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EDITORIAL

Right Turn Only?

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God is an Englishman: Christianity and the Creation of England. Bijan Omrani £25; 394 pages; Forum Books.

There is no dispute that Christianity in England is in decline. Congregations are dwindling, and ever fewer young people believe. The author, Bijan Omrani, asks whether we should simply shrug our shoulders and accept this as inevitable and even healthy, or is something important being lost? Or, rather, recover and revel in a past that has shaped the present and might set the course for the future? He argues that this decline is the most momentous change to occur in English history.

Omrani is well placed to set out his wares. He has taught classics at Eton and Westminster. He is a barrister and also serves as a churchwarden in the Anglican Diocese of Exeter. He has impeccable credentials as an apologist for the established order and status quo, yet argues for this with a freshness, poise and vigor that few could match. This is a brave book that sweeps across history. I get the sense that being taught at school by Omrani would have been a captivating, engaging and probably quite thrilling experience.

Omrani sketches the contours of a faith that has been part of a national story for over 1700 years and was instrumental in the creation and development of the English nation, its codes of law and morality and structures of government and monarchy. He argues that it has a profound cultural impact, in areas ranging from architecture and literature to the very landscape and the structure of English everyday life and language. Its influence, he contends, has been enormous, largely benign and shouldn't be lightly abandoned.

The attention Omrani pays to writers such as John Donne, George Herbert, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe are particularly welcome. Equally, it is hard not to warm to his notes on how the early English translations of the Bible continue to find expression in ordinary contemporary language. Omrani concludes his thesis with a rousing call to retain English Christianity, rightly understood, as a way of dealing with both the eternal questions of the human condition, as well as the malaises of modernity, offering an erudite and tender tribute to English Christian history and heritage. Yet despite this being such a fascinating book, and one that

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I can offer two qualified cheers for, I also want to register some serious concerns and caveats.

There is a recurring existential question that most denominations or nations must wrestle with and address. Do they want to be a big part of something small, or a small part of something big? It is baked into the nature of English parochialism that it will choose the former. At the same time, it will claim to be a dominant figure of some global enormity. Arguably, the English are at a tipping point in the 21st century. The emerging generation seeking global change and pan-nationalist solutions to shared problems knows that England is actually quite a small player in a big world.

This brings us to a more major concern, namely, Omrani's book title – *God is an Englishman*. The mere idea of a modern German book entitled *God is a German* would set off waves of protest and feverish introspection. A sacralized nation and divinized leadership that is given to claim a natural right to rule over others will summon dark shadows from the recent past. Conflation with divine and human authority, even if the ensuing autocracy is allegedly quite benign, may yet prove to be a recurring threat to world peace in the 21st century. Omrani seems to be unaware of the levels of offence and concern the book title would surely trigger outside the English shires.

True, *God is an Englishman* is probably tongue in cheek. But from a nation that has yet to come to terms with its imperial legacy and is currently enjoying an anti-woke bounce, I'm not sure the title and trajectory of the book is self-aware or even wise. Only an unaccountable victor could invest in such a notion. The Irish with their long history of English oppression could be forgiven for choking on the idea. The current conflict between India and Pakistan was made in England. Again, it is hard to see how a benign national theocracy is a good recipe for global politics.

Whilst Omrani's book excels in English spirituality, it is deficient in ecclesial politics. The case for Bishops being in the House of Lords is treated to a very tired trot around the establishment paddock. Omrani ignores the fact that the bishops at work in the legislature of the upper house are not there because of any process of democracy or meritocracy. Their right to rule is based on an unaccountable construction of ontology. The only other country in the world where the clergy are so privileged is Iran.

Some may protest at the England–Iran comparison. But it is worth remembering that bishops who are minded to prosecute their clergy for some alleged misdemeanor, even a minor one, will by English law also sit as judge and jury in that same trial. The bishop also has the right to select the charges the clergyperson faces and select the counsel defending the accused. Any notion of equality of arms is abandoned. I presume that as a barrister, Omrani would find this as objectionable as any other law-abiding English citizen. Yet he valorizes the bishops with little understanding of the authority and polity they wield in today's Church of England.

Another concern with Omrani's book is his underlying historiography, which seems to have roots in a kind of elite preparatory school nostalgia. Englishness is presented as a kind of simulacra of sanity amidst foreign unreasonableness. England is praised for the role it played in ending slavery, but there is barely a word on the many parts it played in its propagation. The English language is lauded, but its status

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as new Latin – surely only because of the dominance of the USA, Hollywood and popular culture – is skated over. The social and cultural histories from the likes of Dominic Sandbrook (e.g., *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties,* London: Little, Brown: 2006) amply demonstrate how English popular culture has come to enjoy global dominance, whilst English political power and influence have continued to decline. This leaves the English with a very curious case of cognitive dissonance. English is known through TV, pop music and film the world over, yet a nation that speaks it is heavily dependent on Europe and the USA for its economic and political stability.

More problematic is the treatment of revolutions at home and abroad. Wat Tyler and the 1381 Peasants' Revolt (it was a serious, widespread and violent insurrection) is written up as though it were a civic protest that got slightly out of hand and went a bit too far. Too bad that the revolutionaries stormed the Tower of London and decapitated the Archbishop of Canterbury.

In the centuries following, the shadow of the French Revolution (1789) was surely the prime mover for the political changes that swept Britain just a few decades later in the 18th century. Nobody seriously imagines that the English establishment-initiated reforms on poverty, voting or even slavery occurred because of some moral epiphany amongst the English elites. It was fear of revolt that primed the need for change. Revolutions usually topple those who are in control, but a program of reform seldom removes power from the elites. The English are reformers and keepers of the conservative *status quo*. They have a natural aversion to revolution because it leads to a loss of control and wresting power from the hands of the elites.

But more puzzling is Omrani's claimed exceptionalism for early English translations of the bible and its phraseology and that has found its way into everyday language. There is no disputing that English phrases – 'salt of the earth' or 'skin of your teeth' come to mind – originated from medieval translations of the bible and have worked their way into everyday speech.

But is this unique to the English? Hardly. The 'Biblia del Oso' (or *Bear Bible*) was the first full translation of the Bible into Spanish and published in 1569. The impact of the translation extended far beyond religious practice and influenced Spanish literature, culture and even helped in shaping the modern Spanish language, embedding biblical idioms and expressions into everyday speech. It is no different with early French translations of the bible. 'la prunelle de ses yeux' ('the apple of one's eye' – *Deuteronomy* 32.10) or 'faire deux poids, deux mesures' ('two weights, two measures' – *Proverbs* 20.10) are standard French expressions. Similar biblical-linguistic heritage is found in German, Russian and Italian.

In short, there is nothing unique about English translations of the bible embedding turns of phrase into everyday English. Other European countries that developed vernacular translations of the bible in the same medieval period also saw biblical idioms recurring in their languages too. This trend became even more marked with the arrival of the printing press.

The tone of the Omrani's history is ultimately English-romantic, with more than a nod to the legacy of R.J. Unstead, Sellars and Yeatman (i.e., *1066 And All That*, 1930), and with a hint of the *Ladybird* marque. But Omrani's history is painfully bourgeois, and the kind of history one might caricature as Eton and Westminster

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stabled, leaving one yearning for at least a hint of retro-Marxism from the likes of Christopher Hill. *God is an Englishman* will play well with the *Spectator*, *Times*, *Telegraph* and *Mail* clientele, but baffle *Guardian, New Statesman* and *Prospect* readers. Bijan Omrani's England is filtered through the lens of English heroism and exceptionalism.

Thus, readers may find themselves instinctively recoiling from Omrani's reinstatement of nostalgia as the underlying ethos of English national identity. Not least, as the book sleep-walks through history with more than a hint of rosehip syrup-induced somnolence. This is a book steeped in pints of warm beer on an English summer's day – shires, cricket on village greens, half-timbered cottages, pretty churches and families picnicking by the river watching boats and swans glide gracefully by.

It is a vision of England that is conservative with a small 'c'; an apotheosis of natural ethics borne of English common sense and forbearance. There is nothing much to work up a sweat for unless it's putting the rest of the world to rights and back in its place. This represents an example of the gendered nationalism that has swung back into fashion of late, and some scholars flirting with views that are defensive of establishment ideals, anti-liberal and (goes without saying) anti-woke. *God is an Englishman* is an eloquent plea for a cultural reset that some might find valuable, yet the ensuing thesis has produced the proverbial curate's egg.

Thus, England and Great Britain are used interchangeably by the author as though the Scottish, Irish and Welsh are on the same page. History suggests otherwise, and one wonders what the other home nations and their histories with the English – which are far from happy, and still not settled – make of God being an Englishman? I suspect those outside the English borders see only hubris and smell the odor of more national double-standards. Ultimately, Omrani's book represents another example of the unconscious nationalist rightward turns we observe in other parts of the world.

Of course, it doesn't follow that those who ride such cultural waves have any understanding of where they originated. For example, many recent theological pulses found life and meaning without understanding how they came to exist. In theology, the brief rise of the Neo-Barthians at the end of the 20th century and movements like (so-called) Radical Orthodoxy reached their zenith without any account of their rise and inevitable dissipation. Like proverbial tides, they gain their power only to eventually dissipate on reaching the shore.

In the same way, movements like Red Tories and Blue Labour are bound to come and go. The ebb and flow of contrary mashups in ideologies frequently attract attentive interest. Omrani's book hails from the same kind of stable. This is no pedigree. The history comes from a mixed parentage, and it may take a while to understand how this kind of retro nostalgia came to be popular in an epoch of global crisis and multi-national existential angst. Do I think it offers a helpful way forward? Obviously not. But I can see the attractions and comfort in a retreat to such an edited past, glossed, buffed and sugared, with all its rosy redolence delivered by selective redactions.

Ultimately, this reviewer concludes that God is neither English nor male. Jesus the Jew was radically pro-gentile and daringly gender-inclusive. And equally,

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decidedly cool in his attitudes towards imperial power and with his implied critiques of such. Jesus preached and practiced a post-nationalist faith that spoke of a very different kind of kingdom. Nostalgia for all things English is no substitute for recovering one of the major and fundamental paradigms of Christianity. God is the property of neither tribe nor nation.

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