

Comment

The covert far right

At least ninety-nine times out of a hundred, a 'fascist' is any brute doing what we do not agree with and getting away with it. And even in specifically political use there is currently no sloppier word than 'fascism', surely? According to the C.O.D. it can now mean *any* system 'of extreme right-wing or authoritarian views'. Accept that definition and the dominant faction in the Federation of Conservative Students would certainly be 'fascist', and so would many of the right-wing Catholics in France. But it is hard to decide what all the people at present on Europe's far right have in common, beyond a certain contempt for the democratic process and the cause of social justice.

For instance, no doubt most of us can comfortably feel that we are light-years distant from people like Karl-Heinz Hoffmann, boss of Bavaria's now-banned steel-helmeted *Wehrsportsgruppe*. On the other hand, Licio Gelli, Master of the fabulously dangerous P2 masonic lodge, a man of culture who might have passed for a banker or diplomat and whose ultimate dream was to become by force Italy's secret master, was a dazzling operator by any standards, a man whom nobody could easily categorise: the thirty-six members of the Italian Parliament revealed in 1981 to be members of the P2 came from every party except the Communist Party and the Republican. Fascism—or, more correctly, covert fascism—is today a disease likely to appear anywhere in the West where democracy is showing signs of having caught a cold. As in Britain, for example.

Mrs Thatcher does not see herself as a fascist, and, judging from what her friends say about her, she is not. But plenty of her policies and her style of government (and her rhetoric too—those boasts of hers in south-east Asia of how she "saw off the miners", and so on) are undoubtedly conducive to the advance of the far right, and the prevailing mood in the country will not counteract it. When the far right stops being sectarian, and takes over an organisation inside the party in power—and that is what happened at the beginning of this month in the Federation of Conservative Students—all of us, not just the Tory hierarchy, have something to think about. Especially as most of the young men now leading the FCS, with their policies of extreme economic libertarianism, voluntarism in all things, and ardent support for Botha and Pinochet, are of working-class or lower middle-class origin.

All we are out to do here is ponder for a minute or two on what might be an authentic Christian response to this trend.

The young people who are being drawn—or likely to be drawn—to far-right pressure groups of this kind see themselves as very far from the counter-culture of the 60s ... in other words, very far from the movement which was so important for many of the younger men and women in Christian ministry today. Some of them see themselves as personifying the very opposite of it, in fact—commonsense putting to flight leftist fantasy. ‘That lot,’ (i.e. in the counter-culture of the 60s) ‘they are responsible for much that we have had to put up with since; they bear a lot of guilt,’ said one young unemployed working-class supporter of the right to us.

He was wrong, of course. Or, more accurately, partly wrong. Sociologists such as Bernice Martin have shown that the counter-culture of the 60s was not a political movement, fundamentally; it had its roots in the Romantic tradition and in its emphasis on the importance of the private experiential dimension of life (so it was not inextricably linked with radical politics). What we saw in the 60s was an abandoning of boundaries in a search for space in which to be ‘an integrated person with full affective and expressive rights’. But this was not the end of the story. The ‘liminal experience’ cannot last; the return to structures in the 70s was not the triumph of ‘conservative commonsense’, but the working out of something *built into* the 60s movement. Much of the *style* of the counter-culture persisted, and is now part of nearly everybody’s world, in the West. The mood of the ‘Me Generation’ in great part has its origins in the counter-culture.

If this thesis is true (and that seems very likely), certain things follow. In the first place, there is no point in trying to wheel on again the 60s (or what we imagine to have been the 60s), in the hope that with their aid we can reduce a little the less acceptable features of the 80s. The 60s and the 80s are not quite the implacable enemies some of us thought they were. Yet this does not mean that we have to pretend that nothing has gone wrong, as if the mentality of the ‘Me Generation’ were an altogether healthy involvement from elements in the counter-culture. There has been a calamitous failure of imagination. A loss of nerve, you might say. The Romanticism of the 60s had dreams of transforming the world. When—inevitably—it failed to do so, it took flight from the reality of the world. The dominant mood today, far from being ‘nearer reality’ (as the great majority of people think), has fled from it, opting rather for a fictional world populated by angels and demons (especially demons), as the Thatcher rhetoric reveals. The best way—in fact, the only way—to be safe and content in such a world is to be as private as possible, so the argument goes; concentrate on the wants and whims of Number One!

Does this mean that no authentic Christian message—in other words, no message that speaks of this world as well as the next—is

likely to get genuinely listened to by the 'Me Generation'? It is clear that it has no time for the kind of Christianity which was so appealing in the world of the 60s, when hopes of universal brotherhood were trendy. 'The "Me Generation" is not going to get turned on by a lot of talk about other people's troubles,' to quote a young American Jew. On the other hand, the search to be 'a whole person', so central in the counter-culture, also deeply motivates the 'Me Generation', inadequately though it goes about that search.

In theory, then, the way to present the Christian message convincingly to the 'Me Generation' is simple and obvious. The message must start by taking the form of a warning: a warning that people are in danger of missing out on something, if they think that the materialism at present being marketed especially by the right is going to meet all their needs, i.e. is going to turn them into 'whole persons'. Armed with this message, all sorts of modern religious groups have recently won adherents ... only, however, to end up by leading their followers even further into fantasy.

In practice, of course, preaching the authentic gospel effectively to the 'Me Generation' is bound to be a much more exacting exercise.

Firstly—and this must be obvious to all who take St. Dominic for their life pattern—it must involve the boring and unromantic business of trying to tell the truth, for without truth there *is* no reality engaged to transform. This means often saying things all sorts of well-intentioned persons would rather we did not say. It also means that the churches must go on getting themselves involved in political controversy, much as this displeases many powerful people.

This is not all, however. If the churches consumed *all* their energies in political controversy the far right could safely go on chuckling. The real battle with the right is a spiritual battle. And it must be *seen* that to live in terms of the gospel actually is a way of happiness. Here we have for our example the other father of the mendicants, St Francis. If even only a few men and women of such a kind emerged this disease we have been talking about, this 'covert fascism', would fairly soon be in retreat. Not because of a miracle (at least, not a miracle of the old-fashioned kind), but because the 'Me Generation' would have seen startling reasons for revising its ideas of what 'fulfilment' is.

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