

Comment

Anarchy and indoctrination, 1988-style

The vicar's wife in *Bed Among the Lentils*, Alan Bennett's TV play, tells the viewers that her husband 'is in York taking part in the usual interdenominational conference on the role of the church in a hitherto uncolonised department of life, underfloor central heating possibly.' 'Colonising' is an ecclesiastical vice, but more than once we have given reasons in this column why a journal like this one is not necessarily 'colonising' when it hits at Government policies not obviously to do with religion at all. Neither, we think, are we guilty of 'colonising' by publishing two analyses of Thatcherism—Nicholas Boyle's 'Understanding Thatcherism' in July and now John Milbank's 'Religion, Culture and Anarchy'—although the feed-back from the Boyle article has shown us that it is getting read in places which theological monthlies do not usually reach.

Dr Milbank argues that the 'consensus' in post-war Britain 'was, at least in its origins, a quasi-religious consensus', and that Thatcherism, in sweeping it away, is 'at one with the forces of secularisation'. Dr Boyle believes that only the Church has the kind of inflexibility needed to withstand 'the moral atomism, the belief in the primacy of individual desires, and the readiness to reduce human lives to material, which paved the way for Thatcherism'.

Lord Grimond, reflecting on the Boyle article, writes:

Certainly Legislature, Judiciary, Executive and the Public Service are becoming one vast self-seeking bureaucracy. No sooner do people become Ambassadors, Ministers, Permanent Secretaries, than they book their seats on various financial or business boards. I do not understand why Government as an interest and the close link between the City and the Government have not aroused more criticism. You hit the nail on the head over the common interest. It has vanished, and with it politics—the only two criteria for the Government are: Does it pay? Does it further the interests of our friends? As you write, the idea of a Common Good, central to politics, has given way to Nihilism. ... How right

you are too about the dismemberment of the Institutions. The reduction of Institutions from being free-standing centres of influence to creatures of the Executive, itself uncontrolled by Parliament, has aroused far too little protest.

Why so little? Well, we are not going to protest if we have swallowed those values too (and we are nearly all 'realists' now). For the same reason it is not going to trouble us particularly to see Thatcherism commandeering for its own ends even religion, the force which at its deepest level is probably the one most hostile to it.

Most Christians in Britain will no doubt welcome the regulation in the new Education Act requiring daily school assemblies 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character'. If your Editor thought compulsory assembly was likely to turn even a small percentage of Britain's godless young into good Christians (or even good non-Christians) he would probably welcome it himself. But it will most certainly not. Today (judging from a Suffolk survey of 150 14-year olds) maybe only one teenager in ten comes from a home where there is a live religious faith. In the opinion of Dr Michael Grimmett, Britain's most prominent writer on Religious Education, assembly-indoctrination—which has been imposed on the school system largely through the manoeuvres of right-wing evangelical peers—is going to place the majority of pupils in a false relationship with religion and religious faith. It could also, he thinks, undermine the educational legitimacy of RE, which today starts from the belief-systems of the individual youngsters.

Does anybody, though, seriously believe that school assembly has ever awoken in any pupil a love of God? In the 19th century the English public schools utilised Christianity as a means of character-development. Now once again we are seeing it being used for a civic end—this time to promote stability and coherence in a society which, thanks to Thatcherism, is becoming even more fractured than it is already. The writing of the best-known campaigner for compulsory assembly, Baroness Cox, betrays a very real terror of anarchy, and this terror is shared by parents who approve of assembly-indoctrination although they would never dream of setting foot inside a church themselves.

It is one of the jobs of men and women who are not traders in God's Word, but in all humility have reasons to suspect they have some inkling of what the Gospel is actually saying about our world, to help people like those parents to see what it is they really ought to be frightened of, what in fact it is that is now sowing most of the seeds of anarchy.

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