

THE WAY OF TRADITION
LIFE IN AN ORTHODOX JEWISH SCHOOL

by

Dr. B.M. Bullivant

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The research conducted by Dr. Bullivant during his stay as a member of the teaching staff of the 'Lubavitcher School' in Melbourne for the entire academic year of 1969, and six weeks of 1970, makes fascinating reading, particularly for a reviewer who has been involved in Jewish Day Schools for some 30 years. The School and its personnel must be recognised by the Australian Jewish reader, in spite of the device of the school not being specifically named.

The author describes his approach to the study as 'neo-ethnographic', and decides against questionnaire technique, for the well-known reasons of unreliability and inbuilt opposition by subjects and their families. He has preferred gaining his conclusions by 'systematic observation and involvement' although aware of the possible pitfalls of the 'observer effect'. Having the opportunity at the time when Year 10 students were taking Commonwealth Secondary Schools Scholarship Examinations, he also utilised topics, relevant to his theme, as sample questions, a highly satisfactory device.

Dr. Bullivant realised the ever-present danger of his becoming subjective in his observations, but nevertheless had to involve himself in High Holy Day and other religious services and observances to gain involvement, and opportunity for seeing the students and their reactions and interactions. In order to make comparison with other norms, he states he could not attend services of other congregations, ranging over the whole gamut of Jewish practice and observance, which I personally feel would have been helpful in arriving at his conclusions, as, he says, such attendance would have ruined his reputation as a staff member, and would have been considered disloyalty.

The researcher from his references and select bibliography has obviously gone deeply into his topic and methodology as he lists something in the neighbourhood of 270 works. On a rough check, using various sub-headings which are by no means inter-exclusive, I find among them more than 90 titles referring to sociology and anthropology, some 50 concerned with wider aspects of education and educational research, some 45 on Judaism generally and a dozen on Chassidism. Other broad sub-sections include questions of culture, adolescence and peer group influences and religion in general, Hinduism, comparative religion and thought and language — in all a most comprehensive and wide-ranging bibliography.

In the preface the author outlines his aims of trying to establish what really happens to teachers and children in the classroom, and some of the things he describes approach the horrific, particularly when students are not under direct supervision, and sometimes even when they are. Conclusions about such phenomena are drawn at the end of the research.

Dr. Bullivant claims this is the first full scale ethnographic study of a school and supporting community. This study, as has already been mentioned, was undertaken in 1969-70, and since then the Hebrew University, Centre for Jewish Education in the Diaspora, has begun just such studies in various parts of the Jewish world, and is about to use Mount Scopus College, Melbourne, its present and past students, as a research project, and was, and is, keen to do just such a study on Moriah College, Sydney. Dr. Bullivant's final aim was to draw up an account of how a number of boys tried to come to terms with the pressure of the 'Yoke' in their formal religious schooling.

The major content of the book, as the title implies, deals with traditions, Jewish and Chassidic, the 'Great Tradition', and the secular tradition as inherited from the Arnoldian pattern in the 'Public' Schools of Great Britain, and as typified in the G.P.S. Schools in Australia. In dealing with the manner in which the 'Lubavitcher School' attempts to handle the two traditions, and proceed with its enculturation programme, the author frankly admits that the academic success so necessary for public esteem and professional career possibilities, takes second place in the minds of most students, where the 'Great Tradition' is divinely inspired, and where the secular learning and its theories can so easily be subject to change in the light of new discoveries and advancing knowledge.

It is unfortunate in so well documented a book that one or two inaccuracies have slipped in — inevitably it happens — and the matters may have been due to printers' errors, or misinformation or misunderstanding.

On page 53 in a footnote we are informed 'milchig' (Yidd.), Milkhik (Hebrew) — 'Dairy', pertaining to dairy food. 'Srach' is twice given as the covering of the Succah on page 124, and again in the illustrated plate 11, 'kasruth' (page 145) is a form generally not used (except perhaps by some Lithuanian Jews) and the worst error of all is the Fast of Tammuz is indicated as being on the 12th. The technical terminology used by Dr. Bullivant is understandably that used by researchers and specialists in the field of sociology, anthropology of education, and ethnographic research, but even resort to the Shorter Oxford Dictionary (1977 edition) failed to define or even list the word 'cathetic'.

Comments, such as the above, must in no way be allowed to detract from the inestimable value of Dr. Bullivant's research project and his final conclusions, among which may be mentioned the students' apparent acceptance of the idea that academic knowledge is pragmatically necessary as a means to an end, his feeling that the school is an 'intellectual hothouse', that 'good' behaviour on the part of students is a quid pro quo in return for what they consider 'good' (formalistic, didactic, exam result-producing) teaching, and that all in all, there is conflict in the students' minds, because of the Two Traditions.

If schools, says the author, can be conceptualised as a formal enculturation matrix, then the 'Lubavitcher School' is two virtually separate enculturation matrices, which leads him to formulate his Theory of Enculturation Dissonance (can we call it attempting to live in two worlds?) where he feels that frustration and conflict are contributory

reasons for students' aggression, anxiety, tension and hyperactivity.

There can be little doubt, that in light of the insistence on 'integration' of much recent educational theory, and the previous emphasis on assimilating cultural and ethnic minorities, Dr. Bullivant's research, account and conclusions will be of great interest to all concerned with the education of recent migrants, with their own rich cultures and languages, and not least of all to those involved in the administration, support and organisation of Jewish Day Schools.

Harold Nagley
(Director of Education,
NSW Board of Jewish Education;
formerly Principal of Moriah
War Memorial College,
Bellevue Hill)