

Comment

When exhortation fails

In his message for this year's World Day of Peace the Pope had tough things to say about the sort of people who blew up Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie. That was the bit of the message which the media focussed on. But he also had something to say about the ugly side of individualism. He said individuals 'do not exist for themselves alone, but achieve their full identity in relation to others', and not only governments but we as individuals have a responsibility for protecting minorities.

Not many of us would disagree with that publicly. But the all-encompassing ethic of the market does not, of course, make that demand on individuals. In any case, how could anybody in our society, no matter how powerful and well-intended, get the majority of human beings to take a claim of this sort seriously, in other words get them to act on it? It is not something that could be done by legislation, or by stampeding people with threats and seductions, or that an advertising campaign would be likely to bring off. The Pope's appeal to us as individuals has got the flaw that mars so much preaching. Even much of that rare commodity, 'dazzling preaching', calls for changes of attitude that are only going to strike the hearers as compelling if first of all the hearers go through a *more* radical change of attitude.

We hear plenty these days about the need for us as individuals to relate to our whole world in a different way, to see it as to be revered, not to be dominated and exploited. And when we speak of the 'world' in this way it is not just the ozone belt and whales and Amazonian rain-forests that we are supposed to be thinking of, but also our fellow human-beings.

But you do not need a degree in the human sciences to recognise that no amount of exhortation alone will get attitudes as deep-rooted as this to change.

Of all the recent books on God and religion by unexpected authors, one of the most interesting as well as irritating is Peter Fuller's *Theoria*, subtitled *Art, and the Absence of Grace* (London: Chatto & Windus, £15.00). Fuller is a highly-regarded art critic whom we have quoted

before in this column. Once a Marxist, he is today one of those atheists who think religion is important. *Theoria* is an onslaught on 'modernism'—not quite the kind of 'modernism' which upset Pius X so much, but the basic artistic assumptions which have dominated at least the visual arts and architecture in the West especially since World War II.

Fuller is convinced that Ruskin (whose last words for publication were written a century ago this year) has something important to say to us. Although Ruskin's influence was once enormous, and he was read by Gandhi and even Chairman Mao, many of us resent the very idea that a man who wrote so much specifically aimed at the people of his own time could speak to ours. But Fuller has a point. Ruskin thought that nature revealed 'the Divine', and that the task of the artist was to expose this: that beauty, proportion, and the fundamental truth about Creation are interconnected (pp. 5, 44). This was an understanding of the place of art in our world which crumbled even during Ruskin's life. It was eventually replaced by 'an aesthetic dependent upon nothing but sensation and materials ... those "technist" aesthetics which were to prove so attractive to both Marxists and monetarists alike' (pp. 207—210) and which are now ending in a 'dead blank' (p. 211). But Fuller believes that the work of some scientists, like R.O. Wilson of *Sociobiology* fame, is rehabilitating the Ruskinian view—though without God (p. 228).

Theoria covers so much ground that every reviewer will be able to find some obscure mistake in it to pounce on, but it possibly says something to us who get depressed by the limited effectiveness of all these requests that we should relate to the wider world in a new way. We have created for ourselves a hideous environment, and it is not only greed and industrialism and overcrowding that are responsible for this, but a perverted way of seeing things, a debased aesthetic. Our aesthetic sense is not in fact just something for our spare time, something which it is a luxury to indulge, but is one of the major sources through which life comes. Human beings are not likely to alter radically their way of thinking about the wider world so long as they are insensitive to what is immediately around them, and what it reveals. But, if Fuller is right, this could change, and more rapidly than our way of relating as individuals to the wider world.

This, of course, is to say little more than that there are important links between two apparently quite different ways of seeing: the way we see what we have hung on the walls of the rooms we inhabit and the way we see this earth we inhabit. But rediscovering just that could be one of the jolts we need.

J.O.M.