

Back to Godhead Magazine

Volume 19, Number 01, 1984

The Vedic Observer

Transcendental Commentary on the Issues of the Day

1984 Revisited

by Suhotra Swami

Happy New Year! Thirty-six years ago George Orwell selected this year's date as the title of his novel of ominous social prophecy. In his vision, the nations of the world of 1984 would form three superstates, pitted against one another in constant war. Winston Smith, the main character of *1984*, is an official in the government of Oceania, and his duty is to revise recorded history so that it conforms to the political dogma of Big Brother, Oceania's all-powerful leader. Life is depicted as dreary, dull, joyless. Those who count for anything in society—the employees of the State—live under constant surveillance. A careless remark, a few sentences of despair hastily scribbled in a notebook can cost a citizen his sanity in the dungeons of the dreaded Thought Police. For the masses, those persons who are not members of the Party, the State demands less rigid conformity, if only because the masses have become little more than human robots, whose minds are devoid of the ability to think critically.

While Orwell's book is perhaps an accurate foretelling of the rise of totalitarian communist empires, another book, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, predicts a world more comparable to a modern Western technocracy.

God, for *Brave New World*, is science and technology, which extends its influence to all corners of life. Babies are mass-produced in test-tubes, and the children are raised in a tightly controlled but seductively benign environment. All state citizens are trained to fill slots in the complex social machinery, and any tendency in a child to rebel is met by systematic psychological manipulation. The "happiness" of the residents of the brave new world revolves around free sex (marriage has been abolished) and drugs (*soma* for depression, feelies for enhancing excitement). Persons unable to conform to the brave new world are considered savages. They are banished to reservations where they are granted "the right to be unhappy."

The stark prophecies of *1984* and *Brave New World* do not perfectly describe contemporary society, but noteworthy similarities are there, nonetheless. In London, for instance, there is a reservation of sorts in King's Row, where thousands of self-proclaimed savages have taken up a life-style characterized as "the new tribalism," with tribal names like "the Punks," "the Skinheads," "the Rockabillies," and so on. Similar

tribes roam the streets of Paris, Berlin, New York, and San Francisco. Bedecked in their bizarre costumes, they idly gaze into an empty future, while society around them becomes more and more complex and depersonalized.

But perhaps for most of us, a blind optimist within smiles, "I'm looking forward to a happy 1984. I've got my own life to live. I can make my own choices. If I want to go to school, I can do that. If I want to get a job, I can do that, too. I can get stoned on cocaine. Or if I want to drop out—well, that's also my right. I'm free!"

Yet who among us can say that we have independently arrived at our personal definition of happiness? Happiness is defined for us by parents, friends, teachers, politicians, psychologists, scientists, and so on. A laboratory rat is free, too. He runs down an alleyway, turns left, then right, and has a choice of levers to push: one for food, one for drink, one for sex. But the rat may also perish at any moment in the rubber-gloved hands of his big-brother scientist, who gazes down upon his little world from far above.

And far above us, in outer space, surveillance satellites, their unblinking electronic eyes able to read the license plates on our cars, look down upon the maze of our little world. Should they detect things a big brother in Washington or Moscow doesn't like, a signal might be relayed to a missile crew deep under the earth or to a submarine cruising beneath the sea. And in minutes, our world could burst into atomic flames.

Sure, it's frightening, perhaps more frightening than Orwell and Huxley imagined. And what's the solution? These authors—being materialists—didn't have one. Long before Orwell or Huxley, however, sages of ancient India predicted in their writings the ills that would afflict us in the present age. The *Srimad-Bhagavatam*, a treasure house of Vedic wisdom compiled five thousand years ago, refers to our time as Kali-yuga, the age of quarrel. The *Bhagavatam* describes Kali-yuga as an "ocean of faults." But it also recommends deliverance from this ocean through the chanting of the holy names: Hare Krsna, Hare Krsna, Krsna Krsna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare.

The chanting of Hare Krsna is, quite simply, liberating. When one chants Hare Krsna, he liberates his consciousness from its physical and mental coverings. He no longer identifies with the mortal designations of male or female, white or black, American or Russian, but he realizes he is an undying soul. By this knowledge he is freed from the cycle of birth and death.

No, Krsna consciousness isn't pabulum for those too weak to face the world as it is. A Krsna conscious person is the most uncompromising realist and has no false optimism about living in the material world—in 1984 or any other time. Nor does he retreat into listless despair. He knows he is not the body but is an eternal servant of the Supreme Lord. A Krsna conscious person, out of natural compassion, is eager to work enthusiastically in this world to give Krsna consciousness to others, and his only reward

is that his service be accepted by Krsna. Such a devotee is always satisfied, even in the most adverse circumstances.

The year 1984 has just begun, and already the prospects are as ominous as the predictions of Orwell and Huxley. A deliberate, or even accidental, push of a button could set the clock back a thousand years. Our cities, our machines, and our science could be consigned to a mass tomb. Then, standing in the lonely shadows of failure, we would be forced to face ourselves at last and to recognize ourselves for what we really are.

Or we could make it easy on ourselves and give up voluntarily the heavy burden of our false lordship by simply accepting the sublime wisdom of the sacred Vedic texts. This wisdom transcends the limitations of space and time, and it is known as Krsna consciousness. It's as fresh and relevant now as ever. Modern man, whose great intelligence is stranded in a meaningless chaos of his own making, has great need of it.