

The Spectator Debate

Can Catholicism save Christian England?

[Piers Paul Read and Matthew Parris](#)

The Roman Catholic Church is a constant source of controversy, as the ongoing outrage over clerical sexual abuse shows. But the Church also inspires great devotion and loyalty. The Spectator recently hosted a debate under the title 'England Should be a Catholic Country Again'. Here, we reprise two passionate arguments for and against the motion.

Yes, says Piers Paul Read. A Catholic England would counter the barren hedonism of our culture

'A weak priest inspires contempt,' wrote François René de Chateaubriand in the early 19th century, 'a vicious one excites abhorrence; but a good priest, meek, pious, without superstition, charitable, tolerant, is entitled to our love and respect.'

As it was then, so it is now. There have been degenerate popes, corrupt bishops and, recently, paedophile priests. The abuse of children by priests excites a particular abhorrence, and the cover-up of these crimes by some bishops is as bad as anything that has occurred in the past.

However, the wickedness of a few priests should not obscure the selfless and often heroic ministry of the overwhelming majority who work tirelessly and with little recognition at the core business of the Catholic Church, the saving of souls, through the sacraments of baptism, confession and above all the Eucharist which lies at the heart of Catholic belief and worship.

There are also the Church's corporal works of mercy, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving shelter to the homeless. And when it comes to these tangible expressions of that love of God and one's neighbour, the Catholic Church, both now and in the past, has a record second to none.

The Church's teaching on sexual ethics is, I suspect, a big stumbling block in today's permissive society. Jesus makes it crystal clear to his disciples, by referring them to the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, that the heterosexual married couple is the aboriginal paradigm of humanity. 'Have you not read,' he says to them, 'that the creator from the beginning made them male and female, and that he said: This is why a man must leave father and mother, and cling to his wife, and the two become one body? They are no longer two, therefore, but one body.'

How does this square up with today's society? Clearly, not at all. We now have an institutionalisation of sexual practices inimical to Catholic teaching; no-fault divorce, gay adoption and same-sex civil partnerships, described by Pope Benedict as 'pseudo forms of marriage that distort the Creator's design and undermine the truth of our human nature'. The Catholic Church accepts that there is nothing sinful in being attracted to members of the same sex. It is involuntary. But a conflict arises when it comes to thoughts, words and deeds.

Yet our politicians want to prevent Catholics from teaching an ethic on homosexuality which has existed since the beginning of history and is shared by almost all of the world's religions. Nick Clegg has said that faith schools should be obliged by law to teach that there is nothing wrong with gay sex. Harriet Harman says that Catholic schools should be forced to employ teachers who reject Catholic teaching. David Cameron claims that 'the Lord Jesus' would favour the gay rights agenda. Elton John tells us that Jesus was in fact gay. How lucky we are to have so many Biblical scholars among our politicians and entertainers!

And there is birth control. People ridicule the Church's teaching that every sexual act must be open to the transmission of life. At one time the Church of England shared that view but at the Lambeth Conference in 1930 it changed its mind. There are many church-going Catholics who refuse to accept it. Others assent to the teaching but find it difficult, if not impossible, to obey. But the dissociation of sex from procreation in the mindset of our culture has ramifications that extend far beyond the bedroom. It makes sex an end in itself. It raises expectations of sexual love that are rarely fulfilled. Partnerships are formed and then break up. There are fewer and fewer marriages and half of those that there are end in divorce.

Recently the Conservative party has woken up to the damage done to England's social fabric by the increasing number of broken homes. But think of what lies behind the cold statistics. Think of the mute suffering of children when their parents part. There is much cant about protecting the rights of children but, as Pope John Paul II said, the right of a child to be brought up under one roof by its natural parents should be seen as one of the most fundamental of all human rights. And there is no doubt that it would be if children had the vote.

But children do not have the vote. They have no lobby. They cannot articulate the suffering caused by the break-up of their homes. A few emerge unscathed from this psychic trauma, but in many others their misery leads to depression and delinquent behaviour; or it is buried in their unconscious to re-emerge in adolescence and adulthood — in drug-taking or binge-drinking to numb the psychic pain; in self-obsession which makes relating to others problematic; and, of course, a likely breakdown when they themselves come to form relationships or marry — the wretchedness cascading from generation to generation.

You may think that the link between people's sex lives and the suffering of children is tenuous. Let me quote Matthew Parris, who so often puts things so well. 'No man is an island,' he wrote. 'There are ultimately no "private" acts. Everything we think, everything we say and do, however privately, shapes and influences us, our families and friends, and so touches the world outside. It is just fatuous to pretend that if a great many men are unashamedly making love to other men, however privately, that is without impact on the whole of society...'

What Matthew says about homosexuals applies equally to heterosexuals who embark on relationships where the love is tentative, probationary, conditional, not the wholehearted and fruitful giving of one's entire person to the other which the Church teaches, and which we know in our hearts is the way love is meant to be.

The Catholic Church is not the preserve of the virtuous. A Catholic England would not be like Afghanistan under the Taleban. The Church is and has always been a refuge for sinners. We are a community of Prodigal Sons and Daughters. God loves the good and the bad alike. He understands human weakness. He forgives the sins of the repentant, and it is that confidence in God's love, understanding and forgiveness, and the anticipation of an eternal destiny with God in heaven, that makes his yoke easy and his burden light.

There is no joy in the barren, selfish hedonistic individualism that defines our culture in the developed world today. It would greatly add to the sum of human happiness here in England if our country was Catholic once again.

Piers Paul Read's latest novel Death of a Pope is published by Ignatius Press.

No, says Matthew Parris. Jesus of Nazareth would be appalled by the Catholic Church

Lurching drunkenly away from the table at a dinner party, Dylan Thomas once explained his departure. 'Something's boring me,' he said, 'and I think it's me.' I am an irreconcilable atheist who's beginning to bore himself, banging on all the time about it. Plainly there's no God; but there we are, life goes on and it isn't — for us atheists — the most important thing in the world. So, with your permission, I'm not going to play the hired atheist for the purposes of this debate.

Instead I'd like to mount my case from inside the Christian tradition and, make no mistake, whatever faiths or faithlessness individual citizens may profess, this country — its culture, its jurisprudence, its vast, submerged moral landscape — is firmly and powerfully within the Christian tradition. I love the Christian tradition. It made me. It absorbs me and I've studied it and thought about it all my life. I love and revere the person of Jesus Christ — and, if there can exist a non-theistic meaning to the word 'divine', I consider him divine.

That he was under one immense and central misapprehension — that he was the Son of God — cannot, for me, disable the transfiguring energy — and stinging severity — of Jesus's teachings: about love; about human charity; about equality; and about the primacy of each individual's personal response to the universe.

Jesus tells us, every one, to cast off fear and superstition, to turn away from wealth and status and authority; to turn away from rule-based theology, and the High Priests and the Pharisees; to turn away from human mediation; to lift up our heads to the stars; and to be unafraid.

The Roman Catholic Church tells us to bow our heads, to take orders, to follow form, and to be afraid. Rome stands between the individual and the light, blocking the light.

I tell you how we know that about 2,000 years ago a man called Jesus of Nazareth did exist, did attract disciples, did inspire devotion, and did teach much of what we read in the Gospels today. We know it because if Jesus had not existed, the Catholic Church would not have invented him. The Jesus who takes shape in the New Testament is sharply different from the Christ it would have suited the Church to invent.

Jesus of Nazareth is a colossal embarrassment to the Catholic Church. To all the pomp and circumstance, to the chanting and ring-kissing, to the rosary beads, and indulgences, and prayer by rote, to the caskets and relics and the reverencing of inanimate objects, the idolatry and the mumbo-jumbo, Jesus of Nazareth represents a permanent reproach.

There he stands, in all his simplicity: a man contemptuous of finery and wealth, scornful of hierarchy, and utterly careless of bricks, stones, mortar and stained glass; a man whose attitude towards silver and gold — towards display of every sort — it is impossible to mistake. There he stands: a man who never uttered a recorded word about sex, about contraception, about abortion, about homosexuality — or indeed about family at all: never a word, except to say that he had come to tear families apart.

There he stands, this Jesus of Nazareth, a man whose attire nobody even noticed, who never spoke a word, so far as we know, about religious art, religious music, religious architecture or religious form; and whose only, single reference to beauty is to the beauty of a lily.

There he stands, this man whose innocent remark about breaking bread in remembrance of him has been twisted almost beyond what meaning will bear into a holy ritual whose licensed enactment has been made to underwrite the entire currency of priestly authority... a man whose call for repentance has been leveraged likewise into a ceremony of confession and system of tariffs that hands — to a clergy Jesus never meant to found — a stick with which to beat a laity Jesus never meant to see separated in that way.

There he stands, a man with whose words and thoughts and reproaches it would be impossible to acquaint ourselves without at once suspecting that he would have hated ritual, hated set canticles and set responses, hated hats and robes and finery, saluting and Popemobiles. A man who didn't just ignore the authority and certifying of religious truth, didn't just ignore the man-made hierarchies of spiritual authority of his own day, but set his face against career structures in things spiritual... and who would today not just be bemused by popes and cardinals, bishops and archbishops, forms of petition and forms of address, but would rail against them with the fine anger he showed the money-changers in the temple.

There he stands, his whole life, his whole experience, his whole attitude a permanent reproach to everything the Roman Catholic Church has spun around itself, gathered unto itself, and invented for itself over 2,000 years. Can anyone — anyone — believe the Vatican and all its works were what Jesus of Nazareth saw himself as coming to Earth to achieve? In the words of T.S. Eliot, 'that is not what I meant at all. That is not it, at all.'

Faced with this impossible man, this undismissibly real man, the Church for centuries — until they could no longer do so — tried to keep the record of his life, the Gospels, from the laity. Unable to invent, or reinvent, Jesus, they invented a divine human being as close to being Jesus's equal as the rules of blasphemy would bear: the Virgin Mary, a real individual about whom very few facts were known and about whom we can learn little from the Gospels.

The Roman Catholic Church has clothed Mary — for she is its own creature and almost mythical — in the powers and authority its priesthood needs for the sanctification of its own powers and authority. The Church has commanded the laity to approach the Almighty through the mediation of its own constructed figure.

Nothing — nothing — in the Gospels so much as suggests, let alone authorises this. And so this real man has been cunningly, persistently, quietly nudged away from the centre to the margins of the frame; and at the centre is placed a mythical Mother of Jesus, and the cruel and frightening image of the twisted body on the Cross.

Two symbols. And the keeper and interpreter and gateway to the symbols, the Roman Catholic Church. This is not just other than Jesus intended, it is in direct conflict with what Jesus intended. I said at the outset that Christ was not the man these Christians would have invented. Now I shall add that the Roman Catholic Church is not the church that Christ would have wanted to invent. Who really believes that, confronted with what it has become, he could do anything but echo T.S. Eliot?

The Catholic Church, in an age when it is on the defensive, now whimpers for tolerance: a tolerance it never extended to dissent or question when it had the power to crush them. Keep it where it is: on the defensive, on the run, and banished from the corridors of secular power. That, at least, is the plea of this Protestant atheist, a plea made not in defiance of Jesus Christ, but in his defence.

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