

Comment

The complex and unpredictable

We are living in a more chaotic world than we like to think.

Chaos is something to be frightened of: nearly everybody in the ancient world agreed on that. 'Chaos' for them usually meant the formless void spoken of in Genesis 1:2, and surviving fragments of it (the sea, for instance) they saw as a permanent threat. For us 'chaos' is terrifying only occasionally: when getting crushed in the Hillsborough football stadium, for example. For most of our lives it means no more than long waits in crammed airports and jams on the motorway.

The British have for long rather prided themselves on managing to muddle through. Why, in this column, should we be writing about chaos now, particularly?

Partly because of the kind of upheaval the British are going through—that reluctant change of lovers, the swing away from the oceans and towards the rest of Europe, which alone would make this an age of massive change for them ... even though, if the number expected to vote in the European Parliamentary Elections on 15 June is anything to go by, not many yet realise just how massive the change is.

Exactly four years from that date, and one year after the Single European Act, the Channel Tunnel will open, and on 26 May *The Independent* of London, conjointly with *Le Monde* of Paris and *Le Soir* and *De Standaard* of Brussels, published a special report on what the Tunnel is likely to do to Northern Europe's culture and economy. The one thing that seems certain is that it is going to do a lot more than we expected. Nothing else is clear. For example, in spite of multi-billion pound road schemes there is a danger that, partly because of the Tunnel, England's prosperous South-East will come to be serviced from the other side of the Channel and the gap between the South-East and the rest of Britain will grow bigger than ever. But there are equally convincing—or unconvincing—opposite arguments.

Our point here is that huge projects are having to be launched at this time with little idea of where they will take us, of who will get something out of them. Behind the screen of a torrent of official words there is something closely resembling chaos.

Yet—and here is the second reason for writing about chaos—this is not entirely the fault of Mrs Thatcher's government. We are discovering that the world is at nearly all levels a more complex place than we thought, a more unpredictable one.

Chaos, James Gleick's amazingly successful book for the general reader, is now out in Britain in paperback (Cardinal, £5.99). Gleick traces through the last three decades the development of chaos theory, a new discipline which has led some scientists, mathematicians and

economists to see the world of their specialisms in a different way. For them the word 'chaos' has not got a negative ring to it. Chaos theory is 'the study of complexity' (p. 230), the study of the objects of the everyday world *as wholes*.

Disorder—nature's and society's irregular, discontinuous side—has always been a puzzle for classical science and economics, and the children of Euclid and Newton have tended to underplay or ignore what has been seen as 'random' in the world. Often mistakenly, it seems. In fact seemingly minor, fleeting movements in, for example, the atmosphere and the markets can have big consequences in the weather and the economy; 'tiny differences in input' can 'become overwhelming differences in output' (p. 8). With patience order *can* (at least sometimes) be found hidden under complexity, pattern amid formlessness, but chaos theory 'eliminates the Laplacian fantasy of deterministic predictability' (p. 6).

Chaos theory is now being used in many different areas of day-to-day life—helping to solve traffic hold-ups, asking the prescribers of pills for mental disorders awkward questions—but many of its wider, deeper implications have still to be drawn.

What, though, has all this to do with Christianity? A lot, clearly, for what is being talked about is God's world. Also, though, something is being said to us specifically.

Today Christians in general, but Catholics in particular, by and large live with an astonishingly simple picture of the world, one that we hope permits black-and-white ways of interpreting things, confident generalisations. This is true of both 'conservatives' and 'progressives', true of the Pope and true of me. Although most of us are aware that human nature can be complex, we are, nearly all of us, uneasy with complex pictures of the world and we fear the chaotic. (If you do not believe me just spend a couple of hours reading round widely in recent church publications—not only Vatican documents but also the popular stuff, the liberal stuff.)

But complex, chaotic, in many ways unpredictable, is how much of creation is, and we cannot impose our frequently unnatural, over-simple, excessively rational patterns on it as easily as we thought.

J.O.M.

The Editor on Achille Formis's poem *Sex and Politics* (May issue, p. 234)

We have received a lot of correspondence as a result of publishing this poem, in which a respected Italian poet attacks Thatcherism by drawing on clichés used in the Tory tabloids to ask what soul it is that can thus dismember the body politic. We have been experimenting to see if this journal can successfully carry serious poetry today, and would welcome more readers' opinions.

J.O.M.