Books

Tomorrow's Child: Imagination, Creativity, and the Rebirth of Culture
by Rubem Alves
(Harper and Row; 210 pp.; $6.95)

Philip Hefner

Professor Alves, of the University of Sao Paulo, offers a comprehensive vision of our present Western cultural situation. He also suggests what the consequences of this situation will be for the next generation. The vision is total, but it has grown out of one man's intense experience of the political tides that have swept our hemisphere in the last two decades. That experience has been broadened by the interpretations of the natural and social sciences, brought to focus by the Christian symbols which inform it.

Alves's use of symbols is rich, but the "Captivity" is perhaps central. We are captive in a sick society, which is a total system (or Organization) of pathology. Keeping in mind Forrester's Law—that a system which is dysfunctional can be corrected only by the creation of a new system—Alves cannot yet bring himself to believe that a new society will be created in our time. He has drunk deeply of the hopes and dreams of three successive political attempts at rebuilding: the liberals, the revolutionaries and the counterculture. Each has fallen victim to its own fatal flaws, each finally reinforcing the Organization of pathology that it intended to reshape. "Thus runs the script of our frustration."

Ours is the time of the captivity; the logic of this symbol must be understood and obeyed if we are to survive and become more human. The time of captivity is not a time of birth, not a time for victories, not a time for dramatic political exploits. Jeremiah is the man of the captivity, and his action is paradigmatic for us. To the captives in Babylon who planned to escape back to Jerusalem, he counselled, "Stay where you are, give your sons and daughters in marriage; your grandchildren will see Jerusalem, but you will not." But for the besieged, despairing citizens of Jerusalem, he set a curious example when he purchased a piece of land in the center of the city and announced, "The time will come when houses, fields, and vineyards will again be bought and sold in this land."

This interpretation of our times as the generation of the captivity makes imperative that we form and nurture the community of hope. This means something quite specific for Alves, namely, that the power of the life in the community of hope is the imagination. Imagination is that special quality of life which, like Jeremiah's, flies in the face of what ordinary men and the society which envelops them call "reality." Imagination is the quintessential actualization of personality rebelling against this "reality" before which must men bow down. This imagination takes the form of magie, play, utopianizing and humanizing. Above all it takes the form of a disciplined community that is willing to live the life of dying in behalf of the creative act, "a stubborn commitment to the future of our grandchildren." We cannot create or program the creative event, but we can remain sensitive enough to recognize it and to join the movement in this action of disciplined dying in behalf of the future.

The power of his critique and the earnestness of his program lend a stunning character to Alves's vision, which is reinforced by his vivid use of images. He understands, I believe, where we have been since World War II and he perceives where we must go. Nevertheless, even one who wishes to stand with Alves must raise some questions. The first half of the book is a forceful but rather familiar indictment of the pathological technological system which we in the First and Second worlds call "society." This indictment is in some ways more relevant to the mid-sixties than today, since it fails to acknowledge the febrility of the technological system, which in some important ways contradicts itself and thus opens the way for its own alteration and humanization. For Alves, magic, play, utopia and imagination all come from the outside, in rebellion against society. He can be rightly accused of oversimplifying and thus falsifying the present situation, partly because he does not recognize the distinction between "industrial" and "postindustrial" developments in the United States.

This distinction is an important one. Although Alves's critique of our society as the all-encompassing "Supermarket" strikes me as essentially accurate, the supermarket has had to bring in products and people which may alter the whole operation. And in this respect Forrester's Law may not be as applicable as Alves believes. Furthermore, Alves consistently misinterprets Freud and in the process deprives himself of the support which Freud's unremitting methodology of self-criticism would give to the Alves vision. Those who reject Alves will find it easy to attack the first half of the book; more interesting to me is the argument of the second half, which is in effect a set of significant suggestions concerning
the role of suffering and death in the
life style of "tomorrow's child."

"Vision is born out of pain." That
is the proposition. "How can one
create if one does not know what
suffering is?" This is no simplistic
assertion, however, and Alves adds
nuance upon nuance to his concep-
tion of suffering. Suffering is not
the unavoidable evil, that befalls
man; it is the suffering that results
from inequitable social organization;
it is the suffering that results from
the loathing of society which gives
birth to creative rebellion; it is my
feeling "that our social order is struc-
tured in such a way that it has to
destroy the values which are the ul-
timate concern of my personality";
it is the pain of realizing that only
my grandchildren will enjoy the
trees I plant. Suffering is the result
of a sick society crushing me, and
it is also the labor pains accompany-
ing the birth of the creative imagina-
tion which is the "aperitif" of the
future. This is the core conception
of suffering which Alves presents, and
it is essential for the rebirth of our
culture. But he modifies it finally
with the insistence that this suffer-
ing, symbolized in the Suffering Ser-
vant of Isaiah, applies only to the
oppressed, not to the rich and pow-
erful, to those who live in the "pain-
delivering sectors of our society,
not to the inhabitants of the "plea-
sure-producing zones."

This is powerful medicine, ad-
mirable in its insistence that suffer-
ing, not the gratification of desire, is
the key to the life style of the future.
But is it adequate? Alves turns his
critique against liberals, revolution-
aries and the counterculture because
he demands a commitment to im-
agination and rebellion, combined with
discipline and the patient willingness
to die for the future which none of
these three groups can muster. But
the very depth and persuasiveness of
this call assumes a conception of suf-
ferring that is more intentional and
political than anything Alves sets
forth in most of his book. He implies
that suffering is taken up as a pro-
found strategy of dying for the fu-
ture that our generation will not
live to see, but his explicit discussion
does not finally surpass the concep-
tion of suffering as the accidental
evil which man passively experiences
by virtue of the conditions of his
birth. He believes that creativity
lives in spite of evil; evil is finally
to be vanquished upon this earth.

He certainly deepens his concep-
tion of suffering in a sophisticated
manner—it is social evil, not natural;
it applies to the oppressed and the
poor, not to the rich and powerful;
it is the poignant situation of the
creative spirit that feels itself ground
in the mill of a demonic "reality." But
the biblical imagery includes
more. Isaiah's Suffering Servant did
not simply experience the pain of
his oppression, nor was his suffering
simply the birth pangs of creativity.
This Servant was God's active mis-
sion to the world, he is sent to plant
justice (Isa. 42), his servanthood is
God's sword and arrow (Isa. 49),
he took up suffering in behalf of oth-
ers (Isa. 53). As Jesus reinter-
preted this style of suffering, it was
an intentional, taken-up cross. Suf-
ferring and dying is not chiefly a being
ground in the mill of oppression but
rather a permitting oneself to be
ground in the service of the Kingdom
of God's future. And finally, as a
mode of bringing in the Future, we
live in, with and under evil, not
only in spite of it. Although Alves's
proposal implies and demands some
such active, intentional understand-
ing of suffering and dying, he fails
to express it, apart from some hints
at the very end.

Perhaps Alves's dilemma has to do
with his living on the boundary be-
tween the First and the Third
worlds. Only the oppressed, those
who live in the "pain-delivering" sec-
tor of society (an infelicitous term
referring to those who absorb pain
from society) qualify as the Suffer-
ning Servant. But who are the op-
pressed? They must be, very liter-
ally, the citizens of the First and Third
worlds who are economically poor
and politically put down. If Alves is
speaking figuratively to include va-
rious members of the dominant rul-
ing classes, then I think his argu-
ment is seriously weakened. Among
these oppressed only a few have the
insight and the skill and the courage
to suffer and die in behalf of the
creative act which is the "aperitif"
of God's future. If this is so, then
being poor and oppressed by cir-
cumstance of birth is not the real
point. The real point is to have the
courage and insight to take up the
cross and suffering in behalf of the
future which the pain of the poor
and the oppressed tells us is being
frustrated. This intentional taking up
of suffering is the bridge to those
few First World and Third World
dominators who may also feel the
pain of a future being aborted and
who may respond by taking up the
suffering of Isaiah's Servant.

Unfortunately, the lack of clarity
in Alves's description of suffering
can blunt the impact of his book
upon the First World WASPs who,
like this reviewer, will buy it and be
inspired by it. They will very likely
be depressed because they cannot
be born again poor and oppressed, or
they will romantically try to become
poor and oppressed. They may not
see the mandate for the WASP
which is inherent in Alves's vision,
the mandate to translate it into the
kind of painful, disciplined suffering
for the future which is liberating
for the WASP managers of society.
What this means politically and cul-
urally for our generation is yet to
be set forth. We await a description
of the "politics of the Captivity"
which will enable those of us who
are WASP by the circumstance of
our birth to become tomorrow's chil-
dren. This politics of the Captivity
will rely upon the imagination, as
Alves has insisted, and it will be the
companion-piece to his manifesto.

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