

Comment

The perils of indignation

Of course, there is nothing wrong with righteous indignation, providing there is not too much of it. In fact, this world would be a better place if there were more of it sometimes. 'The ugly decade' is what James A. Michener has called the 1980s in a trenchant article, designed to get our righteous indignation going, published by *The New York Times* as a way of welcoming in the New Year. Ours, Michener says, is a period 'marked by general know-nothingness', a time 'in which evading central problems is a substitute for grappling with them', with all the emphasis on piling up riches rather than ideas. Looking around at the havoc wrought by the ideology of consumerism and its numerous proponents, a fairly substantial minority of us in the First World feel that Michener and his like are perfectly right; there is plenty to be indignant about.

But, having got indignant, what do we do next? The trouble is that a lot of the indignation that boils up in us has its origins in a deep sense of helplessness. And this is especially true of indignation in the Church; above all, the indignation earnest Christians feel when they see 'the world' so often and so successfully silencing the preaching of the gospel.

The evidence seems to be piling up that what happened in Seattle last year was one such instance: that it was resentment of Archbishop Hunthausen's strong anti-nuclear stance that was the basic incentive for the campaign conducted against him by extreme right-wing Catholic groups which ended up in Rome stripping him of most of his episcopal competence. But we are only mentioning this because it is a topical and heavily-publicised instance. After all, over and over again the Church has capitulated to the pressures of 'the world'; again and again the Church has betrayed the gospel because it has felt that its survival depended on its doing a deal with 'the world'. The number of occasions in the history of the Church for righteous indignation, for justifiable wagging of fingers at ecclesiastics—only God knows what that number is.

But what good has most of this indignation done, this finger-wagging?

See the film *The Mission*, if you have not already done so. It presents more powerfully than do any printed generalizations the terrible dilemma constantly facing the Church, and which so blights the life of the Church. It is set in the mid-18th century in what is now Paraguay, where the Jesuits had most of the extraordinary chain of mission settlements which they had created, the *reducciones*—one of history's more remarkable experiments in utopianism. Soon after the film opens

we learn that, thanks to a new treaty, the *reducciones* are now in the territory of the slave-running Portuguese. We see Altimirano, the legate from Rome (in actual history it was a visitor-general), slowly spelling out to the local Jesuits what the choice is: abandonment of the *reducciones* or probable suppression of the Order throughout the world.

Abandonment of the *reducciones* will mean profit for the Portuguese but death or slavery for thousands of Indians. The story seems to confirm our utter helplessness. It seems to be asserting that we are indeed utterly at the mercy of events, that (to quote favourite words of the Prime Minister) 'There is no alternative'.

Curiously, it is Altamirano, the Roman legate in *The Mission*, who says there *is* an alternative. After the massacre at the end of the film he says to the Portuguese and Spanish men of action, 'Have you the effrontery to call this slaughter "necessary"?'

The reply he gets is 'Given our legitimate purpose, yes.' One of the Portuguese diplomats adds, 'You had no choice. You must work in the real world. And the real world is thus.'

'Oh no,' says Altamirano. 'Thus have we made it.'

'Thus have we made it.' So long as we go on *just* being made indignant we are presupposing that it is always 'they' who 'thus make it', we are giving 'them' a power 'they' have not got. This means (if it is the betraying of the gospel that we are getting angry about) that we are forgetting what every Christian is supposed to believe: that the gospel is not like a magnificent Old Master, which we have to care for if it is going to stay beautiful. It actually has a power itself.

Reminding people of that is the preacher's job. And if you happen to be a theologian you can, surely, help in a rather different but equally important way to undermine that sense of frustration we are writing about, the 'they make it' mentality which is behind so much indignation and which so much indignation nurtures. For, while it is important to remind the men and women of today of the power of the gospel, the power of God, it is equally important to find better ways of saying to them that, since God is the source and origin of all, his power does not reduce them to servility; rather, that God's grace is in them to enable them to transform the world.

But neither theologians nor preachers nor any other people who want to serve the gospel are going to be much use if they for long let indignation, however righteous, take over their own hearts. And, judging from the way things are moving in the world and the Church of the late 1980s, the number of opportunities for righteous indignation is likely to move upwards.

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