

The Politics of Innocence

Angela West

"It wasn't that I particularly supported their policies" a colleague said to me on the day after the election "but I just wanted to get rid of that other lot." In many ways a natural conservative, she seemed to represent that vast change of mood among the electorate, for whom the Tory government had become the image of corruption, self-interest and hypocrisy, and for whom New Labour seemed to offer the hope of a re-birth of political innocence, a new national consensus about the common good. Coming from a different standpoint, it was a mood I could fervently share with her, and with so many friends who are still reliving the exhilaration of that historic night. Yet I am conscious of a paradox with regard to this great upsurge of new political hope. For the longing to avoid harm and be blameless is at the root of our highest spiritual and moral aspirations; but it is also a dangerous and corrosive passion. The lust for innocence can also be detected in the desires of the recently disgraced.

In the *Guardian* some months before the election Hugo Young analysed the particular form of corruption that had overtaken British politics—not so much systemic financial corruption, as a form of intellectual corruption. Ministers, defending their actions after the Scott Report or in the Neil Hamilton affair, had apparently come to believe that 'the mere fact that words and actions are theirs, unflinchingly performed for the best of all possible reasons, guarantees their rectitude'.¹ They were scandalised that the public might actually believe that they had been privately milking the political system to protect or advance their political interests. The Armed Forces Minister, Nicholas Soames, admitted misleading Parliament over the use of dangerous organo-phosphates in the Gulf, but refused to consider resigning—a move which might at least signal to the victims that someone in the government was willing to take responsibility for the gross errors that led to their plight. In their own eyes, these ministers were honourable men who sincerely believed their conduct to be unchallengeable and who felt justified in passing on whatever blame could not be refuted to subordinates or those less able to deflect it. The old codes of honour and corporate responsibility, it seemed, no longer applied.

In the event, the electorate did not judge them to be innocent and held them responsible for their actions. The election result revealed a widespread desire to make a clean break with the past, to be 'born again'

with a new government that was politically uncompromised. Yet the refusal of Tory politicians to give up the belief in their own permanent moral innocence seems to me, to be a phenomenon with a wider reference than British politics. It has its origin in a theological question that emerged from our particular cultural and religious history and I suggest that it is of great importance both for our theology and for our political future that we understand it more thoroughly. In the sixteenth century, the Reformers of Christianity attempted to call to account what they saw as a clerical caste who were exploiting the doctrines of human sinfulness for the sake of personal and institutional control. Thus, they rejected a concept of priesthood that seemed to validate a class of middlemen between God and individual believers. They declared the principle of the fundamental equality of all believers, and hence of the believer's direct access to God without any essential requirement for a priest as mediator.

Taken as a response in historical context to many abuses of power within the Church of that time, these principles express some radical theological insights of which we should never lose sight. Our equality before God as believers is fundamental to our faith, as is God's accessibility to each one of us. But divorced from their context in religious history and subsumed into the ideology of individualism, they have emerged as part of a polemical alternative to the doctrine of original sin.

In its new ideological form, this alternative approach is treated as a 'self-evident truth'. For the type of thinking that rejects the notion of human sinfulness is also highly suspicious of 'doctrines', because of their association with priestcraft. Yet doctrine in essence simply means 'teaching', it is the means by which a community hands on a consensus about truth and the common good. The belief in 'essential human innocence' is also a kind of doctrine/teaching with certain features. According to the 'truth' of original innocence, a person belongs to humanity as an individual not as part of a body that is infected by the disease of sin. Personal moral failings are possible but sin is not a fundamental part of our human lot. Thus, salvation is not a matter of belonging to the right body (in Christian terms, the Body of Christ) but of getting right with God or the universe on a personal basis. There is no need for spiritual authorities or mediators (except as role models or advisers), for the individual must be the final judge of her or his own spiritual condition and moral conduct. A person with these attitudes could hardly say, with full assent to its implications: 'Pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death.' To acknowledge kinship with fellow sinners in the body of humanity misshapen by sin is imprudent for those committed to maintaining innocence at all costs. Moreover, it allows the dangerous possibility that a reckoning might be made of us other than that which we make ourselves.

The mention of death, in a culture geared to cheat death as long as possible, serves only to underline this sinister notion of a judgment beyond our control.

We are dealing here with a doctrine that has escaped from its theological habitat and taken root in the forms of global culture, where it is no longer subject to the checks of theological debate. Its theological features are present as a kind of 'implicit theology' in secular culture, which crystallizes out in social attitudes and formations. It is evident especially in the *laissez-faire* capitalism and free-market individualism which, in the period since 1945 has permeated our institutions and politics. It is a major factor in that 'market-place morality' that the bishops of England and Wales have recently criticized and in the intellectual corruption among politicians which we have noted. Thus, God no longer represents the 'last word' of judgment of our motives and actions: self-evaluation is the watchword of the new management, and in their hands it has become the means of managing conformity to the sovereignty of consumer freedom.

However, it would be wrong to give the impression that it is only right-wing politicians who suffer from this form of intellectual corruption. For it forms part of a far wider set of attitudes born out of reaction to a very narrow understanding of Christian doctrine, and theologians have not paid sufficient attention to such an influential distortion of Christian teaching. The ideologies of radicalism have also inherited the doctrine of original innocence. Those who hunger for justice have championed the innocence of the oppressed, and campaigned for the rights of victims. So much is required by the Gospel. But in most cases, justice—God's justice—has been firmly disconnected from the idea of God's judgment. This is because in a liberal culture, the whole notion of the judgment of God has become deeply problematical—often because of the association with a Church whose image has at times been tarnished by its support for authoritarian regimes and politics. But this gives rise to new problems. For as radicals, now lacking a theology of God's judgment and mercy, we have tended to assume the mantle of innocence attributed to victims, and thus made ourselves the measure and standard of justice. We have been unaware of how this exposes us to the gravest of all spiritual temptations—that of spiritual pride, the pride of the self-righteous.

But many radicals, who are perhaps sincere and humble Christians, might well ask: but of what use is the doctrine of original sin? How can such bad news be part of the Good News? And if working for justice lays us open to the spiritual pride of self-righteousness, is not preaching the judgment of God likely to involve us in a far more fundamental hubris?

Original sin can be understood as a teaching about the corporate nature of our humanity—that belief so persistently denied by the dominant

ideologies of the right. It attempts to make sense of the fundamental structures of corruption by which we share in the consequences of sin and error. It is a doctrine that does not increase guilt (as its critics maintain) but mitigates it. The sins and failings of a person remain personal—but are judged in the context of the whole sin-sick humanity. Thus we share responsibility for the 'common evil' just as we do for the common good; and from those to whom most has been given, most will be expected.

In the absence of this teaching, those blighted by poverty or disability are credited implicitly or explicitly by the right as being morally responsible for their condition. Thus their condition is not seen as the proper concern of the 'unafflicted' parts of society. The latter, by a different reckoning, may also have human disabilities which are evident chiefly in their inability to acknowledge them without threat to their self-esteem. Where God has diagnosed (i.e. judged) the whole body to be sick, the hubris consists of exempting ourselves from the body. And such exemption disqualifies us from access to that ultimate well-being (redemption) that God has promised to the whole body.

Although redemption has sometimes been co-opted by radical ideology through the politics of victimhood, the project of unassailable personal innocence is fundamentally incompatible with the theology of redemption. This becomes explicit in the writings of one-time Dominican, Matthew Fox. Fox has done us the service of returning the cultural doctrine of original innocence to its proper theological context. And the fact that it has been greeted with acclaim by many Christians is, I believe, largely because it has the ring of familiarity—it has the 'same shape' as the message that reaches us through the dominant culture. The justifying rhetoric of all such 'radical' theologies is always egalitarian and anti-hierarchical: but unlike the hierarchy of the human body—where each part is unique and irreplaceable and essential to the welfare of the whole—on the Spiritual Internet of the Well-Connected each unit is equivalent and interchangeable, and may drop out without damage to the whole. In fact, as in the prototype of consumer society, the welfare of the well-connected few rests upon the exclusion of the majority.

Those of either left or right who seek justification through ideological correctness lay themselves open to the kind of intellectual corruption that Hugo Young has identified. As a feminist in the 1980s, I learned (rightly I think) to regard women's chronic lack of self-esteem as a scourge of our gender. But with hindsight I have come to appreciate that what we proposed as the remedy, the cultivation of self-affirmation, was not so much an opposite condition as the flipside of our malady. I see that the logic of self-affirmation, linked to the belief in my rights as a member of a victimized gender, could easily lead me to a position not so different as that

of the Tory politician with an unshakeable conviction in his own innocence.

Though the pursuit of self-esteem may well be a necessary stage in our development as Christian women (and men) I do not think it can be our ultimate destination. For the self allowed to be final judge of itself is capable of disastrously overvaluing (in the case of the powerful) or undervaluing (in the case of the powerless) its own role in the body. Self-esteem is not an end in itself but that which makes possible our self-gift, by which we enter upon that opening-out-towards God which characterizes the discourse of the saints. And this consciousness is possible, only if we make submission to the judgment of God, which is sometimes mediated to us by the judgment of our fellow Christians (as for example, in elections!) As Newman has pointed out, most human beings are willing to admit they commit sins and are not perfect, but balk at the suggestion that they have less than perfect freedom to do right if they really wanted to.² That we are dependent on the grace of God for our 'justification' is what is implied by the doctrine of Original Sin. The bitter modern hostility to the doctrine rests on the fear that to accept it would be to increase our burden of guilt, blame and self-hatred. Yet the contrary is true, for rightly understood it enables the lifting of self-hatred, and the freeing of our souls for a fruitful humility.

As I have suggested, our attitude to this doctrine has crucial political implications. For liberals who are wedded to a belief in original innocence often accept uncritically the idea that power corrupts, which can be seen as a kind of intimation of the reality to which the doctrine points. For to exercise power is in some sense, to contravene the injunction to 'judge not', for it cannot be done without the risk of doing harm and creating victims, since unlike God we are neither good nor all-knowing. In short, it cannot be done innocently. This helps to explain why, in certain radical circles there is an unhealthy puritanism about the body politic; and in society at large, a debilitating cynicism about the exercise of political power. Yet at some level we all exercise power, and the specific exercise of political power is necessary for the flourishing of the human community. Thus, we must surely hope that our new rulers will be theologically wiser than their predecessors and have the humility to realise that they cannot simply, by good will, preserve innocence in all cases. Yet they may, if they have the courage to eschew the project of personal self-justification, still serve, by the grace of God, to lay a new political foundation for the ancient goal of the common good.

1 *Guardian* 8.10.96

2 Michael A. Testa "Newman on the Doctrine of Original Sin" *New Blackfriars* May 1997, p. 234.

in N.Ireland, are acting directly under orders of the British Government. It certainly did not reach as far as the UDR, or the puppets of the RUC.

In short, it is a "control" which exists, and has long existed, only to the extent that it supports, and is tolerated by, enough Protestant rednecks. Successive British Governments have recognised as much, building the execution of their N.Ireland policies on precisely that premiss. But that "control" is not control, and some consequences are worth examining.

It used to seem that the constitutional issue in N.Ireland was that sovereignty was in dispute between the British Government and the IRA, because the "legitimacy" element in some views of sovereignty was in dispute. Hobbes, of course, and successive British Governments have denied that there is any more than the "control" element to the notion of sovereignty. Logically enough, then, successive British Governments, feeling that they had 'control of the militia' and could give not a fig for questions of legitimacy, claimed that sovereignty was not in dispute. What now appears, is that there is already doubt about the applicability of the "control" element in N.Ireland. What now appears, is thus not that sovereignty is in dispute, but that there is a vacuum, in which no one has sovereignty. The British Government indeed controls what is much the largest of the armed forces in the territory, and as long as the Army remains, no one else can claim more than a notional sovereignty. But it does not and apparently cannot use the Army, save when and to the extent that its use is tolerated by the rednecks and their Kettledrummies.

Now this is where the bad faith comes in. In the classic example, Sartre's woman in the cafe is enjoying the very ambivalence of her assignation with the man who is not her husband. She knows she will have to make up her mind, sooner or later, but tells herself there is no urgency. She blots out all considerations save those in which the man is seen as discreet and respectable. She blots out consideration of the developments which time almost inevitably brings. She knows what she really wants, but even naming it would be too much to acknowledge. She would wish to remain in the charmed present, permanently. Then the man takes her hand in his, cutting through the reverie. Leave the hand there, in his, and she consents to a process which she would still rather not think about, despite its attractions. Pull the hand away, and the magic of the moment is gone. How can the moment of decision still be put off? Simple. The woman leaves the hand there, but tells herself 'This is not me, only my hand, something which can neither consent nor resist, be faithful or betray. Just my hand, not really me.' In short, she remains in bad faith.

Long before Drumcree, British Governments had left their executive arm under the sufferance of others. Not just the sufferance of the bulk of the population, as in any civilised country. Under the sufferance of the rednecks. It cannot openly consent to leaving its arm there, for fear of being led into a train of events it would not even wish to name. It cannot decisively draw it out, or the magical illusion of oneness with the 'oul cause of the rednecks, is broken'. So it leaves it there, but telling itself 'It is only our military arm, not us. The execution of our policies will in no way be compromised. We will execute what we decide, after due deliberation... .' But this detachment in fantasy from its own compromised forces, merely confirms the depth of the Government's bad faith. For as long as your executive forces are under sufferance to the rednecks, Sartre's point holds. *La délibération volontaire est... truquée... . Quand je délibère les jeux sont faits*. When, in such a case, you claim to decide after deliberation, your claim is phoney. When you go through the motions of deliberation, the decisions are already made. So leave Ms Mowlam in office. Every worthwhile politician can be allowed one Bay of Pigs, and Drumcree was hers. But either pull the Army right out, or stop pretending that it is not really your Army, your executive arm.

Relativism: Opportunity or Threat?

Andrew Bebb

The postmodernist perspective is so amorphous as to almost defy description. A good deal of imprecision inevitably flourishes. Its description ranges from the superficial level of populist culture and its images, to an anarchistic nihilism. Many of its adherents are refugee post-Marxists sheltering under the banner of a relativistic abandonment of all *ideological* absolutes. Where is one to find the link between the post-structuralism of literary criticism and the postmodernism in the field of architecture and art? There are many who regard the process as a fundamental transformation in human self understanding. They regard it as a radical de-centring of the self and as a comprehensive embracing of relationality and relativism, (which