

Comment

Cracking the clerical abracadabra

Not for some time have theologians thought of themselves as an elite group. British Catholic theologians certainly have not. Lately the Ponting affair and 20/20 Vision's TV film "MI5's Official Secrets" have brought torrents of indignation on Britain's strongest elite group, the Government itself. The trial of a civil servant put in the dock for revealing to Parliament that the Government had deliberately misled it, followed by news that the country's security services have been tapping the phones of upright citizens for party-political ends, has jerked a few more people into acknowledging what a fragile plant open democracy is. But while we wag fingers at Mrs Thatcher we lay ourselves open to others wagging their fingers at us.

Of course, those of us who are theologians, or bound up in some other way with the theological enterprise, have got rather more modest secrets to hide than Mrs Thatcher, and less exciting information-flows to control. All the same, in what we have defined as our territory we can—if we do not watch ourselves—become just as certain as Mrs Thatcher that it is we and only we who know what is worth knowing and know what it is good for others to know. In spite of all the theology titles in paperback, all the "popular" conferences and courses, and the very occasional and normally gimmicky TV coverage, the gap between the theological circle and the worshipping community is still enormous. A stream of words bridges the gap, but the traffic is nearly all one-way.

Part of the problem has nothing to do with elitism, of course. Even in theology, as in nearly every specialism, the sheer speed and size of the growth of knowledge makes it difficult for non-professionals to keep up. But that does not explain all. In Britain Catholicism is becoming more and more middle-class, and picking up middle-class assumptions about what is worth noticing and who is worth listening to. Worse still, although theology is no longer supposed to be an abracadabra for cracking in seminaries only, the world in which it is practised is still very clerical. And that means it is in constant risk, even today, of getting infected by the occupational disease, clericalism.

"I really and honestly do not believe that a cleric can recognise the true nature of clericalism", Michael Knowles writes to us. He may be right. One thing, at least is certain: it is so endemic that even we, who produce *New Blackfriars*, can catch it. Mr. Knowles was the author of the article in our October issue which stirred up so much discussion, "Is there a Catholic Social Ethic?". In December we commented on some of the controversy in a way intended to be mildly

ironic. Regrettably, our mild irony was, it seems, so mild that it did not come across as irony at all. All that was apparent to certain of our readers was our "patronising clericalist and academic elitism" (to quote Mr. Knowles). Needless to say, we were dismayed when we discovered what kind of indignation we had stirred up, and we are particularly sorry that we said things that could be construed as personally offensive by Mr. Knowles.

It is this elitism which he believes blights theology. In fact, he states his position even more strongly than that. "The very structure of theology is wrong at a fundamental point; that point is the priesthood", he writes. We know, personally, no male Catholic theologians who would agree with that. All the same, in today's world arguably the shaping of a theological idea is incomplete until all sectors of the Church have begun to wrestle with the idea proposed. This means, of course, that the genuine populariser has a central role in theological activity: he, or she, is not just the hack who must be tolerated so that the simple can have the insights of the wise explained to them. And it means much more. It means that theologians must listen (although, as Margaret Mackley says in *New City*, publication of the Urban Theology Unit of Sheffield, 'we have so often presumed to *tell* the poor what the good news was, we have no way of suddenly beginning to listen to them').

We are not, here, circulating ideology, but simply pointing to what it implies to say that feed-back is indispensable if any theological talk is going to illuminate accurately the human condition, and not be the in-talk of a private clerical world. Yet can we in fact be so certain that theology from now on must be everybody's business? Could it even revert to being seminarians' abracadabra?

More important, perhaps, than next November's Extraordinary Synod called to evaluate the results of Vatican II may be the International Synod of Bishops planned to meet in October 1986. This will discuss "the vocation and mission of the laity in the Church and in the world" today. The Secretariat says it wishes to consult the laity themselves in preparation for it. The Consultation Document *Ex Ecclesiae coetibus* has already been published (London, C.T.S.—Do 563; price 65p.) You, our very many readers who are lay, do get this document, discuss it and respond to it. It scans the role of the laity, but there is no mention in it of the vital part of the role of the laity we have been commenting on. It does, on the other hand, mention the Pope's fears of "the clericalization of the laity" and "the laicization of the clergy" (p. 10). We must all shout as loud as we can that theology—the discipline which is supposed to mediate between the gospel and our experience of the world—cannot today just be the preserve of a clerical elite and be true theology. And the sooner we start shouting that the better.

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