

# Resacralising Reaction

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I find it hard to comment on Flanagan's contribution. He is exemplifying an attitude rather more than he is conducting an argument, and I do not have a clear-cut alternative to so confidently display.

Some portions of Archer's book and the structure of feeling which informs it are, perhaps, highlighted by Flanagan's endorsement of it, but the latter seems to write as if there was a single obvious case or as if Archer would endorse his own position. I simply cannot see this. There is something powerful and disturbing that Archer has touched upon which has this quality precisely because it does not issue from a somewhat *intégriste* version of the short-comings or failures of Conciliar reforms.

Flanagan certainly writes with panache but the telling and amusing swipes at some contemporary liturgies have to be disentangled from the rather less amusing idea of 'the present failure of the Church to keep the working classes in practice.' It is a matter of common experience that there are, at least for some people, severe problems of a sense of loss of transcendence and sacrality in much contemporary liturgy. The problems here are part of the question of the distinctiveness of Catholicism in the latter part of the century, and more particularly in Britain. It is, however, hard to come at these issues when a core part of the article rests upon appeals to 'the sociological', taken as crucial and probably rather a good thing, as against 'the cultural', which is variable and generally dangerous, if not just bad. If, however, 'the sociological' embraces what people do and value, then those many thousands of Catholics who do value the new liturgical reforms have to be taken into account as well. For my own part, I rarely find liturgical events in which guitars might feature arousing anything but a sinking feeling of dutiful attendance. Twenty years of comprehensive school and chaplaincy-watching, however, show that large numbers of people undeniably find such liturgy vital, transforming, opening onto the transcendent. And allowance needs to be made for whether the new forms have helped to keep *them* in practice. If it goes on long enough, perhaps 'the cultural' (in the pejorative sense) becomes 'the sociological'? Of the small number of sociologists actually interested in religion, several of those with the most articulate religious positions happen to be conservative, and 'sociology' may sound more respectable than 'cultural analysis' (with its possible echoes of dreaded counter-culture or contemporary culture), but pitting one against the other is a side issue. The core questions concern deep, long-term patterns of religious identity

and the conditions, avoidable and unavoidable, under which they change for what are taken as good or ill.

The sense of a 'world we have lost' involved in the present argument is as likely to concern an invented as much as a remembered past. More particularly, there is the danger of identifying particular valued experiences and senses of order as *the* experience of the sacred, as if there was a uniquely privileged mode of access to it which the arrangements of thirty years ago simply had and the present ones simply have not. I do not see that this is the case. Aesthetically, all manner of things can be done well or badly. Agreed, there can be a particular ghastliness in liturgies of the 'sing along' style, but there could also be painful experiences of out-of-tune banal nineteenth-century hymns. Perhaps sentimentality becomes dignified over time?

More substantially, I cannot take as simple alternatives in liturgy what Flanagan calls making the sacred available ('old') and generating the sacred on a communal basis ('new'). Surely what Archer skilfully evokes and deplores the loss of is a particular *balance* of the two. To pose them as alternatives risks losing a distinctive and awkward Catholic problem: that of relating what could be called *pietas* and prophecy, the former frequently more inclusive, the latter more exclusive. *Pietas* seems to me to involve at least three things. First, finding one's connexions in a diverse, occasionally broken, corrupt and violent two thousand-year tradition or set of traditions. Second, representing and living these continuities as best one can. Third, trying to maintain understanding of the barely imaginable unity of major tensions within the tradition, when, say, the universality of the Church can do so little to soften murderous nationalism or can so often be invoked to reinforce injustice.

There seems to me (in Flanagan's plea for re-sacralizing) a distinct danger of collapsing this tension and of again excluding the prophetic. We are still struggling out of a long period when that dimension of the sacred which makes almost any human distinction and desire precarious, the equal unworthiness of all in the face of ultimate mystery, was abused to justify acceptance of palpable, time-hallowed, cruelties and injustices. If we are really to find new or re-find old means of access to mystery, they will be quite clear of such mystification.

Flanagan heavily accentuates Archer's claim that 'the half-understood mutterings and gestures and silences' (138) of the Tridentine liturgy, in their very distance from the everyday, allowed of a space in which 'there was evidently something more to life ... a fixed centre to which people could relate their changing worlds' (139).

I wonder a bit about those silences—there was a lot of individual counter-mutterings of Hail Marys and business with clicking beads. And the novel experience of what seemed very long collective silence in some of the new liturgies was for many met with great apprehension before it came

to be valued. Present discontents lie, perhaps, somewhere between those half-recollected Tridentine silences and what E.M. Forster once called 'poor talkative Christianity'.

If one takes the wider world of devotions and practices evoked by the book and the article, those novenas, scapulars, guilds—then as much as opening access to the fixed and timeless, they have been of as dizzying a variety and (dread word!) fashion as some of the more exotic saints in the older calendars. Some of the things we have lost are like St Philomena and pose similar problems—how can prayers be answered through the intercession of a relatively recently invented non-existent saint? The world of the treasury of grace which would have dealt with such misdirected credits, is, like other Roman banks, looking a bit dodgy. This does and does not matter. It does not because the treasury was only one way of trying to grasp issues of prayer and their answers. It does or may matter, and I think our two authors hit a nerve here, because it is not yet clear how appeal to the infinite love of God, which the treasury idea in its odd way mediated, can be assimilated in an, as it were, unmediated form. The point is not an easy one to get right. Perhaps it will be clearer if put more generally. One aspect of whatever it is that we call modernity involves an implicit drive towards the goal of everyone being self-aware, even critically conscious, all of the time. Such a goal is obviously at odds with many senses of what a tradition is. In Ricoeur's phrase, we can no longer have a primary *naïveté* about, say, myth, and it is an open question whether we can attain a 'secondary' *naïveté* through interpretation. There is a general crisis of religious consciousness here from which great areas of Catholicism were temporarily and artificially isolated in the first half of the century by, for instance, 'political Thomism' (Poulat, cit. Archer, p. 12).

Changing worlds had made the wider Tridentine system unviable in many parts of the globe (and for different reasons, as between, say, North and South America). There was an inevitable fragmenting of that kind of defensive system, most graphically marked in the upheavals of priestly and religious life in the 1960s and the 1970s—sometimes liberating, sometimes tragic, sometimes merely flat. Much of the needlessly painful side of Conciliar changes arose from their implementation within the old clerical framework of *romanitas*: passing on what comes from the centre not because you are committed to it or even understand it but solely because it comes from the centre. However, in focussing on the banalities and disappointments of the Conciliar period, both our authors, I think, seriously underestimate the degree to which familiar British Catholic positions were either lost or incapable of sustainment long before the worst excesses of Vatican II were unleashed upon an unsuspecting country!

Changing worlds were also disrupting and transforming the economic basis and social cohesiveness of the localities from which Archer draws his material, and I am not sure that the particular distinctiveness of Catholicism

within those localities could or even should have survived as it was. At points Archer clearly marks this sort of issue but leaves it very undeveloped (and thus perhaps gives Flanagan his opening). The book oddly lacks any detailed sense of the complexity of social classes over time which would make a better sociological picture, though possibly less dramatic polemic. In particular, there are almost passing references to 'the relinquishment of an Irish identity' (236). The issues of cultural identity and connexion with Ireland for individuals, families and parishes over several generations cry out for further study, but 'relinquishment' almost suggests lack of energy or personal accident.<sup>1</sup> On this Irish dimension I think there is far more room for doubt about how much of the old and powerful feelings of distinctiveness could have survived. Similarly, I find the apparent ease with which Catholics became accustomed to leave their politics at the church door understates an important issue in the interests of a lost neighbourly consensus. The Church clearly was involved in politics. The popular press over the decades provides one obvious index of this, and Archer I think underestimates the strength of hostility, especially clerical hostility, to Catholic socialists<sup>2</sup>, and how many of these came to feel they had no place at all in the Church. At points with both writers, the 'middle class' has such a monopoly of articulateness and public interaction it would be hard to believe that 'the working class' could have produced trade unions or political parties or that Catholics could have played a part in them.

My point is that so much of the Catholic distinctiveness evoked was reactive and protective, rightly and necessarily so for long periods of time. Almost inextricably mixed up in that was the sense of being an off-shore piece of a would-be triumphalist Church on the retreat. There was a narrowness and nastiness, a 'tribalism' of the pejorative kind that should also be remembered—to be anecdotal, the anti-semitism and the private schools of the nuns (banned to children of tradespeople) and the persecution of the working-class unmarried mother.

It is against this background that I am wary of Flanagan's 'resacralization'. One need not be opposed to opportunities for variety, privacy, dignity and so on, to be cautious of the conscious attempt to restore unconscious loyalties. There is a paradox in making a programme of a tradition, which can slip from traditionalism, through conservation, to attempts at authoritarian imposition of the old spontaneous ways that were good for us.

1 This seems as good a place as any to put the record right, and point out that on p. 199, where Archer quotes the 1967 article by A. & A. Cunningham, 'More Questions for the Catholic Left', which appeared in *Slant* 12, awkward phrasing (at least) seems to attribute to them views on the Church as vanguard of a revolutionary movement about which they were, in fact, being very sceptical.

2 See, for instance, Kenneth Durkin & Mary Mulligan, *The Second Spring: 50 Years of Catholic Revival in Colne 1871—1921*, Victoria Press, Bentham, Lancaster, 1986 pp. 114—127, on Fr John Aspinall and the downfall of the Labour Council in Colne in 1921.