

Auto-Catholicism in Britain

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It hasn't needed an economic crisis to make shareholders and taxpayers in Britain realise that the motor car industry is tottering on the brink of virtual financial collapse and ruin. Poor management, lack of efficiency, overmanning, a deficiency in new ideas and inability to respond to competition, are just some of the reasons for this failure. Excuses are even more abundant. The well worn oil crisis theme is dragged in at every available opportunity (even though it occurred several months ago and does not appear to have affected the sale of foreign vehicles). Allegations are made of overseas competitors 'dumping' their products on to the British market (this frequent ploy is used where responsibility is not taken for self-inflicted inflation with its accompanying non-competitive and higher prices). Industrial disputes are blamed, Communists are seen under every factory bench, even inflation itself is used as a scapegoat. But in offering these, and a host of other excuses, including all but the weather, what none of those connected with the motor car industry is prepared to admit is that they are collectively and directly responsible for the state of affairs in which they currently find themselves.

It was the first Vatican Council which suggested that a suitable method for a deeper appreciation and understanding of an article of faith was to employ analogy. In making such a suggestion, the Fathers made it quite clear that it was a mistaken view to claim that because a doctrine was a mystery there could be no further theological reasoning employed for a furtherance of understanding (as if to say 'a mystery is a mystery is a mystery'). Following their example, I would like to suggest that a current appraisal of the Catholic Church in Britain can be aided by use of another British institution, that of the British motor car industry. The comparison of the two institutions will stress similarities, rather than differences, although of course the latter do exist.

In the first place there is a similarity of structure. Although both institutions in their present form (the Church in 1851 with the restoration of the hierarchy and British car firms somewhat later), occurred after the Industrial Revolution, in many ways their hierarchical structures appear to antedate it. The top echelons of management are based on ascription, rather than on achievement, on nomination rather than election.

Representation of the lower paid workers, or laity, should be present in theory, but in practice little consultation or participation in decision making takes place. Committees and commissions have been set up to

deal with specific areas of policy, but in fact many of their findings can and have been overruled by the executive body. Thus both institutions tend to become identified with their leadership. Consequently, it is an easy temptation to blame the failures of the respective institutions on the two leaderships, and one to which it is even easier to succumb when there are grounds for suspecting the competence of the top executives. It should be noted in passing that very rarely is success attributed to such a style of leadership. Also interesting to note is the relative difficulty in firing leaders; even the traditional grounds of incompetence and immorality appear to have no say in the matter. The only solution is resignation (i.e. apart from death), and even that is not likely where an individual, power drunk perhaps, is not inclined to yield up his bureaucratic authority. It is important too that the leadership of both institutions maintains a good image. Leaving aside certain past traumatic experiences, today this is often preserved by keeping leaders out of the limelight, where an ill-prepared television appearance might expose their deficiencies to the public gaze. Similarly precautions are taken that no independent investigations are carried out into the quality of leadership, which might endanger reasonably safe positions. The Press, of course, can be more easily controlled than the instant TV interview; hence the importance both leaders attach to having good PR men around them.

Such relatively hierarchical and inelastic structures make it difficult for either institution to adapt to change, even when not to do so would strike the outsider as a form of suicide. The challenge of new ideas from Daf and Schillerbeeckx, from Volkswagen and Kung, from Renault and Congar, is seen as a threat to existence. Instead of modifying a vehicle or providing a useful theological antithesis, the British motor industry becomes more British and the Catholic Church Limited becomes more limited. MPs are asked to outlaw foreign vehicles, import tariffs are requested, just as Continental theologians are treated with suspicion and any of their ideas is given the Corpus Christi treatment. The in-group becomes even more introverted, out-groups become hated and banned, to the extent of producing a Northern Ireland type of ghetto mentality.

It is this inner-centred ghetto-like existence which calls for further comment as it permeates the lives of both institutions. The training programmes of the British motor industry can be set alongside the socialisation of the British Catholic and a marked degree of similarity detected. In the case of the former, from the apprentice to the skilled worker, all are trained in conveyer belt output, performing the same monotonous tasks day after day, only alleviated by the welcome stoppage or strike. Pay is based on time done (as it is in any prison), rather than the production of a piece of work accomplished. Men work as individuals on separate tasks rather than in teams (as with Volvo, for instance). People continue to be employed on boring and unsatisfying jobs even when sales drop as much as 30% in two years, and the sales department, responsible for such a fall in orders, continue to use the same weak and unimaginative methods. The only reason why the

employees continue to suffer in this fashion is, of course, money. With the knowledge that with support from the taxpayer this will not run out, and with the added knowledge that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to find alternative comparable employment elsewhere, the tendency is for British car workers to remain as they are, changeless, secure and inner-directed. The Catholic Church in Britain is not unlike its mechanical counterpart. No independent survey or investigation is encouraged to establish pastoral needs, with the result that the same old routines continue to be used. Catholic children are drafted into their nearest ghetto school, where, in addition to learning the differences between themselves and other human beings, they may acquire the skills of Catholic algebra, Catholic geography, Catholic football, etc. Indeed many issues of Catholic newspapers record goals scored by Catholic feet or bring tidings of a Catholic mountaineer scaling a mountain of the same faith. The conveyor belt of the catechetical method leads the Catholic drones to their instant cultural package of church-presbytery-school. Even when the rock-like image fails to be sold by clerics in the sales department (cf. the drop in the number of converts in this supposedly missionary church), no radical hiring or firing is carried out to rejuvenate this antique department of ecclesiastical geriatrics.

Similarly, just as British Leyland, Chrysler, Rolls Royce, et al., only survive by massive injections of State aid, without which they would have certainly collapsed as a result of inefficiency and incompetence, so too the Catholic Church keeps its head above water with the subscriptions it receives from its compulsory Sunday Mass attenders. Such a situation can be termed 'virtual collapse', and it is one that is evident from a close inspection of the books. If one looks back over the returns from 1943 until 1973 in the Catholic Directory, then it can be seen that the Catholic Church in England and Wales is going into a Spencerian decline and is subject to a law of diminishing returns. While the number of Catholics has risen by 70% in that period (clearly not as much as one would expect given the higher than average birth rate for Catholics), the percentages of those receiving Holy Communion and being married in the Church are of a much lower order. In fact a quick calculation shows that of every three Catholics baptised, only two marry in their own church. Further calculations reveal a considerable decline in the number of converts and vocations. Perhaps then it is time for shareholders to sell before the Church in Britain becomes suspended on the Vatican Stock Exchange.

Or is it too late? Should we be as pessimistic as all that? Clearly all cannot be swept under the ecclesiastical carpet as before. So what should be done? I suggest that we take up this parallel between the Church and the British motor industry, and ask ourselves about the management, the top executives, the foremen, the sales department, the skilled and semi-skilled workers, that we investigate the allegations of corruption and inefficiency, that we take another look and try to distinguish genuine reasons from excuses, and that we don't blame all on Vatican II (the Church's oil crisis!), but instead try and succeed as many of our foreign (though still Catholic) competitors are doing.