

What Heretics Are For

by Garrett Hardin

Myths," said Salustios, are "things that never happened but always are." Though distinguishable from myths, the best of the fairy tales share this paradoxical relation to reality. A truth we are reluctant to acknowledge can be insinuated into the mind by the account of an event that never happened. Hans Christian Anderson's *The Emperor's New Clothes* tells just such a story. His emperor is a fiction, unnamed and unplaced in time ("many years ago"), but he is also all of us at all times — and no fiction.

The swindlers who fleeced the emperor first caught him in a neat logical trap. The exorbitantly priced and nonexistent clothes they tailored had the wonderful quality, they said, of being invisible to anyone who was "hopelessly stupid or unfit for his office." Given the Emperor's acceptance of this criterion of reality, his loyal subjects were psychologically bound to see the invisible. Behold, then, the noble Emperor, naked as a jaybird, marching in parade to the enthusiastic plaudits of the throng! The denouement comes when the

This is the Preface to (and the reason for the title of) Naked Emperors: Essays of a Taboo Stalker (1982) by Garrett Hardin, Ph.D.

innocent child protests: "But the Emperor is naked!"

This scene, first projected on the mind's eye of a delighted, giggling child, is periodically recalled by realities of the external world. Every generation brings new swindlers (many of them, curiously, self-deceived) and more new clothes for credulous emperors. At any point in time a sizeable wardrobe of such clothes is being paraded in the marketplace of ideas. There are far too few children, too few iconoclasts (to use another image), to keep up with the busy looms of the weavers of invisible cloth.

The story of *The Emperor's New Clothes* no doubt strikes completely socialized, other-directed adults as preposterous, but reality outrages myth. In Anderson's story the child's outcry leads to a rapid erosion of faith among the spectators; truth strips the Emperor naked. Unhappily, in real life, majority opinion frequently overwhelms perception.

Some experiments carried out by the social psychologist Solomon Asch are most enlightening. Asch asked a small group of college men to identify the longest of several lines drawn on paper. Unbeknownst to one of them, all the others had been instructed to agree on a preposterously wrong answer. Choices were announced in open meeting. As the responses forced the "odd man out" to become aware of his position, he not infrequently gave way to the

majority and expressed his agreement with them. It does not take an Inquisition to make heresy painful. ("Heresy" comes from a Greek word meaning "to choose for oneself.") Out of 123 men subjected to this ordeal, 37 percent conformed. (Is it significant that this is about the same percentage as that of "placebo reactors," people whose pain is reduced by the administration of a placebo, a medication known to have no beneficial effect?)

Asch's experiment might tempt a cynic to rewrite the Anderson story to make the little child yield to adult opinion. We would not accept such a rewriting, of course, because the cynical version would deprive us of hope. The progress of science — indeed of all positive knowledge — depends on the courage of Thoreau's "majority of one" in the face of nearly unanimous error. Yet there are many naked emperors parading the streets of learning, and we need a few people who have the Anderson child's confidence in their own senses and judgment. Statistically speaking, the populace may well be right more often than wrong — but sometimes the Emperor is indeed naked.

What follows is one heretic's attempt to point out some of the naked emperors of our time. Heresy is no guarantee of truth, but let us not forget (as T. H. Huxley said) that every new truth begins as heresy. •