Comment

Power in the Blood

You need not be an atheist to wish that people – *some* people anyway – would talk much less religion.

In a country like Britain, in which we have been Christian for 1500 years or so, people's belief in God seems irreversibly in decline, in the mainstream churches at any rate. There will be far more mosque-going Muslims than church-going Christians, they say, quite soon at that.

No doubt the 'New Movements' in the Catholic Church, and the 'Evangelicals' in the Church of England, will go on punching well above their weight. Today, obviously, such levels of commitment and enthusiasm remain far beyond the range of most ordinary Anglicans and Catholics. Nor are we accustomed to hear God invoked much in public life (or private either, for that matter).

In a few years from now, one suspects, few if any ordinary Christians will still exist. According to the distinguished Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, anyway, the Church is destined to become the 'little flock': a tiny minority in a pluralistic society, people in a 'diaspora situation', who have all chosen as adults to become believers as the outcome of their own personal reflection. He did not sound at all intimidated by the prospect. On the other hand, Rahner hoped to retain non-practising Catholics – 'that grey throng made up of the weary, the indifferent, and the uninterested'. He argued that we should not practise a 'latent Novatianism', rejecting all but Sunday Mass goers and treating the rest as bad Catholics', 'centrifugal borderline Catholics' as he calls them. (Whether Novatius had much to do with the schismatic rigorists in mid-second century Rome who go under his name in the histories of heresies seems quite doubtful; it has not helped his reputation that, apparently disappointed by the leniency towards repentant apostates shown by Cornelius, he allowed himself to be consecrated Pope.) Clearly, as the following remark reveals, Rahner was thinking very much in traditional European terms: 'An Italian intellectual who has temporarily given up practising does not feel himself so alienated from the Church *on these grounds alone* as a German or an Englishman in the same position' (*Theological Investigations* XII, 1974, pages 202–228).

Thirty years on, one might feel quite nostalgic for those who styled themselves *cattólico, ma non fanático*.

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Things are not like this in the United States. In so many respects, for better and for worse, British culture and politics become more American every day, something that is likely to accelerate. The great exception to this unstoppable process is, however, the complete failure of the British to imitate Americans in their religiosity.

True, we have the first Prime Minister since Gladstone who seems driven by his Christian beliefs. (It is a mistake to think that he has *no* beliefs.) He has, however, some way to go before he rivals his friend in the White House.

In the State of the Union address of January 2003, for example, President George W. Bush insisted that one of his goals was to 'apply the compassion of America to the deepest problems of America'. He continued: 'For so many in our country – the homeless and the fatherless, the addicted – the need is great. Yet there's power, wonder-working power, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people'.

Many Americans probably missed the reference, as surely most Christians in the United Kingdom did; but Mr Bush is quoting: 'There is power, power, wonder working power/ In the blood of the Lamb; /There is power, power, wonder working power/In the precious blood of the Lamb'. Many more Americans, especially in the 'Bible belt', must have caught the allusion.

What he is quoting is the refrain in one of the most popular hymns by Lewis Ellis Jones, words and music composed in 1899 at a campfire meeting at Mountain Lake Park, Maryland. Jones (1865–1936) was a classmate of the evangelist Billy Sunday at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. He worked for the YMCA in Davenport, Iowa; Fort Worth, Texas; and finally Santa Barbara, California. Writing hymns was his vocation. Besides 'There Is Power in the Blood' he composed other 'Christian-traditional' old favourites, such as 'I've Anchored in Jesus', 'Lean on His Arms', 'The Old Book Stands', and 'We Shall See the King Some Day' (you can get them and the very singable honky-tonk tunes, if you have the right software, on the web: www.cyberhymnal.org).

There is no use in being sniffy about the kitschy mawkishness that might lift the hearts of a congregation of 'born-again' Christians, some with problems with alcohol, in clapboard chapels in the wide open spaces of Texas. The tunes, after all, would fit comfortably in with much that is sung in Catholic churches these days.

What is less comfortable, however, is that this echo of 'born-again' evangelicalism fits so neatly into the political discourse of the man in control of the most powerful military machine the world has ever known. While of course it is true that state and church are kept 'separate' by the Constitution, you don't have to be a border-line Catholic in western Europe to be amazed, then amused, and finally dismayed, by the amalgam of religion and politics in the United

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States. Even 'good Catholics' must have qualms. One should, no doubt, be glad to hear there is so much invocation of God in the White House, prayer breakfasts and suchlike. Yet, why is it so scary to hear that, when asked by a journalist if he consulted his father about invading Iraq, President Bush replied that he had a higher Father? Deadpan, that might have been a good joke, putting down the presumptuous inquirer. The worrying thing, however, is that most likely he was deadly serious.

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