

Comment

Defenders of Pope Maggie's infallible doctrines

We are all idolaters at times, but some are more idolatrous than others. Take, for instance, Thatcherism's latest phalanx of special defenders, the authors of *The Kindness that Kills*, which SPCK published a few weeks ago. Without exception they are confessing Christians, but they have tumbled—nearly every one of them—into a terrible fast-spreading idolatry. It's sad. And what is the new god's name? The Market! According to its arch-priest, Milton Friedman, its "invisible hand" controls us all.

Why, though, am I wasting your time and my space writing about an eighty-per cent dreadful book (an "evil book", according to a canon lawyer)? Because, if you are seriously concerned about the future of Christianity in a country like Britain, you ought to skim through it. For its voice is not the voice of a tiny embittered minority. Without doubt, its attack on the many statements on social questions coming out of the Christian churches which conflict with the outlook of Mrs Thatcher and her supporters mirrors the sentiments of quite a number of people who would identify themselves as Christians, not only in Britain but also in Ronald Reagan's U.S. too.

It is, of course, trying to speak to all sorts of people. Seeing how roughly they talk about them, it is not clear that the authors seriously care whether their words are noticed by the actual makers of church documents—yet what is said about the sloppy use of data and concepts drawn from the social sciences in many church documents is the one really good thing in the book! More important readers are the people—a mixed group—who get very upset whenever, rightly or wrongly, they imagine clerics are saying that the gospel and current socialist policies are one and the same. Finally, there are the devotees of the new cult of The Market (let's call them "Marketeers", since not every monetarist has yet tumbled into this idolatry). Some Marketeers still want to be Christians too, but the churches perceive as flaws certain characteristics of human nature—greed, selfishness, hardness, etc.—which the Market legitimates. The book helps Marketeers to overcome this difficulty.

Here, incidentally, I am not merely trying to crack a joke (it would be an exceptionally feeble one). From what I have seen, having returned only fairly recently from years in an international job abroad, I seriously wonder if my fellow-countrymen realise what a rare delicate plant democracy is. Remember, less than a quarter of the world's nations are set up as democracies and less than half of those are running as democracies. At moments, still tending—inevitably—to see the world through international spectacles, I wonder if I am back in the country I grew up in. It strikes me that the grave crippling of a tradition of fairly independent local government is

only one indication—the latest and most sinister—that democracy in Britain could be on the way out. Some of the best things about the country's way of life are getting stamped out, deliberately or in passing: in fact, it seems whatever happens to be in the way of the aims of the Prime Minister, the most prominent Marketeer. All in the name of freedom. Whose? Yours? No, the freedom of the Market. And government decisions which not very long ago would have roused outrage that would have made the toughest politician tremble now rarely stir up much more than intelligent growls in *The Guardian*.

The blame cannot be entirely stuck on Mrs Thatcher, tyrant though she is (or wants to be), any more than reactionary political views in the churches could be blamed entirely on the authors of *The Kindness that Kills*. What we are up against are widely-shared moods, values, attitudes of mind. Just because we are not devotees of the cult of The Market, we ourselves should not be complacent. Today nearly everybody in the West to some extent has a "supermarket mentality". The supermarket, after all, has the role in our culture that the cathedral had in medieval culture. Once people took it for granted that they could only live as their parents and grandparents had lived. Today they have at least an *illusion* of potentially unlimited choice. (You are weary of that breakfast cereal? Choose another. Of that TV channel? Choose another. Of your diet? Choose another. Of your church? Your wife? Your god...?) It is wonderfully easy to slip into thinking—like the people I have called Marketeers—that the supermarket *is* the cathedral: in other words, to come to believe that the market is the supremely important thing in life...in fact, *is* life. Then the market becomes The Market. But who can challenge this idolatry?

Outside Parliament, at present the only powerful public institutions beyond the close control of government and big business which can question and counteract Thatcherite-type ideology are the trade unions and the churches, and this is not one of the great times in trade union history. Is it surprising, then, that some Thatcherites feel it is high time discordant voices on social questions coming from the churches were also shut up or else ridiculed into silence? Especially as religion is supposed to favour the forces of the right? Rosemary Radford Ruether, in the last of her articles "Church and Family", appearing in this issue, shows how the New Right in the U.S. is presenting itself as protector of "truly Christian" values and "the Christian family". Documents like Pope Paul VI's encyclical of 1967 on human development, *Populorum Progressio*, and books like Bishop David Sheppard's widely-reviewed *Bias to the Poor* of 1983 are an embarrassment.

The specifically theological attack that *The Kindness that Kills* slings at the current social doctrines of the churches is, frankly, just boring. One author accuses the creators of the offending teaching of being Manichean (he says they are indifferent to the process of wealth-creation.) Another accuses them of being Pelagian (because they have faith in man's ability to make the world a better place—as,

surprisingly, St Thomas Aquinas had!). The book tries to reconcile Christianity and the cult of The Market by playing down the novelty and perennial relevance of Jesus's teaching (an old tactic) and by trying to prove that God is not "for the poor" after all (and that's been done before too).

No, the real attack is the onslaught by the economist Lord Bauer against the papal teaching on the future of the third world, and here what we might as well call the "theology" of the cult of The Market is easiest to discern in all its foulness. Bauer's chapter is one of the most disgraceful things of its kind I have ever read—not because the teaching attacked is papal, but because the attack grossly misrepresents both the documents shot at and some basic truths about the third world. It could be ripped to pieces for committing precisely the same sort of faults as the book repeatedly criticises. As every reader of *New Blackfriars* must know, now 6 per cent of the world's population is consuming almost 40 per cent of basic commodities, and the disparity in per capita income between the countries situated at either end of the development ladder is 1 to 200. A person who seriously believes that, if "free market forces" are allowed to operate, then personal initiative and drive (and the lack of it) will justly sort out who in the world should be rich and who poor, is less in touch with the grim facts of life than the most wild-eyed clergyman. At this moment the "invisible hand of The Market" is at last stimulating the development of the Amazon basin (by foreign capital, of course). Unfortunately 200 tribes are there, but the authorities are happily solving this problem. They have been dropping meat injected with small-pox among them. That's "the working of The Market" for you, as it really is in a third-world context, as distinct from what it is in the mind of a right-wing theoretician.

The psalmist wrote:

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. ... They have eyes but they cannot see, they have ears but they cannot hear. ... Their makers will come to be like them and so will all who trust in them.

Idolaters become like their idols; they become blind. Eventually they cannot see the suffering they are causing.

Yet even in this "evil" book, in the middle of the hum of worship rising from the devotees of the great new god, The Market, there are one or two surprisingly different voices. For it is curious to see, rubbing shoulders with denizens of the wilder shores of capitalism or their henchmen, a man of genuine Tory instincts like David Martin, who pleads for the Church of England to remember its role of being "the nation at prayer". It is curious, because it is precisely the policies of these monetarists which are going to destroy altogether whatever may be left of that vision of the nation so important to Martin. And at the grass-roots level the real division among Christians is between those who think of Christianity primarily as an ointment to rub on from time to time to help one run and win life's race, and those for

whom Christianity first and foremost means a people, a community. Why do the attempts in this book to reconcile the gospel with the idolatry of The Market all fail so dismally? Because the command at the heart of the gospel is a command to give of oneself “to the least of my brethren”: in other words, to build up community.

However, even writers here like Martin are looking backwards, while the Life that fires the Christian community is driving it always forward, into the unknown. The Old Testament prophets were ruthless about idols because idols turned the people’s minds back to the past, while the God of Israel was calling them on to the future. At all costs the churches must not fall in line with the demands of the devotees of The Market, for whom the Promised Land is always some version of the Egypt they left behind. When, today, the churches try to say publicly how the gospel teaching can be seen to apply in current social and political situations, undoubtedly quite often their concrete suggestions are fairly banal and occasionally only deserve to be laughed at. But by trying to speak on these issues they are in fact engaging in a preaching activity with a much more important message than the actual detailed recommendations: they are reminding human beings that God is drawing them to a future which must not be lessened by being sized up according to today’s or yesterday’s criteria. In other words, they are reminding human beings that they are sons and daughters of God, and so not slaves of any idols, not even The Market.

J.O.M.

Sir Basil Blackwell, R.I.P.

Head of one of the leading companies in the world book trade and described as “the world’s greatest bookseller”, Sir Basil Blackwell, who died on 9 April at the age of 94, was one of the best friends of “Blackfriars” in its early years. He published and managed it from 1922 to 1934, and gave it his strong support when, in 1925, it went through a crisis that nearly killed it. We remember him with affection and gratitude.

EDITOR