New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01398.x

Comment: *Christians in a secular age*

The Gifford Lectures, which Professor Charles Taylor delivered at Edinburgh in the spring of 1999, dealt with the question of how Christian practice would continue in the West as the social, cultural and intellectual matrix disappears in which it has been embedded for centuries.

The interdependence of the sacred and the everyday has characterised every society until very recent times. Already in the 1940s, as regards Christianity in Western Europe, Karl Rahner was writing of a 'diaspora' situation that he saw affecting Christians (by which he meant Catholics), as distinct from the *Volkskirche*, the surrounding, deeply rooted and uncontested Catholicism that he knew as a youngster growing up in the Black Forest (he was born in 1904). By the late 1940s, as he saw things, the culture was becoming increasingly secular, such that the burden of faith was shifting from the community as a whole to the individual on his or her own. People were having to develop a personal faith in a way that nobody was required to do in his youth or indeed even for centuries in his part of the world.

Of course, as Rahner would have agreed, Catholics and Protestants risked marginalisation, persecution and even martyrdom for their beliefs during the late 16th century and for most of the following century. On both sides, however, religious practice remained interwoven with ordinary everyday life, albeit sometimes oppressively so; and the great events of birth, marriage and death were *rites de passage* unself-consciously consecrated by the local church.

As a pastor in war-time Vienna, and then back teaching theology in the ruins of post-war Munich, Rahner must have talked to hundreds of bewildered and demoralised people who were inevitably questioning what place was left for God in their lives. Consider the effect on devoted Catholics of having to confront the facts about the Holocaust. Many of Rahner's most characteristic essays are the product of such conversations, aiming to persuade people not to despair. In the circumstances, he expected the Church to become a 'little remnant', a network of 'communities of election', no doubt with missionary outreach but no longer with any basis and cultural support in the customs and aspirations of secular society.

This 'church of the diaspora', as Rahner foresaw it, would gain in committed membership what it would lose in numbers. As critics and

© 2010 The Author. New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society. Published by Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2010, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden MA 02148, USA
https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01398.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

admirers sometimes forget, this prospect of the Catholic Church as composed of 'elect communities' is at least as characteristic of Rahner's ecclesiology as the better known and much disputed 'anonymous Christian' theme. In a beautiful article, first published in 1954, reprinted in volume III of *Theological Investigations* (1967), Rahner discusses how a practising Catholic should deal with lapsed and unbelieving members of his or her own family ('How does the heart of a mother not tremble when she asks herself whether it will be her belief or the unbelief of her surroundings which will triumph in the hearts of her children?'): one of the best documentary witnesses to pre-Vatican II Catholic religious sensibility in Western Europe. The unanimity and homogeneity of the Catholic Church, let alone the often-lamented conformism, were already disintegrating years before the Second Vatican Council.

Recently, in an interview with the BBC's HardTalk programme, the Archbishop of Westminster said that he would prefer a smaller, purer Church than one in which most Catholics compromised on Catholic doctrine — thus agreeing with the then Cardinal Ratzinger back in 1997, comparing the Church with the mustard seed, 'where it will exist in small, seemingly insignificant groups that nonetheless live an intense struggle against evil and bring good into the world — that lets God in' (see *The Tablet* 10 July 2010 page 36). That form of the Church would obviously be counter-cultural, in moral practices as well as in spirituality and religious expression. On the other hand, the Annuario Pontificio (at the end of 2008) claims 1,166 billion Catholics in the world, reaching these statistics by agglomerating the populations of traditionally Catholic countries like Mexico, Brazil and so on, assuming that everyone nominally Catholic really *is*, — if not committed as in Rahner's diaspora, at least generally sympathetic.

The figure for England and Wales is 5.2 million, over 9 per cent of the population; in Scotland 850, 000, about 17 percent of the population, with Sunday Mass attendance estimated (surely a little optimistically) at 40 percent. Paradoxically, while it would be exaggeration to count most of us as committed in Rahner's sense, let alone likely to risk life for our faith, we have to put up with so much media hostility to Christianity and to the Catholic Church in particular, not to mention legislation, that we exhibit enough of a subculture's apparent eccentricity to retain something of a self-aware identity. But in Britain we have nothing to compare with the forms of Catholicism that flourish in Mexico and Brazil, let alone in Southern Spain and Italy — in that sense, undeniably, we are among Charles Taylor's Christians who have little or no supporting culture to enable us to live in a 'secular age'.

Fergus Kerr OP

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01398.x Published online by Cambridge University Press