Persuasive Beliefs

A group of shipwrecked sailors, in danger of death in stormy seas, might believe, falsely or without good evidence, that help would come to them in time. Nobody would call such a belief ideological merely because the sailors clung to it to allay their fears. To be ideological a belief must be one that people resort to on most or many occasions of a given kind. But a belief like this ordinarily goes along with other beliefs. It belongs to a set of related beliefs to which a community or group resort in situations that recur quite frequently. The people who share these beliefs may acquire them gradually without even being aware that they form a more or less consistent set of beliefs. It might take a sociologist or a social anthropologist to explain how these beliefs are related to one another and to define the situations in which they are resorted to.

Often, a community or group share several distinct ideologies, each of them coherent enough in itself, some overlapping with others, which yet do not, taken together, form a system of beliefs that is a coherent whole. Ideologies to which people resort on different kinds of occasions need not be consistent with one another. It is not a condition of harmony, of the absence of disputes within the community or group or of 'tensions' within the minds of its members, that they should be. In a large and complex community, most people belong to several groups whose membership is not the same, so that any one person shares different ideologies with different people.

Ideology, thus conceived, is no less important in illiterate than in literate communities. Among both the illiterate and the literate, ideological beliefs are passed on from generation to
generation. This is done to a large extent deliberately; beliefs are taught and not only acquired. The teachers, for the most part, do not see themselves as persuaders—except in the sense that every teacher is one. That is to say, they do not recognize that the beliefs they teach are persuasive. This is clearly true of teachers in primitive communities, for the very notion of a persuasive belief is unknown to them. But it is true also, as often as not, of teachers in literate and sophisticated communities, where this notion is widely familiar. In primitive communities, there are few or no teachers by profession. In ‘advanced’ communities there are many; and if the idea of persuasive beliefs is at all familiar, it is apt to be most familiar among teachers and others—journalists, writers, publishers—whose business is to provide information and inculcate beliefs. Yet, even in the most sophisticated communities, the propagators of persuasive beliefs often do not recognize that that is what they are.

Every teacher and publicist is, of course, a persuader and knows that he is one. The physicist or biologist with no axe to grind wants to persuade others of the truth of what he is saying. Besides, there are times when he does have an axe to grind, as, for example, when he wants to score off a rival or to achieve something else for himself or for others. The political theorist or the theologian may have exactly the same motives as the physicist for teaching what he does teach; he may be concerned primarily that others should share beliefs which he holds to be true, or he may be keener to achieve something else. What makes political theory and theology much more apt than physics or biology to be ideological has nothing to do with the intentions of the theorist or the theologian; it has to do only with the motives and feelings of the persons who accept the beliefs and with how they behave as a result of accepting them. If the beliefs are accepted largely because they express or inhibit feelings, and if they encourage or discourage some type of behaviour, not just on a few occasions, but on all or most occasions of a given kind, they are ‘persuasive’. The propagator of the beliefs may or