Comment: *Chamberlain's Coffin*

Maurice Cowling, born in London in 1926, educated at Battersea Grammar School and Jesus College, Cambridge, served in the British and Indian armies from 1944 to 1948, and has spent most of his life as a Fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge, teaching English history. He retired in 1993 and divides his time between London and his wife's flat in the Gower Peninsula. That is the sort of information he provides for himself as well as for the principal personalities in his new book: the third volume of *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England.* The first volume appeared in 1980, the second in 1985, the third runs to nearly 800 pages and all are published by Cambridge University Press.

The dustwrapper has a photograph of Neville Chamberlain's coffin resting in front of the altar in Westminster Abbey (in November 1940), with a quotation from Hensley Henson, then Canon of Westminster, noting the significance of an avowed Unitarian's being buried 'as if he had been an orthodox Christian'; seeing no 'other defensible line than that which makes belief in Christ's Divinity the *unum necessarium* of Christian profession' — 'But even so, I dare not act, nor would even wish to act, on this assumption'.

In short, Christianity in England has been subverted from within, by theologians, philosophers, and especially clergymen.

In the first volume Cowling offered his own intellectual autobiography, discussing the thinkers who most influenced him. In the second he described the aggressive defences of Christianity from Newman to Chesterton and Belloc; and the even more aggressive attacks on Christianity from Herbert Spencer to J.G. Frazer and D.H. Lawrence. Now, in this third volume, he delineates the 'latitudinarianism' by which mainstream Christianity in England has accommodated itself to increasingly non-religious and secular-humanist positions, ultimately rendering Christianity obsolete in the eyes of most educated people (intelligentsia as he sometimes calls them — or us).

The focus is specifically on England — Scotland, Wales and Ireland have different stories which Cowling has no room to relate. He already covers an astonishing amount of ground. He has read everything from Thomas Carlyle to Terry Eagleton, not to mention 'Miss Lessing' ('Socialist secularity'), 'Miss Greer' (another who goes on about 'the wounds she believes women to have suffered in all male-dominated societies'), as well as Simon Raven's less than epoch-making novel *Alms for Oblivion* ('secular homosexuality'), Kingsley Amis's 'black comedy about Christianity' and, in 'the flat fictional firmament of the last thirty years', the works of 'Miss Spark'. (Mrs Spark, actually.)

Even more specifically, the focus is on Oxford and Cambridge

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2002.tb01795.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

universities and their more exotic specimens. Among recent thinkers Cowling discusses, he deals especially brutally with C.S. Lewis ('Inkling-speak'), Joseph Needham (his mother wrote the song 'Nellie Dean'), R.C. Zaehner ('a confirmed, reclusive but apparently non-homosexual bachelor who felt an irremovable distaste for his mother and interrupted an intense dedication to work with controlled regular interludes of intoxication'), Alasdair MacIntyre ('has manifestly believed all the positions he has adopted, even when they have been mutually contradictory'), F.R. Leavis ('insufferable'), Raymond Williams ('too limp and amiable'), Terry Eagleton (saved by 'intellectual brutality' from being 'merely the playboy of the movement of the 1960s') — not to mention Mary Warnock ('government's guide through the moral maze', not in the very inadequate index, see page 683) and Malcolm Muggeridge ('inventor of Mother Teresa as an English personality'). Some of these witticisms no doubt started over the port in the senior combination room. Some are unashamedly 'venomous' (Cowling accepts the term)— none more so than in the pages about Anthony Kenny ('a prose whose misleading clarity is impressive, and a religion which has dessicated itself into professionalization') and Quentin Skinner ('a panelled facade of professional detachment conceals the muted and inadequately stated atheism'). Roger Scruton's career since his Cambridge days is thoroughly examined, not in the end entirely dismissed (though, as it happens, judging by a recent radio emission of 'The Moral Maze', Scruton is now a Christian, news that has not yet reached Cowling). The only figure who emerges with credit from Cowling's story is, perhaps unsurprisingly, John Milbank: for all his 'humourlessness and directness', he contends that secular humanism needs to be ruthlessly unmasked, confident that Christianity has a much better story.

We are always told where the thinkers went to school, often whether they were born in this or that class (though Milbank's class origins are not disclosed). It is not clear what this is supposed to tell us. Eagleton and Scruton were contemporaries at Cambridge, Cowling says: he declines to side with either — because he believes that 'both take thought far too seriously' (page 621). Christianity, Cowling says, 'is a matter of hunch or commitment' (perhaps not quite the same thing?). In conclusion he allows that 'the Christian phase of European civilization may be over'. On the other hand, while he sees 'secularization' as 'a phase of intelligentsia life' (*sic*), it would be 'absurd' to assume that 'the instinct for religion which lurks beneath the indifference of the public mind' may not yet surprise us 'by its willingness to be led astray by Christianity'. While thought is obviously not what Christianity is primarily about, one may surely hope that the 'instinct for religion' never develops in indifference to what thinkers about religion have to say — Eagleton and Scruton as well as Milbank.

F.K.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2002.tb01795.x Published online by Cambridge University Press