Invisible Religion, Popular Culture and Anti-nuclear Sentiment

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'It's unchristian', cried Mrs Varden shaking her head. 'Unchristian!' said the locksmith...'What on earth do you call it unchristian for? Which would be most unchristian, Martha – to sit quietly down and let our homes be sacked by a foreign army, or to turn out like men and drive 'em off? Shouldn't I be a nice sort of Christian, if I crept into a corner of my own chimney and looked on while a parcel of whiskered savages bore off Dolly – or you?'

Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*[1]

Underground. They want us to go underground.
You got the right to say what you think
You gotta fight 'cos they're leading us to the brink.

There's gonna be a fireball
Never a time like this before

Go down the line
You got the right to stay alive
You gotta fight to survive.

Wishbone Ash, 'Underground'[2]

Someone's gonna work for the CIA
the KGB and the man in red.
I wonder if we're gonna see another day
Somewhere near the future.

We got everything we want for a peaceful time,
Take what you want but you can't take mine,
Everybody's living on the Siegfried line
Worried 'bout the future.
It's so confused
Easy to believe someone's gonna light the fuse.

Rainbow, 'Can't Happen Here'[3]

Two hundred Christians gathered last Sunday for an ecumenical service in unlikely conditions at the 'Green Gate' of the Greenham Common air base – scene of current anti-nuclear demonstrations by women peace activists...There was a strong feeling of Christian support for the demonstration – and for the 'peaceful blockade' of the base on Monday. Several Anglicans and Methodists from Wales who had never participated in any demonstrations before were representative of the many 'non-political' Christians who have felt drawn to the women's peace camp at Greenham...In her sermon, Valerie Flessati observed that Advent recalled the time when Mary waited silently for birth. But, she added, women today could not wait silently for the destruction of life on earth – 'as women were called out of their traditional roles to be first witness of the resurrection, so women are called today to witness to peace and to the non-violent love that makes for peace.'

News item, *Church Times*, 17 December 1982

The world is in a mess
And finished more or less
It doesn't really matter
And maybe it's too late to change it
It's never too late to change it.

Now this old sea-dog's gonna get away across the water
This old sea-dog is a-waving you bye-bye
But I don't think God thought we'd get out of order,
This old sea-dog is a-waving you bye-bye.

Status Quo, 'Never Too Late'[4]

While I wouldn't go so far as to term the film a strict allegory, *E.T.* has – as no doubt others have divined – an allegorical resonance. A superior being descends to Earth from his extra-terrestrial sphere. The toolshed in which he is found will do at a pinch as a modern suburban counterpart to the manger. The only maternal presence in the film is named Mary. E.T. performs miracles....His message is one of love. He attracts disciples among the children, who in a biology class free the frogs they are expected to chloroform and dissect. E.T. is hounded by relentless pursuers, dies, is reborn, and returns at the end, if not to heaven, at least to outer space. Before departing, he makes a sign of benediction. 'I'll always be right here,' he says, his luminous fingertip glowing over Elliot's heart.'

S. Schoenbaum, 'Botanist in the Manger', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 January 1983.

This may seem an ill-assorted set of texts with which to preface an essay on contemporary Christianity and opposition to nuclear arms. There is, however, a rationale to the selection: certain crucial themes connect these quotations within a continuous tradition in English culture. This article will not be an analysis of the careful theological, philosophical, moral and political arguments which Christians and non-Christians deploy in a deliberate and articulate debate on the problem of nuclear arms. My concern is rather with the inchoate constellations of imagery, sentiment and identification which form archeological strata in our culture, sedimented deposits of unconsidered, implicit meanings lying beneath the surface of reasoned debate. My premise is that in order to understand the well-springs of popular sympathy for the anti-nuclear or unilateralist position,

one needs to examine certain long-established models, assumptions and values which are embedded deep in our culture – sometimes so deep that they escape our notice precisely because we take them so much for granted. They stand unanalysed behind what counts as a good story, a proper response in a crisis, and so on. Popular culture is the medium in which these assumptions appear most unselfconsciously as self-evident structures of meaning. The charge that a soap-opera is trite often means just that: it is playing back to us, unmodified by irony or criticism, what we like to assume about how the world works – or ought to work.

Many of these powerful models have the quality of myth and, further, are a direct, though often secularised, legacy of Christianity and, in the case of Anglo-American culture, very specifically of individualistic Protestantism. Partly because they have broken loose from the anchors of coherent theology and institutional location, they have acquired new ambiguities and inner contradictions. The symbols with which I am concerned seldom lead unequivocally to an absolutist pacifism; rather, they cluster problematically around issues of power, authority and coercion as stumbling-blocks equally to an ethic of love and to the politics of individual independence. Secularised Christianity and western individualism are the twin nodes of the constellation which is the subject of my analysis. Together they constitute a major part of what Thomas Luckmann has called 'invisible religion',[5] and of what, by analogy with that concept, I have elsewhere called 'invisible politics'.[6] They are not the only elements in the bedrock of core values in British culture; indeed they are in permanent tension with certain other central values of which two will be important for the discussion below, that is, heroism and group loyalty, more particularly patriotism. The tension is an ancient one which is always rendered especially acute by war and civil disturbance, but it is given a new colour and resonance by the threat of nuclear warfare in which the technology of wholesale death is extravagantly unselective and the individual more than usually impotent.

My first quotation came from Charles Dickens: he is not perhaps the obvious starting-point for an analysis of these contemporary problems. Yet I am not alone in seeing a connection between that most demotic of novelists and the popular culture of today. In a recent television interview[7] the rock music entrepreneur Malcolm McLaren claimed that a direct line connected the author of *Barnaby Rudge* with the rock group the Sex Pistols since both were supreme exemplars of the English tradition of story-telling and social comment. No doubt McLaren expected to create a *frisson* of incredulity in drawing such a parallel, but a variant of his case is far from absurd, provided one ignores the special pleading on behalf of the Sex Pistols. The novels of Dickens are a rich repository of archetypical imagery of English life and values. They may not be wholly accurate accounts of Victorian society[8] but they reflect, and indeed have had no small hand in moulding some of the most condensed and widely recognised symbols of English identity and ideals – one only needs to reflect on the style of the English Christmas to see how deep Dickensian imagery has penetrated. In several of his works, but more explicitly in *Barnaby Rudge*, a central preoccupation is the very tension on which my analysis turns – an ethic of love, and the politics of independent individualism juxtaposed with each other and with the virtues of heroism and patriotism. For Dickens, patriotism encompasses order, duty and Englishness while recognising the frequent inadequacy and corruption of the authorities. Respect for properly constituted authority (parents, masters, the state, the law) vies with the knowledge that our leaders are as often as not little better than licensed rogues, or at the very least, masters of what in *Little Dorrit* he calls, How Not to Do It. Dickens' dislike of chaos and contempt for 'the mob' stands alongside his championship of 'the people'. Modern popular culture, and not least the world of rock music, resonates with the same tensions, although the symbolic vocabulary is somewhat altered and the balance has probably tilted further against authority. There is indeed a direct line connecting

Gabriel Varden and Maypole Hugh of *Barnaby Rudge* with John Lennon, The Jam, Status Quo, Wishbone Ash, Gillen, Rainbow and other English 'anti-nuclear' rock groups of the late twentieth century.

Gabriel Varden, the 'harmonious locksmith' is in many ways the real hero of *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens' fictional account of the Gordon riots. He is the embodiment of all the English 'yeoman' virtues brought forward in time into this idealised, early bourgeois figure. Varden is a patriot and a supporter of civic order; the exchange with his wife from which I quoted is provoked by his intention to march with the Volunteers: further, he is proud to have made the great lock on the main door of Newgate Prison. Yet his patriotic feelings are not activated by abstractions but by personal loyalties and a fierce private independence. His wife and her malicious, comic maid are members of Sir George Gordon's fanatical Protestant movement which Varden steadfastly refuses to support. Later in the story he faces the No-Popery mob who are intent on sacking Newgate and refuses to help them open the lock of the jail. His refusal stems not so much from a passion for civic order and respect for property – though that too – but rather from the principle of resisting mob coercion. 'Under compulsion I will do nothing,' he repeats, even in peril of his life. Gabriel Varden stands for domestic virtue, loyalty, tolerance, order and individual liberty. It is he and not his cantingly 'religious' wife whom Dickens treats as the real Christian. He is heroic in his unobtrusive protection of the weak, in his exercise of mercy, and in his blunt temerity in recalling his social betters – scheming aristocrat, corrupt magistracy and vacillating government – to their unpalatable moral and civic duty. He is a peaceable man who likes nothing better than to drain his Toby jug of ale, but *in extremis* he is prepared to fight for the sanctity of private life and the right to self-determination. He stands against vicious mob and venal authority as a lone individual and potential martyr.

Varden's *alter ego*, as it were, is Maypole Hugh, one of the

leaders of 'Protestant' rioters. He too is courageous and fiercely independent, but these virtues are twisted into negative shapes and become the basis of anarchy and mayhem, public evil and private wrong. Yet Dickens shows a deep sympathy for this anti-hero. He pictures Hugh as a victim of social conditions and, more precisely, of the wilful dereliction of duty of those whose responsibility it should have been to ~~turn~~ Hugh into a civilised being. State, community and family all fail Hugh: the principle of love never applies and he becomes a half-wild creature more at home with horses than people – his unnatural 'natural' father gives him the derisory nickname of 'the centaur'. Yet Hugh's independence and his courage against the odds remain heroic in their own tragic way.

Both figures, Hugh and Varden, are sympathetic characters to English readers because they are two faces of English individualism. A powerful case has been made by Alan MacFarlane[9] that such individualism is not only a core value of English culture but that it was established as such long before the onset of modernity and industrialisation. Dickens was merely celebrating what had long been taken for granted as the prime, heroic virtue of Englishness. That same virtue is found at the heart of popular anti-nuclear protest and is a striking feature of the rock music associated with anti-nuclear sentiments. Several current rock styles include anti-nuclear songs among their repertoire. The best-selling ones of the last couple of years are numbers by the veteran heavy-metal group Status Quo and the recently disbanded new mod group the Jam, but anti-nuclear protest is also a frequent element in punk, particularly among the small independent record companies, and among the all-girl groups of the live London circuit[10] as well as in remnants of the 1960s progressive/protest music – vintage Lennon, Dylan and the rest still sell and crop up with fair regularity on the radio. A theme which unites all this music is hostility to leaders: accredited institutions and their representatives and, above all, the state are depicted as hostile to the needs of the private individual. The

burden of all these songs is that a nuclear holocaust is likely to come about through the stupidity, corruption and self-interest of political leaders. They stand in privileged positions – first candidates for the nuclear shelters, who meanwhile play lethal power games with all our lives and with the future of mankind itself. Peter Gabriel's 1980 song 'Jeux sans Frontiers' was built entirely on the conceit of world political leaders playing a species of chess game with ourselves and our nations as the pieces. In these lyrics there is never a sense of the state as an institution which embodies and protects the interests of its people: rather, the state is depicted as a privileged club in which pretentious lunatics stride and posture. The individual has to stand on his own feet to oppose this madness in high places.

Two further themes frequently accompany this. The first is that modernity itself – super-tankers, micro-chips and depersonalisation – has somehow sent the world out of control and made it difficult to recapture the human scale of things. The second is a cynical variant on what Daniel Bell once called 'the end of ideology': the leaders of the world super-powers are indistinguishable from each other; there's nothing to choose between capitalism and communism 'the CIA, the KGB and the man in red' are all enemies of the people. In live concerts Ian Gillen prefaces his anti-nuclear song 'Mutually Assured Destruction' (or MAD) by patter which runs roughly as follows: 'We had a personal letter from President [pause] Thingy in America, and from [pause] the other chap in Russia. They said this song had put off a nuclear holocaust for three whole months. But in another three months it will bring one about.'[11] It is a knowing in-group cynicism which presents the world leaders as faceless, inter-changeable, vicarious action-men. Deprive them of their proper names and their proper deference and they are reduced in size; if they treat us as expendable numbers then we shall treat them as nameless puppets. In *Bleak House* Dickens uses a very similar technique to make the same point about the Victorian ruling class: Government

and Opposition are identically faceless teams – Boodle, Coodle, Doodle, etc. down the alphabet versus Buffy, Cuffy, Duffy, etc.

I have argued elsewhere[12] that a major cultural legacy of the radical counter-culture of the late 1960s was a simplified, popular version of secular antinomianism which found a niche in youth culture and rock music. The hostility to political leaders which contemporary anti-nuclear songs express, is a continuation of this element in the individualist tradition. John Lennon's hit song 'Imagine' (now 'old' but with a continuing currency) puts the antinomian case as explicitly as possible.[13] All that stands between us and perpetual peace and harmony is society – country, patriotism, property, the state. All the institutional anchors of meaning, identity and ascribed loyalty simply serve to divide us, to corrupt our capacity to recognise our common humanity. In 'Imagine' Lennon resolved the tension he saw between the individual and the social by opting for the personal 'life world' of chosen companions as the only possible haven. In such a view, the private becomes the sacred sphere where peace and harmony would be unproblematic if only the wider structures of society would leave us alone. It is a vision of a world purged altogether of the dimension of power and coercion; it is an *a*political Utopia, the invisible politics of antinomian privatisation.

This is a very frequent theme in youth culture and underlies most of the anti-nuclear protest rock. The private individual is the proper unit of concern, just as it was for Dickens, but now the level of cynical mistrust of the authorities runs even deeper than it did for Dickens. In the mid-1970s, Bob Marley said: 'The Devil has always come in between politicians and they start quarrelling. Y'have to imagine what really go on, because power become a pride business instead of we live together and trade together and stop the war.'[14] The theology may have been Rastafarian but the sentiment was common to most of the rock music milieu. David Bowie makes a similar point: 'I've seen life and I think I know who's controlling the world. And after what I've seen of the state of this world, I've never been so damned scared in all my life.'[15] A popular song of late 1982 draws the lesson of such beliefs. In 'Gettaway', by Chris de Burgh, the lyric argues that *people* have no quarrels; we are all tired of being threatened with the final big bang so why not lock up the leaders in one room and let them fight it out? The affairs of state and the *amour propre* of politics have no meaning for ordinary folk who are just pawns and victims.

An articulate and self-consciously antinomian philosophy of the kind which was developed in the counter-culture and the 'progressive' wing of youth culture in the 1960s probably characterises only a limited segment of the spectrum today. There are some indications that the generations whose adolescence or early adulthood occurred during the effervescence of counter-cultural radicalism have carried a muted version of sixties' values through into adult life and are notably more radical in a mildly antinomian style than the generations immediately above and below them, that is, the over forty-fives and the under twenty-fives. In a recent poll of its readers, *New Society* found the sixties' generation, among other things, more involved in unilateralist protest than their elders and juniors and more likely to have been involved in demonstrations.[16] The antinomian tradition continues in some youth cultures: a recent hit single by the Jam, 'Going Underground' is an aggressive, anarchic piece which, for instance, includes the line 'I don't want what society wants'. Contemporary punk is the main home of such ideas and is often a hard-nosed repeat of sixties' values. As a total world view, it probably embeds itself in a fairly narrow segment of the current generation. Without further research, however, I would not rule out the possibility that such values have shifted down the social spectrum from the educated young bohemians of the sixties towards the working class and unemployed young today, who after all, will hardly appear in a poll of *New Society* readers.

A full-blown version of antinomianism does still appear from time to time, more especially on the radical fringe of the arts. *Any Minute Now*, a musical performed by Wildcat Stage Productions at Stratford East in February 1983, is a case in point. The play takes the form of a trial of a young woman who has strangled her baby, with the audience cast as the jury. The woman is depicted as the victim of a social system which subjected her to slum life, a brutal husband and the ever-present threat of nuclear war. Her compassionate violence on her child is the consequence of society's wider violence: the structure of the play is an invitation to the jury/audience to pronounce a verdict of not guilty. Such theatrical productions – this one began life at the Edinburgh Festival – seldom reach beyond a small, self-selected audience of the already converted. Even a humorous anti-nuclear play such as Spike Milligan's *The Bedsitting Room* – goonish surrealism on the theme of post-holocaust mutants – will hardly reach a mass audience. Yet a 1983 revival and updating of this ten-year-old farce has been judged a commercial proposition for the West End – not least, perhaps, because political leaders appear in it mutated into parrots, which is yet another technique of cutting them down to size. Touches of such surreal humour as well as more explicit anarchism also figure in New Wave anti-nuclear songs. Their ideal individual is more reminiscent of Maypole Hugh than of Gabriel Varden. Like *Any Minute Now* they tend to lay the blame for violence and mayhem with the authorities, but often, as in the Jam's 'A Bomb in Wardour Street', they nevertheless seem to take a grisly relish in depicting post-holocaust horrors. It reminds one sharply of Jeff Nuttall's analysis in *Bomb Culture*[17] of the seductive power of sadism even when employed by disciples of peace.

Anarchic radicalism may be very much a minority phenomenon but there is more than a hint of secular antinomianism among a wide spectrum of the population, although it is implicit and unphilosophical in its form. In the course of conducting research into the beliefs of young people in the

mid-1970s,[18] I found that throughout the range of age, education and social class the young people in my sample expressed a near-unanimous mistrust of politics and politicians. This was not a fundamental radicalism but more a proclivity to assume, as Tom Kitwood found in a similar piece of research more recently, that 'on the large scale nothing can be radically changed.'[19] It was also part of a tendency to regard the formal institutions of Church and State as at best irrelevant to their lives and frequently as hindrances to their personal well-being: in fact, Church and clergy emerged with a more benevolent image than that of the political class. The perspective which these young people had on the world was strikingly individualistic and their positive values clustered around the private and the personal. Kitwood's findings are entirely of a piece with this picture. Such ground is fertile soil for the growth of something between cynicism and fatalistic apathy about the impersonal institutions within which the economy and the polity are organised.

Popular humour shows that such attitudes are part of the common ground of English cultural assumptions[20] and not a mere passing feature of adolescence. A successful television comedy show like *Yes, Minister!* depends for its humour on our being prepared to collude in a knowing cynicism about politicians and civil servants. Sir Humphrey Appleby and his Ministry of Administrative Affairs are worthy successors to Dickens' parasitical Barnacle family and their Circumlocution Office or to Trollope's machiavellian cathedral city, Barchester. I am not suggesting that British democracy is in peril because we have uniformly lost respect for public institutions, but merely that there is a thread in British culture which takes it for granted that the powerful will always be self-interested and pretentious, sometimes even buffoons, but which sees this as as much comic as sinister. It is accompanied by a deep mistrust of missionary zeal and fanaticism. Anyone who takes himself or his cause too seriously is in danger of alienating potential sympathisers.

Among the young people whose beliefs I studied,[21] there was a pervasive dislike of enthusiasts – both religious and political – who tried to 'stuff their ideas down your throat'. Proselytising and extremism from the Moonies to the National Front are seen as embarrassing, un-English and a violation of the individual's right to privacy and self-determination.

Popular humour mirrors this view, too, treating extremism as the natural butt of the common man. In a recent television show, Jasper Carrott, a comedian from the Midlands club circuit, hit both these targets in a notably effective joke.[22] He read from a Civil Defence leaflet containing advice about what to do after a nuclear attack. The base line of the whole joke was the absurdity of offering homely advice against such an unspeakable eventuality, but the two biggest laughs came even-handedly at the expense of the authorities and the anti-nuclear crusaders. He quoted from the leaflet: 'A nation is like a forest and the aim of war planning is to secure the surivival of the great trees and not the brushwood,' and then added: 'And who's the brushwood? I'm looking at it.' This was greeted by loud laughter and applause followed by a gradual uneasy silence as the cameras panned across the 'brushwood' in the audience. There followed some nonsense about swatting flies as a measure of post-holocaust hygiene, and then: 'If they wanted to be really useful they'd lock up all the CND fanatics. They'd be a right pain in the arse running around with tee shirts saying *I told you so.*' Laughter, applause and cheering followed. The cynicism was uneasy but pervasive.

What this joke and the audience reaction to it illustrate is that there is no enormous break in the cultural assumptions of the mainstream and those of the anti-nuclear activists. Both see the ordinary citizen as the pig in the middle in the game of nuclear *realpolitik*. The break lies not in the assumptions but in the seriousness with which they are held and in the moral drawn from them. A soft-edged, passively fatalistic and mildly antinomian individualism is what the common man takes for granted and is probably at least as pervasive as

the hard-edged Darwinian or Manchester School version of competitive individualism which has been the focus of much recent political journalism. It is a syndrome which merits further scrutiny.

In a recent analysis of contemporary best-selling fiction, John Sutherland[23] argued that the major preoccupation in this literature is anxiety about living in a world which is fundamentally unsafe. Neither nature nor society – including, crucially, the properly appointed authorities – can be trusted not to engulf the private individual in horrendous disaster of some kind. The same might be said of the horror/disaster genre of currently popular films. It could be claimed that such themes are merely a sublimation of the perfectly rational fear of nuclear war, but it seems to me more plausible to consider the dread of nuclear disaster as one item in a wider repertoire of contemporary anxieties. Dr Stuart Blanch, Archibishop of York, made a cognate point in the General Synod debate on *The Church and the Bomb* in February 1983.[24] He suggested that in the current wave of public consternation about nuclear arms there may lie a primal fear of cataclysm such as our medieval forebears harboured – an anticipation of Armageddon in which evil triumphs over good. Certainly symbolic reverberations of End-of-the-World mythology are prominent in popular imagery of the nuclear threat: for example, the Status Quo song quoted at the beginning of this article is constructed round the imagery of the flood, the first 'end of the world'. It is certainly the case that such chiliastic hauntings do tend to seize popular imagination in periods of fast and disruptive social change when the causes of personal insecurity and misfortune are abstract, impersonal forces, less than easily amenable to intentional control. Contemporary social systems based on high technology, a minutely complex and ever-changing division of labour and a world political and economic system which is beyond the immediate comprehension of the average citizen, might well spawn such fears. Moreover, a period of world recession in which dread of unemployment and a fall

anti-Cruise activists, who see Britain as an 'occupied country'.

The rock music charts contain one small index of the complication which ensued from the fact that the individualistic 'masculine' version of anti-nuclear protest shared a symbol system with the imagery of patriotic heroism during the Falklands War. The anti-nuclear songs to which I have made reference all date from before the Falklands War, and all achieved considerable popular success, notably Status Quo's album on which 'Never Too Late' was the title track. (The record sleeve was in the form of a clock on which the finger was a nuclear rocket which a human hand was pushing back from midnight.) The huge public success of The Jam whose vocal support for CND is well publicised, is another indication of the wide spread of popular anti-nuclear sentiment in the rock music world. Yet, in the autumn and winter of 1982 a single by Robert Wyatt, 'Shipbuilding', was given intensive coverage by progressive disc-jockeys on radio. It was an anti-war, and specifically an anti-Falklands War song: here the ships were built which gave *you* employment; but what were they for? – simply to take young men out to their deaths. At New Year 1983, the song was voted number two in a listeners' poll on the Radio One show of the disc-jockey with the best progressive pedigree of all, John Peel. He lamented its sad failure in the wider charts. 'It didn't get the air time it deserved.' Anti-Falklands rock simply did not have sufficient popular appeal, however hard it was promoted.

This is not the end of the lessons to be derived from the Falklands campaign. Let us take a further look at the ambiguities imprinted in the imagery of heroism. It is a simple thing to recognise and respond to the macho heroism of 'our lads' 'yomping' many miles in appalling weather on the uplands of the Falklands to face an enemy who outnumbered them. All that is the stuff of military heroism and the all-male bond from the Sagas to boys' adventure comics.[28] But once one examines the transmutation which occurs when dealing with individual death in war one is

drawn to recognise an entirely different ingredient which resonates with Christian significance. In our culture, suffering, sacrifice and martyrdom can hardly fail to conjure images of Christ as the Ur-symbol standing behind and giving reflected meaning to individual human death. When the news of Colonel H. Jones' death was first reported on television it was immediately clear that this had been a major act of heroism and self-sacrifice in battle. No film was then available, so drawings were presented showing colleagues carrying his body on a stretcher. The sketches had the unmistakable quality of a 'Deposition from the Cross', not only in the modelling of the figures but in the sacred manner in which they were presented. The model of innumerable 'Pietàs' similarly lay behind the accumulating images of grief and mourning. To lay down one's life on behalf of others is always a powerful act; in Christian cultures – however secularised – it partakes of something of the numinous quality of Christ's own death and of the deaths of the saints and martyrs because these are the most sacred of all the cultural meanings which historically cluster around both the act itself and representations of it.

Even the fact that the war dead are themselves dealers in violent death does not wholly cancel out the Christ resonance which focuses on death as suffered. It is the victim-hero who has suffered the violence of others who shifts the register of the imagery of heroism into a more specifically Christian mode than I have yet had cause to examine. It is the Christian modes or models which move us from individualism and it's 'masculine' imagery of fierce independence to the more passive or even 'feminine' imagery of suffering love as the ultimate principle. While much, though probably not all, of the individualism which I have discussed above is a product of Protestantism, sometimes at more than one remove, I have not so far done more than indicate that it gives rise to a set of symbols which oscillate uneasily between independent self-determination and antinomianism. I cannot proceed further with my argument – even to a clearer account

of why antinomianism so easily fits within the anti-nuclear cause – without becoming more explicit about the basic symbolic models in Christianity itself. To attempt to define the essence of Christianity would be foolish and impossible: my purpose is less ambitious, that is, to suggest some of the lasting elements which Christianity tends to deposit in the culture of societies in which it has been the dominant system of ultimate meaning.

It is often helpful to clear one's view of an over-familiar object by comparing it with one which is similar yet distinct. The cultural deposit of Christianity is so over-familiar, so embedded in what we take for granted, that it has become virtually invisible. A comparison with its parent religion, Judaism, can do a great deal to remind one of the crucial points at which the identity-markers of the two religious cultures diverge and thus reveal to us Christianity's specific legacy.[29] The two religions, of course, share a common core. The first common element is the conception of a transcendent deity who has made man in his own image and is thus able to make demands on his creation: He has also given free will to man, which therefore gives man the power to fail God. (Even the Status Quo song is based on this belief: 'I don't think God thought we'd get out of order'.) The second crucial common feature is an essentially social vision of salvation, with heaven pictured as purified society. This gives rise first to a prophetic tradition of social criticism as actual society is measured against the righteousness of God, and second, to a recurring aspiration to Utopia.

In his novel *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*, George Steiner[30] draws implications from these features which have scandalised many people but which, partly through the shock value of Steiner's literary tactic, throw into high relief those aspects of Judaism and Christianity which are pertinent to my argument. Steiner gives to the aged Adolph Hitler a virtuoso speech of self-justification. The hub of Hitler's case is the argument that the Jews were responsible for bringing into the world 'the bacillus of perfection' and that therefore:

> we had to find, to burn out the virus of Utopia before the whole of our western civilisation sickened. [The God of the Jews] is purer than any other. The very thought of him exceeds the powers of the human mind. We are as blown dust to His immensity. But because we are his creatures, we must better ourselves, love our neighbour, be continent, give of what we have to the beggar. Because His inconceivable, unimaginable presence envelops us, we must obey every jot of the law. We must bottle up our rages and desires, chastise the flesh and walk bent in the rain....The Jew invented conscience and left man a guilty serf.
>
> But that was only the first piece of blackmail. There was worse to come. The white-faced Nazarene....What did that epileptic rabbi ask of man? That he renounce the world, that he leave mother and father behind, that he offer the other cheek when slapped, that he render good for evil, that he love his neighbour as himself, no, far better, for self-love is an evil thing to be overcome. Oh! grand castration!...Ask of man more than he is, hold before his tired eyes an image of altruism, of compassion, of self-denial which only the saint or the madman can touch and you stretch him on the rack. Till his soul bursts.

The third act of the drama according to Steiner's *A. H.* is the Marxist Eden.

> Sacrifice yourself for the good of your fellowman. Relinquish your possessions so that there may be equality for all. Hammer yourself hard as steel, strangle emotion, loyalty, mercy, gratitude....The Jew had grown impatient, his dreams had gone rancid. Let the kingdom of justice come here and now, next Monday morning. Let us have a secular Messiah instead. But with a long beard and his bowels full of vengeance.[31]

I am not really concerned here with the question of whether Steiner's novel gives a convincing explanation for anti-Semitism and for Nazism (which, after all, was another in the line of western Utopias) but only with his highly persuasive characterisation of the perfectionist utopian strand in the Judeo–Christian–Marxist legacy. (There is no space here to pursue the third, the Marxist, act of the drama.) I want to focus particularly on the tension between the Christian version of that vision and ordinary human and social exigency. It has often been argued – from Frederick Engels to Enoch Powell, in point of fact – that Christianity began as a Jewish sect and its founding characteristics must therefore be expected periodically to reassert themselves. Prominent among these is a heroic ethic which inverts all the conventional categories of social, political and ritual obligations and, with its scandalous ethic of love, places the meek, the poor and the defeated at the centre of the symbol system. The redemptive quality of suffering is a feature which Christianity shares with Judaism, but its transfer from the righteous remnant to the Messiah both individuates and radically alters the idea. Once Christianity appeared, the Messianic element became gradually muted in the mainstream of Diaspora Judaism,[32] which needed to operate as a quasi-tribal religion of cohesion in order to survive, but did so, perhaps, at the expense of an incipient individualism in its spiritual tradition. The exemplary figure in Juadism has long been not the awaited Messiah nor even the prophet, but the patient teacher and, even more importantly, as Freud understood, the patriarch[33] – flawed and all too human like Saul and David. In Judaism, social as distinct from divine authority *does* (*pace* Steiner) wear the fallible human face of the community leader: in Judaism the Incarnate God as perfect man is an alien model. It is Christianity which has carried that 'bacillus of perfection' into the modern world. Moreover, the symbolic legacy of the Christ–Messiah as supreme exemplar in Christianity makes the outsider, the rejected misfit, into the archetypical charismatic figure. Lurking

within Christianity is a potent and subversive mixture: love above power and even justice; the spirit above the letter of the law; the degraded criminal, victim of the violence of the state and of the calculus of *realpolitik* as the supreme saviour.

That is not the whole story, of course. Once Christianity became an imperial religion it had need to elaborate the other half of the paradox in its founding texts – not only 'render unto Caesar', but also the whole *political* implication of the social nature of its vision which involves salvation as the City of God and, even more important, God as fully man. Thus the Church developed its complex and subtle traditions of teaching about the Christian as citizen in and of this world. At the level of popular cultural symbolism this has left us images of Christian civic and political virtue, monarchs (and their executioners) as the servants of the Lord, Christian patriotism, crusades, the church militant, and the just war. This is, needless to say, gross simplification, and much of the work of the Church has been an attempt to reconcile and balance the apparent contradictions in the fundamental paradox. I am not concerned here with the popular symbolic legacy of this 'civic' strand in Christianity, though clearly it would be important if the task in hand were to uncover the popular symbolism which might underpin the just war tradition: it certainly played a part in the imagery of the Falklands campaign. But my subject is the principle of love which is the starting-point of anti- or apolitical stances and the whole antinomian tradition. It is this aspect which differentiates Christianity most sharply from Judaism, and even more decisively from the other major religious traditions. Such a legacy of popular subversive imagery is inconceivable in a religion of power like Islam, for example.

The peace movement has available an enormous repertoire of symbol and resonance laid down by this Christian principle of transcendent love. The users of this symbolism are often quite unconscious of the Christian source of the mythic power on which they draw. The effectiveness of such a tradition does not depend on all those who employ it having

automatic access to its directly Christian pedigree, because for centuries popular culture of many varieties has become saturated with its themes. In our own secular age, western rock music would be bereft of much of its power and appeal if it could not play on the theme of the rejected outsider as charismatic disturber of the conventional pieties. The Christ reference can even there sometimes be direct as in The Who's enormously successful rock opera *Tommy*. Dickens' narrative structures and moral judgements also rest crucially on the power of love and the redemptive qualities of the poor and meek: Florence Dombey, Little Nell and Little Dorrit may additionally show feminine dutifulness but in masculine figures like Smike and Barnaby Rudge who are 'despised and rejected', broken innocence acts as the instrument of redemption for others through love. The phenomenal success of the Tolkien fantasies owes much to the same theme. The weak and insignificant Hobbits become the instrument of common salvation: through suffering, Frodo attains a Christ-like stature while in Sam – the Gabriel Varden of the story – the theme of yeoman independence and an unmistakable Englishness is organically attached to the myth of the defeat of power by love.[34] The Tolkien *oeuvre*, incidentally, is an instructive popular instance in which this theme is complemented rather than contradicted by the counterpoint of Holy War – a strand which draws not only on the alternative Christian tradition but on the Sagas and European folklore. I mention this partly to illustrate the lack of exclusiveness which symbolic traditions display: no cause, group or tendency can lay exclusive claim to them. (It may, however, be worth remarking in parentheses that the juxtaposition worked easily for Tolkien because he took the precaution of making The Enemy wholly outside the human pale and irredeemably evil – an expedient which works better in fantasy than in human politics.)

The film *The Extra-Terrestrial* (*E.T.*) which is currently breaking box office records is another instance of the same kind – my list is indicative not exhaustive. Schoenbaum's

somewhat sardonic review of *E.T.* quoted at the beginning of this article, is perhaps meant to puncture portentous claims which have been made for the film as 'profound' or 'art', but I would simply restate what I argued above – that such a film could not conceivably produce the same response in a culture which had never been saturated in Christian imagery. Perhaps it takes a Jew to recognise it as a carrier of the boundary-markers of Christian culture. At all events, Bernard Levin hailed the film as warmly as he had earlier enthused about the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *Nicholas Nickleby*, and for the same reasons – that they are both celebrations of the power of love, innocence and weakness. In a recent column in *The Times* he wrote:

> Steven Spielberg...[seizes] as did Dickens and his interpreters at the R.S.C., on the crucial principle at the heart of the universe: *the Manichee is wrong.* Though hate, cruelty, pain and fear abound, love is stronger.[35]

In the film children are the agents of this principle and E.T. himself, in his innocence is a 'child emeritus', as it were. The adult world, and more particularly the male world of power, is set to crush this fragile creature in the interests of reason, science and politics. The children's refusal to dissect frogs in school as well as their protection of E.T. are gestures rejecting that world of power and calculation. Levin ended his column by quoting directly: 'Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.' The case could hardly be clearer.

I should be very surprised if Bernard Levin were in favour of unilateral disarmament. I am not arguing that there is an irresistible translation from such themes and values to anti-nuclear sentiment or strict pacifism. I am only suggesting that they offer a powerful reservoir of symbols with an in-built legitimacy on which the peace movement can draw. The

structure of reasoned argument employed by unilateralists can encompass strategic and political as well as moral and theological considerations, but at the level of symbolic rhetoric the gesture of throwing away the ultimate in coercive weapons has a clear affinity with the repertoire of values which places love above power in the final hierarchy of spiritual priorities. The clearest example of this process is found in the Women's peace camp at Greenham Common which opposes the siting of Cruise missiles on European soil. The mass demonstration organised there on 12 and 13 December 1982 by Women For Life On Earth might have taken as its text the same fragment of the Gospel as Bernard Levin quoted, or equally well, the ubiquitous Sunday School wall frieze of my childhood 'Suffer the little children to come unto Me'. The demonstrators 'embraced' the whole nine-mile perimeter fence of the air base – a terminology and a ritual act redolent with imagery of love. The leaflet which advertised the demonstration stated:

> Each gate will have a theme, and on Sunday [sic] morning women will gather at the gates they find express their feelings about life on earth and the nuclear threat. Bring personal things to decorate the fence with – objects that express our lives, our joy, our anger, our fears and feelings about the threat of nuclear war: photos, banners, writing, toys, children's clothes, ribbons, balloons, cardboard tombstones bearing the names of victims of violence and war. At one o'clock we'll begin to form a circle and link around the base, singing the same songs, linked with joined hands, scarves, wool, ribbons. Then return to the gates, and as dusk falls we will light candles and hold closing ceremonies.[36]

Those present, whether as demonstrators or observers, found it a powerfully moving occasion, which is hardly surprising given the closely textured and unmistakably liturgical deployment of the 'feminine' symbolism of love.

Valerie Flessati was not alone in drawing the parallels with Mary particularly since the whole occasion vibrated with transmuted Christmas references. Christmas as the secular festival of family love and child-centred celebration was echoed in the toys, balloons and children. The lighting of the peace candles in the closing ceremonies conjured Christmas trees, carol singers and the whole Christmas card and *Christmas Carol* world through which we traditionally view our own ideal selves at this season. Peace candles have taken on a ritual significance of their own, too, in recent years. The spontaneous lighting of the peace candles was the most powerful moment during what one can only regard as the secular requiem which took place in the main square of Liverpool after John Lennon was shot, again close to Christmas in 1980. (The Christ resonances there were, incidentally, as unmistakable as in the reports of the death of Colonel H. Jones in the Falklands.)

These symbolic features carry a stronger charge than a coldly rational statement of the case against allowing American Cruise missiles on English soil, not least because the symbols seem to transcend the vocabulary of political calculation. The ritual expressions of 'love not war' make a pre-emptive strike in claiming the vocabulary of love and the dimension of the personal as their exclusive property: they make the political calculus look shabby and mean. On 9 February 1983 when the American Vice-President, George Bush, met CND demonstrators in London the peace marchers deployed very similar symbolic props to those used at Greenham Common. In an exchange with Monsignor Bruce Kent, Bush was provoked to protest at the expropriation of such themes – especially that of the vulnerability and innocence of childhood – by CND: 'I've got grandkids, I've got children! Do you think we want peace any less than you?'

The rhetorical imagery of the personal as opposed to and transcending the political dimension is one of the more potent residues of the incipient antinomianism of the doctrine of love when it is pulled out from the rest of the fabric

of Christian social theology. It underlies what was taken for granted by the journalist of *The Church Times* when he wrote of the many 'non-political' Christians who had been drawn to the women's peace camp. This 'non-political' valuation of the personal as the fundamental dimension of values has long been a particular characteristic of women's attitudes to politics in this country. It may be worth noting that in Britain women are far more likely than men to oppose Cruise missiles and to support unilateralism.

The high value placed on the personal and the private, on sincerity and the feeling heart, is one point at which the Christian and the individualist traditions intersect, and, indeed, in English culture the two have frequently fused indissolubly. The Protestant tradition of individual conversion is one example of this. It is a model to which the peace movement is clearly indebted in its style of turning individual hearts to the cause of peace. It also surfaces in the Status Quo song quoted above with its refrain 'It's never too late to change'. By one of the many paradoxes in this tangle of symbol systems, the missionary effort to convert individual hearts and minds has a capacity for turning into a crusade. Once a movement takes on the quality of a crusade (or for that matter, the absolute conviction of the sect that it possesses the only truth) one frequently finds that the individual and the personal sink beneath the pressures for group cohesion. The symbols of love and innocence march behind increasingly military-looking banners. When the massed young women of Greenham dance ring-a-roses around a small group of policemen, singing John Lennon's 'Give Peace A Chance', there is a thin line between the invocation of innocent children's games and the coercive circle of playground bullying. Even passive resistance can evolve into active struggle and by February 1983 some of those same women were prepared to punch and kick the newly-appointed Defence Secretary, Michael Heseltine, in their anxiety to convey the urgency of their message: 'You gotta fight to survive.'

The milieu of symbolic resonances and mythic models is messy, slippery, ambiguous. But my case is that it is important because it provides a conventionally 'invisible' but emotionally potent dimension to issues such as the debate on nuclear arms policy. It supplies a hidden vocabulary which may be just as significant to the outcome of such debates as is the more carefully modulated vocabulary of rational argument. Indeed it may say more to the man and woman in the street and in the pew – and even in the pulpit – than he or she is aware of having heard.

It may seem tasteless, implausible and even blasphemous that I have placed the deeply serious cheek by jowl with the ephemera of popular culture, and claimed that they share a set of meanings. The juxtaposition was deliberate. Profound messages can resonate in the apparently trivial, and the popularity and persuasive power of the latter arise precisely from the echoes and reverberations which are set up in and by the former. This is why the 'invisible religion' of our society is as important as either the visible variety or reasoned argument in affecting choices and decisions of great moment. Yet because the structures of symbolism so often operate subliminally, they tend to escape our notice. They combine and regroup in shifting and complex patterns of which we have only glimpsed a few here. It may well be that particular groups and movements at specific times have a natural affinity with distinctive symbolic constellations, but we understand too little of these processes to do more than hazard a guess about what the dominant patterns may currently be. At all events, I do not believe the patterns are random; I do believe that they are available, however partially, for rational reflection if we care to look for them. And it is surely preferable to confront directly the implicit values so richly embodied in the cultural forms of our society rather than to allow them to act on us as hidden persuasions.

NOTES

1 Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge* (Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 383.
2 Wishbone Ash, 'Underground', copyright.
3 Rainbow, 'Can't Happen Here', copyright.
4 Status Quo, 'Never Too Late', Copyright Rossi/Frost, Dump Music/Eaton Music.
5 Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion* (Macmillan: New York, 1967).
6 Bernice Martin, 'Not Marx but Lennon', *Encounter*, vol. 56, no. 6., June 1981.
7 *Whatever You Want*, Channel 4, 3 January 1983.
8 A point made effectively by Krishan Kumar, *Prophecy And Progress* (Allen Lane: London, 1978).
9 Alan MacFarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism* (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1979). This argument has important implications. For example, it renders very dubious the popular Marxist view that capitalism itself created an ethic of competitive individualism.

The American and English traditions of individualism do have many points in common but also some important differences. The English tradition is held within a culture of historical depth and continuity in which Durkheimian elements of social solidarity – from a popular constitutional monarchy to a tradition of class solidarity and of the dignity of manual labour – soften its competitive edge. American individualism, whether of the frontier or of Yankee commerce, is more extreme in its implications. Dickens was well aware of the differences as his merciless caricatures of the American variety in *Martin Chuzzlewit* can testify. The issue may be pursued in: Seymour M. Lipset, *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (Heinemann: London, 1964); Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1977).

In contemporary popular culture the North American component is of course a considerable ingredient and although I have taken my main instances of anti-nuclear rock music from English bands, many of the other media from which I take examples have a transatlantic provenance. I would point out that the British and American traditions have enough in common to be instantly accessible to each other; and my concentration is on what British users make of the common tradition.
10 I am indebted for this information to Philip Wark, an MPhil student at Bedford College who is studying these all-girl bands.
11 From a report supplied, like many other leads for this article, by my sons Izaak and Magnus, to whom much thanks.
12 Bernice Martin, *A Sociology of Contemporary Cultural Change* (Basil Blackwell: Oxford 1981).
13 Bernice Martin, 'Identity in the Modern World: a sociologist on John Lennon', in *Kairos* no. 5, Easter 1982

14 Quoted in Jonathon Green (ed.), *The Book of Rock Quotes* (Omnibus Press: London 1977), p. 69. One can find such quotations all the time in rock music press, but I have used this source – a best-selling paperback – simply because of its appeal to mainstream readership. I have concentrated on mainstream anti-nuclear rock music rather than specialist extreme sub-cultures for the same reasons: it is easy to study extreme sub-cultures because they exist in discrete pockets, but very difficult to find an acceptable and effective methodology for studying mainstream culture. Hence my essay takes the form of an artful trawl rather than 'scientific' research.
15 Green (ed.), op. cit., p. 65.
16 Paul Barker, 'Radicals in a Generation Gap: New Society Readers' Survey' *New Society*, vol. 62. no. 1045, 25 November 1982. *New Society* readers were more in favour of unilateralism than the general population. The findings of this survey are supported by the work of Jonathan Chandler, a PhD student at Bedford College who is analysing responses to John Lennon's death.
17 Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture* (McGibbon & Kee, London, 1968).
18 Bernice Martin and Ronald Pluck, *Young People's Beliefs* (General Synod Board of Education: Church House Westminster, 1976).
19 Tom Kitwood, *Disclosures to a Stranger: Adolescent Values In An Advanced Industrial Society* (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1980), p. 3.
20 For an effective analysis of the social significance of humour, see e.g. Christie Davies, 'Ethnic Jokes, Moral Values and Social Boundaries', in *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 33, no. 3, September 1981.
21 Martin and Pluck, op. cit.
22 'The Best of Jasper Carrott', BBC2, Christmas week 1982. My sons drew my attention to this joke.
23 John Sutherland, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction of the 1970s* (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1981).
24 The debate of the General Synod of the Church of England on the report of the working party of the Board of Social Responsibility, *The Church and the Bomb: Nuclear Warfare and the Christian Conscience*, (Hodder & Stoughton: London, 1982). The debate was broadcast live on both television and radio.
25 Sutherland, op. cit.
26 Cartoonists who have caricatured Mrs Thatcher as Superman may be nearer the mark than they suppose. I suspect that one wholly positive aspect of her image (and one which intellectuals tend to see negatively) is her refusal to regard *any* problem, whatever its provenance, as *not* amenable to decisive, individual action.
27 Gerald Kaufman, Labour MP for Manchester Ardwick, pointed this out in *The Times*, February 1983.
28 In Anglo-American culture much of this male bonding takes the form of what, adapting Troeltsch, one might call 'a parallelism of individualism'. It is quite distinct from, say, Mediterranean or oriental styles of all-male cohesion.
29 An abortive attempt to assist a potential research student to delineate 'Jewish identity' which she regarded as threatened with assimilation to the implicit Christianity of English culture, did much to focus this point for me.

30 George Steiner, *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.* (Faber & Faber: London and Boston, 1981).
31 Steiner, op. cit., pp. 122–4.
32 Movements of Jewish Messianism did in fact occur, with the usual disastrous outcomes, alongside the other millenarian movements of the middle ages in periods of disruptive social change. My point – over-condensed in the text – is that: Christianity's having expropriated the Messianic principle led mainstream Judaism to de-emphasise the theme as a mark of its own distinctiveness against the dominant Christian culture; and the social system of the Jewish ghetto communities was, *faute de mieux*, relatively undifferentiated. Under pressure Jewish identity and culture were held together by the Durkheimian virtues of everyday ritual and the sanctity of tradition.
33 I am indebted to Basil Bernstein for pointing this out.
34 Tolkein himself protested against the idea that *The Lord of the Rings* (Allen & Unwin: London, 1969, 1 vol.) was a directly Christian allegory, perhaps in order to insist on the difference between his work and that of his friend and rival C. S. Lewis, whose Narnia cycle was designed to be a Christian allegory for children. Readers can often detect implicit structures better than authors, however.
35 Bernard Levin, 'A Night of Magic With the Little Invader' *The Times*, 22 January 1983.
36 Printed by Spider Web (TU) Sussex Way, London N.7.

IV ART, LOGIC AND PROPHECY

Why the Bomb is Real but not True

PETER REDGROVE

Somehow it would be a relief if Einstein turned out to be wrong, since his physics seems to have created a world in which the atomic bomb not only exists, but in which his ideas and authority appear to make it easier to use that bomb.

What I mean by this I can only sketch, and it would be better for a professional physicist to describe these ideas. I hope the reader will forgive any gross errors I make here. But as I understand the matter, there seems to be not only a connection but also a feedback between a certain monstrous cosmic detachment there is in Relativity, which is held to describe the ground of our universe, and modern behaviour. Relativity has not only given us the bomb, but its mechanistic aspects are no improvement on other cold-blooded systems of thought which bring despair into the world. Without Einstein's work, the bomb would not have seemed possible, and so would not have been looked for; and he himself got caught up in the terrible accident of the weapon's creation, and recommended its first use to Truman.

Should one blame Einstein? It is such a curiously-named theory: 'Relativity'. As Bertrand Russell remarked of it, the theory is 'wholly concerned *to exclude what is relative*

And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken.

Luke 21:25–6

UNHOLY WARFARE

The Church and the Bomb

Edited by
DAVID MARTIN
and
PETER MULLEN

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