation, and that He is the one in whom and by whom each one of us is healed and made new.*"

### **Healing the Wounds of the Drug Abuser**

Christ is the one who comes to heal us in the deepest mystery of our souls, and in the many wounds which existence inflicts upon us.

Of course, all of this raises the question of what is the "really real." It raises the questions also of belief and trust in the person of Jesus Christ. It is almost becoming a commonplace that we are willing to believe any statements but the expression of the Word of God itself.

Strangely enough, we are brought to a screeching halt in the routine of our daily lives only when crises arise. With many youth, it has become the crisis of drugs, and with the parents it is the crisis of reacting to their children who are on drugs. It is all a crisis of human weakness and the need to acknowledge our

dependency, not on something phony and unreal, but upon that which is the "really real," which I call "the God experience."

How do we find this? It appears that at the basis of all human experiences is a type of fellowship of suffering, and of the weak. It is only when we realize how stupid and fickle we are that we come to a certain humiliation. In this humiliation is born new hope. If there is to be a new religious awareness, we must individually discover the person of Jesus Christ. He shows us in his own life the fellowship of the weak, the suffering, the misunderstood and the rejected. He alone reveals to us how much is the care and the love of God for man.

The core message of religion and of Christianity in particular, is the ever present truth that no matter what the mistakes or failures, hope of our ability to change is possible. Evil is indeed reversible. Change for the better is ours for the asking, whenever we feel like it. Our capacity to realize the possibilities of transcending the "taking" and "using" form of human love, and replacing it with the "giving" form of love is at the essence of the Christian experience of divinity. The main witness of this message, of course, is Jesus Christ Himself, who in the exposure of His total vulnerability, burst the chains of death in His own death, and found His life by losing it.\*

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\*See Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Intimacy* (Notre Dame: Feders Press, 1969), pg. 37

## In Weakness, Strength

Christ challenges us to break through the circle of our imprisonment, whether it be drugs or some other trap, and deepen the routine of conventional religion, and to become real Christian people. He challenges us to face our fellow man without fear, and to enter with Him into the fellowship of the weak, knowing that in acknowledging this weakness that it will not bring about our destruction, but our *recreation*, and we will become capable of having a new energy, a new life, and a new and deeper religious experience, because of the very weaknesses we acknowledge. In that moment of honesty and truth, we acknowledge our real dependence upon God through Christ, and as St. Paul says, speaking of Christ, "He takes our weaknesses and then makes them into our strengths."

It is on this level that people really want to live, and live deeply. But they are so afraid. It is our job to prove to them in our own actions that God liberates and does not condemn, that he is a God of mercy and kindness and not a tyrant. All men may indeed be the free sons and daughters of God. I would submit that this is what the young people are looking for, and it is up to us to reveal it to them in our own personal lives and experiences. If we can struggle to live more deeply the life of the spirit ourselves, we can help to put the spirit into the lives of those around us. In this, we will accomplish the fulfillment of the *signs of our times* to be more rather than less ourselves.

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