

Impious Europe

by Roger Scruton

An enormous spiritual tension has begun to manifest itself in Europe. The presence here of large numbers of Muslim immigrants has brought home to ordinary citizens truths that have long been officially hidden: Religion is natural to human beings, and is also a means by which they define their social membership. Under the old Christian dispensation, membership and citizenship coincided; that was the purpose of national churches. Under the new dispensation, the two are growing apart, and the native population is beginning to sense its lack of spiritual identity in the face of religious communities that appear to defy its way of life. We have witnessed the political effect of this in France, Holland, and Germany. But the spiritual cause remains unexplored and, to a large measure, unrecognized.

I was brought up in the England of the 1950s, when it was generally assumed that, with the exception of the Jewish minority, you were either non-conformist or Church of England. On official documents that required you to state your religion, you wrote “C of E” regardless. And you could be confident that God was an Englishman, who had a quiet, dignified, low-key way of visiting the country each weekend while being careful never to outstay his welcome. In today’s England, God is a foreigner, an illegal immigrant with aggressive manners and a way of intruding into every gathering, even in the middle of the workweek. In the presence of this new God, the voice of the English churches becomes ever weaker, ever more shy of doctrine, ever more conciliatory and ill at ease. The idea that the British should be re-evangelized would be dismissed by most of the official clergy as an act of aggression, or even a racist affront to our nonbelieving minorities. After all, the church is not there to propagate the Christian faith but to forgive those who reject it.

It is, of course, one of the great strengths of Christianity that it makes forgiveness into a duty and freedom of conscience into a religious ideal. But Christians recognize the duty of forgiveness because they too seek forgiveness. Those brought up in our postreligious society do not seek forgiveness, because they are by and large free of the belief that they need it. This does not mean that they are happy; indeed, the high rates of juvenile crime, promiscuity, and drug dependence suggest the opposite. It does mean that they put pleasure before commitment and can neglect their duties without being crippled by guilt. And since religion is the balm for guilt, those brought up without religion seem, on the surface, to lose the need for it.

But only on the surface. You don’t have to be a believer to be conscious of a great religious deficit in our society. We saw its effect during the strange canonization of Princess Diana, when vast crowds of people congregated in places vaguely associated with the princess’s name, to deposit wreaths, messages, and teddy bears. The very same people whose pitiless prurience had caused Diana’s death



More than five years after the death of Princess Diana, mourners are still powerfully drawn to an informal, flower-strewn shrine near the site of her fatal Paris car crash.

sought absolution from her ghost. She became a sacrificial offering, and therefore a saintly intercessor before the mysteries that govern the world. Forget the gruesome kitsch and liturgical vagueness—inevitable results, in any case, of the decline of organized religion. We were in the presence of a primordial yearning for the sacred, reaching back to the earliest dream-pictures of humankind and recorded in a thousand myths and rituals.

There is a yearning too for spiritual forces that we do not control. This yearning has given birth to J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels and to the trilogy of Philip Pullman. Ostensibly, this is literature for children; in fact, it has gripped the adult imagination all over the world. The Harry Potter books are particularly significant. They deal in miracles and magic; they concern the primeval contest between good and evil; their hero is a kind of spotless saint, saved from the degradations of the modern world by his youth and sexual innocence. And they are set in an English private school, in the heart of the English countryside, where the Anglican presence still lingers among gothic arches. They have all the elements of religion save God, and are a kind of lament for the death of God, phrased in the language of people who have never quite believed in him.

You can witness religious yearning elsewhere as well—in the stunts, for example, that are now practiced in the name of art. Each year at Easter, on the Philippine island of San Fernando, 10 volunteers spend half an hour nailed by their hands to a cross; this year, the London artist Sebastian Horsley was one

of them. “An artist,” he reported, “has to go to every extreme, to stretch his sensibility through excess and suffering in order to feel and to communicate more.” The act of his fellow martyrs was one of penitence, and if they sought to draw attention to suffering, it was not to their suffering but to Christ’s. Mr. Horsley, by contrast, has no religious belief and was suffering for art’s sake—which is to say for his own sake. This was to be the first stage in his rebirth as an artist and a man. And his suffering was to be put on display and sold as a work of art. People were fascinated, and flocked to witness the video of Horsley’s martyrdom with all the eagerness of the crowds that followed Jesus to Calvary.

The Italian-born artist Franko B entertained visitors to a recent performance-art festival in England by displaying his naked body decorated with a large, self-inflicted stomach wound. Franko’s art consists in ostentatious mutilations, bleedings, and slashings offered to his eager audiences as a kind of cathartic encounter. Those who queued to study Franko’s wounds were made conscious of their own vulnerability and filled with compassion—not for Franko, but for themselves. Franko is currently planning his next work, *Oh Lover Boy*, which he describes as “a bleeding piece, something between a life-class setup and a post-mortem setup in a hospital.”

Horsley and Franko offer the spectacle of suffering as the remedy for a spiritual void. Many religions, including Christianity and Shiism, focus on a re-enacted martyrdom, in a collective ritual that purges believers of their sins. This phenomenon is so widespread that the critic and anthropologist René Girard sees it as the fundamental secret of religion. In Girard’s view, the suffering of a vic-

tim is necessary if the accumulated violence of society is to be released and abjured. That’s why we’re moved by the story of Christ’s passion. We nailed this man to the cross, and the compassion that we feel for him is also a purging of our guilt, which arises from our experience of society. The guilt is the residue of

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the aggressions through which we compete for our thrills. In our postreligious society, these aggressions are no longer sublimated through acts of humility and worship. Hence the sadistic forms of entertainment that dominate the media in Europe. But if we accept Girard’s view, and there is surely a lot to be said for it, we must accept also that the irreligious young are just as subject as the rest of us to the burden of religious guilt.

And indeed, as soon as we look at religion in that detached, anthropological way, we begin to discern its subterranean presence in European society. Although doctrine has no place in our public life, a fear of heresy is beginning to grip the countries of Europe—not heresy as defined by the Christian churches, but heresy as defined by a form of post-Christian political correctness. A remarkable system of semiofficial labels has emerged with which to prevent the expres-

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sion of dangerous points of view. A point of view is identified as dangerous if it belongs to the old Judaeo-Christian culture and thereby reminds us of what we were when we actually believed something. Those who confess to their Christianity are “Christian fundamentalists,” or even part of the “Christian fundamentalist Right,” and therefore a recognized threat to free opinion. Those who express concern over national identity are “far-right extremists”—a label attached to Holland’s Pim Fortuyn purely because his political campaign, which ended in his assassination, focused on the real problems caused by the mass immigration of Muslims. As a former Marxist sociologist and gay activist, Fortuyn would have been considered—in any other context—to be a man of impeccable left-wing credentials. Defenders of the family are “right-wing authoritarians,” while a teacher who advocates chastity rather than free contraception as the best response to teenage pregnancy is not just “out of touch” but “offensive” to his or her pupils. To criticize popular culture, television, or contemporary rock music or to press for the teaching of grammatical English in English schools is *prima facie* evidence of “elitism,” whereby a person forfeits the right to speak. It is as though our society is seeking to define itself as a religious community whose very lack of faith has become a kind of orthodoxy.

Heretics are no longer burned at the stake. But they are marginalized by cultural and educational institutions. *The Guardian*—which, as the mouthpiece of *bien-pensant* opinion in Britain, tirelessly hunts down the criminals who threaten the body politic with their elitist poison—recently carried an article complaining of the lack of any real philosophers in our culture. It praised Plato, who had placed philosophy at the center of Athenian life and shown its relevance to the conduct of politics. It then mentioned my own (admittedly far more meager) efforts to make philosophy a part of public debate, and said merely that my views on hunting, homosexuality, and popular culture are a discredit to the discipline. The article failed to mention that Plato had written on those same three topics in *The Republic*, *The Laws*, and elsewhere, and defended exactly the views that I defend. In effect, the writer was demonstrating just why philosophy has no place in our culture: It risks arriving at the wrong conclusion, the conclusion that current orthodoxies are not divine revelations but human mistakes. In other words, the *Guardian* writer, caring nothing for arguments but acutely aware of the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable doctrine, was expressing not a philosophical but a religious attitude.

Even if we mourn the post-Enlightenment loss of faith, it is sometimes said that we should welcome the fact that rational argument rather than blind superstition now governs the movement of public opinion. The problem is that rationality does not govern public opinion. The social and political movements that are currently most influential in Europe—the ecological movement, the movement for “animal rights,” the movement toward political union—are, in their activist components, almost entirely closed to rational argument. Try persuading ecologists who trample down genetically modified crops that there is as yet no clear scientific evidence that the crops are dangerous, and you will find yourself immediately stigmatized as the enemy. Try arguing that hunting and shooting are socially necessary and, when properly conducted, beneficial to the quarry species;

you will be demonized by the animal rights movement, and maybe even targeted by their bombers. Question the project of European union and make the arguments for national sovereignty; you will be dismissed as an “extremist,” a “little Englander,” a “Europhobe.” Behind the façade of reasonableness in each of these movements lurks a fortified orthodoxy, ready, if challenged, to punish dissent.

There is nothing new in this. Jacobinism and communism both began life as antireligious movements, and both bear the marks of the Enlightenment. But they recruited people precisely as religions recruit them—by offering inviolable orthodoxies, mysterious rituals, witch-hunts, and persecutions. And that’s why they were successful. Living as we do in an age without certainties, we like to believe that we can finally dispense with the religious instinct and coexist in open dialogue with people who dissent from the premises on which we build our lives. But we too need orthodoxies, we too hunger for rituals, and we too are apt to confront the critic and the dissenter with persecution rather than argument.

We even have gods of a kind, flitting below the surface of our passions. You can glimpse Gaia, the earth goddess, in some of the deranged rhetoric of environmentalists; fox and deer are totemic spirits for the defenders of animal rights, whose religion was shaped by the kitsch of Walt Disney; the human genome has a mystical standing in the eyes of many medical scientists. We have cults (football), sacrificial offerings (Princess Diana), miracles (Harry Potter), and improvised saints (Linda McCartney).

But we have abandoned those aspects of religion that provide genuine guidance in a time of spiritual need. The instinctive awe and respect toward our own being that the Romans called *pietas* has more or less vanished from the public life of Europe. This is nowhere more evident than in the officially Roman Catholic countries of France and Italy. Now that the church has ceased to be a public voice in those countries, secular ways of thinking are colonizing the culture. Discussions of embryo research, cloning, abortion, and euthanasia—subjects that go to the heart of the religious conception of our destiny—proceed in once-Catholic Europe as though nothing were at stake beyond the expansion of human choices. Little now remains of the old Christian idea that life, its genesis, and its terminus are sacred things, to be meddled with at our peril. The piety and humility that it was once natural to feel before the fact of creation have given way to a pleasure-seeking disregard for absent generations. The people of Europe are living as though the dead and the unborn had no say in their decisions. The Romans warned against impiety not only because it would bring down judgment from heaven but because it was a repudiation of a fundamental human duty, the duty to ancestors and to progeny.

And that impiety, surely, is at the root of European spiritual anxieties. The Muslims in our midst do not share our attitude toward our absent generations. They come to us from the demographic infernos of North Africa and Pakistan like Aeneas from the burning ruins of Troy, an old man on his shoulders, a child at his feet, and his hands full of strange gods. They are manifestly in the business of social as well as biological reproduction. And they reveal what we *really* stand to lose if we hold nothing sacred: the future. □