

perpetrator, and their families. The ambiguity in our approach to our children can amount to a blind-spot—the sort of blind-spot found more often in avenging rabbles than in supposedly civilized societies. This recognition of the unpalatable truth of human cruelty is a necessary starting point for a realistic approach to child abuse. At least for Catholics this seemingly hard-headed approach is not fatalistic: it must be balanced by our hope, which is based on the belief that human cruelty can be redeemed and can be forgiven. Such balance may not be easy to maintain, but is essential if we are to hold in check the extremes of indifference at one end, and, at the other end, the morality of the lynch mob.

- 1 See Stuart Bell M.P. *When Salem Came to the Boro: The True Story of the Cleveland Child Abuse Crisis* (London, Pan Books, 1988). Also *The Report of the Inquiry into Child Abuse in Cleveland* (London, H.M.S.O., 1988)
- 2 The best known of the many works on this subject is still Philippe Ariès *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (London, Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1962).
- 3 Germaine Greer *Sex and Destiny: The Politics of Human Fertility* (London, Secker & Warburg, 1984) p.2.
- 4 Donald Weinstein & Rudolph M. Bell *Saints & Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom 1000 — 1700* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1982).

Religion, Culture and Anarchy: the attack on the Arnoldian vision

John Milbank

The Department of Religious Studies at Newcastle University not long ago ran into controversy, because of its acceptance of a bequest which endows a post in theology on condition that its holder be a practising Christian. To some commentators this case appears as an ominous harbinger of what is to come: university departments, starved of public funds, will be increasingly forced to turn to private means, sometimes under conditions which threaten the upholding of academic objectivity. There is, however, a possibly irony in the Newcastle case, an irony which should cause us to ponder more deeply the pros and cons involved: the professorial research fellow at Newcastle has a brief to reflect,

theologically, on the situation in the inner cities, so although the appointment has been made against the background of governmental withdrawal of financial support from the universities, the results of the new professor's research are much more likely to be a critical embarrassment to the government than the usual more abstruse, more detached and 'scholarly' products of research in religious studies.

Of course, pointing up the irony is not to resolve the argument. And old whiggish purists, like Mr Tony Benn, exhibit a proper integrity when they insist that we should not look to defeat Mrs Thatcher by disinterring the power of privilege, whether princely, aristocratic or religious. However, the deeper reflection which the irony can invite is the following: does the critical function of an academic community in relation to the wider society *really* proceed from its detachment, its initial non-commitment to social, cultural or ideological formations? And as a corollary to this: is the bland, politically unthreatening, character of an academic department like the usual religious studies department *really* a reflection of its intellectual innocence, or is the notion of scholarly neutrality itself a mask which conceals the function of a realm of humanistic and cultural studies within an overall economy of public power? Below I shall try to explore these questions, but in the quite specific context of the Thatcherite upheaval, which is totally re-arranging a historically received equilibrium, a particular disposition of the interactions between politics, religion, education and culture.

In this inherited disposition of social fields a consensus was at work which one is tempted to describe as a *secular* consensus about the rational character of the public realm: a consensus that this public sphere should be expanded precisely because it *is* rational, concerned with our common humanity. This consensus built the post-war new towns, new schools with lots of plate glass and generous imitations of the playing fields of Eton; it secured and extended state-funded education; it encouraged public transport; it achieved universal health provision for all. However, I want to argue that this consensus, although making claims to common rationality, was *not* simply a secular consensus; on the contrary, it was, at least in its origins, a quasi-religious consensus. And in sweeping this consensus away, Thatcherism, although it may raise the spectre of market and bureaucratic dominance by religiously fundamentalist forces, or by new forms of fascism, is nonetheless, objectively and in itself, at one with the forces of secularisation. It is a hyper-modern, rather than a post-modern, phenomenon.

The old consensus can conveniently be dubbed 'Arnoldian'. In his work *Culture and Anarchy*¹ the Victorian poet and prophet Matthew Arnold (the anniversary of whose death falls this year) both advocated and foreshadowed a new era in public life which would leave behind the individualism and 'philistinism' nurtured by nonconformist Christianity,

and encourage a more positive, 'Germanic' view of the state as the guardian of common standards and common aspirations. Arnold self-consciously saw himself as the representative of the apparently 'lost cause' of Oxford, the great romantic but vanishing tide of resistance to the gradual disestablishment of the Church of England, and the growing institutional pluralism in education, and the banishment of 'sweetness and light'—i.e. the pursuit of beauty and truth—by purely economic, pragmatic values. Arnold insists that the 'cause' is only apparently 'lost', and conjectures that the new, anti-liberal democratic movements arising amongst the working class will prove more receptive to the 'values of Oxford' than middle-class nonconformity.² Here he correctly anticipates the conjuncture in which the Labour movement will gradually embrace his own project for a new cultural establishment acting as a counterballast to the forces of the market-place, which Arnold describes as essentially 'anarchic' in their operations and implications (and which invite, so Arnold feared, real physical anarchy on the part of a frustrated 'populace' whose appeal to 'self-interest' society will no longer have the right to gainsay).

For Arnold, as for the Oxford Movement before him, the decline in reality and influence of the Church-establishment meant that a vacuum had arisen in the heart of the state; no longer was there any accepted public doctrine, no longer did political unity centre round a shared concept of human flourishing, or a common notion of what sort of character is to be nurtured in British subjects. Yet, under the influence of his father's continentally-tinged idealism, which ran deeper within him than the influence of Newman, Arnold did not despair. He conceived public education as a new, all-inclusive, established 'broad church', not just preserving a commitment to the moral fervour of Biblical religion, but supplementing this with the 'sweetness and light' of the hellenic inheritance. It is important to realise that when Arnold rhapsodises over 'right reason', he is not thinking merely of a detached theoretical inquiry: culture, he contends, extends beyond mere *curiositas*; it is, rather, concerned with the practical development of 'perfection' in the individual human character.³ 'Right reason' concerns a process of moral discernment which develops only gradually, and which is indissociable from certain qualities of aesthetic sensibility. Although the person of culture exhibits an ethical *finesse* inaccessible for the philistine disparager of beauty who relies for his morality on revealed, fixed commandments, this finely attuned sensibility nonetheless registers an objective, natural law, instilled into things from a transcendent source. Hence when Arnold advocates more attention to reason and less to revelation, this is only apparently a secularising move: more precisely, Arnold is the advocate for a new, more classically tinged religiosity which looks to the 'inwardness' of reason for the deliverance of a new,

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transcendentally sanctioned, public consensus. Arnold is above all against the dominance of instrumental rationality, or mere 'machinery' as he calls it: in Victorian England, he argues, all that can be publicly agreed upon is that there should be *more* health, *more* industry and *more* freedom, but the 'right reason' instilled through true culture is to answer the questions what are health, industry and freedom *for*? In other words, in the full classical and mediaeval sense, what are the true ends of humankind?

Arnold's transcendentalism or 'Platonism', or whatever one wishes to call it, is admittedly vague: moreover, it is already tinged with aestheticism; Arnold the *flâneur*, the dandy, implies that, could the naked world of 'jealousy of the establishment, disputes, tea-meetings, openings of chapels, sermons'⁴ (one may well think of Grantham) only be clothed with more style, more grace, then a lighter, more delicate, yet finer existence would ensue. Bloomsbury is in sight as much as Leavis, and one can take both as manifestations of an Arnoldian era in which the expansion of the British state went hand in hand with the lingering presence of idealistic philosophy, the assumption that values were objective and accessible either to reason or emotional 'intuition', and the belief that true education was concerned with the nurturing of such values. Of course, the increase in the scope of state institutions had much to do with economic exigencies, and the need for capitalism to compromise with the new aspirations of the mass of the population. Nevertheless, the character of this response did not lie 'ready to hand' in material circumstances, and the confident progress of the state in the fields of planning, education and health owed something, in Britain, to the idealist vision of the state as guardian of the highest and the best. The dandy's modest gestures towards transcendence persist in the careful attention given to the appearances of the public realm; the garden cities, the national parks, the National Trust; the characteristic motifs adopted by the Royal Mail, by British Railways, by London Transport, whose repetition gave unobtrusive harmony and uniform character to the entire country. At the same time the vision of Arnold, Britain's first national inspector of government schools and the eldest son of the pioneer in the modern generation of Britain's 'public schools' survives in the ethos of the grammar school; in the emergence of the university study of English; in the creation of public service broadcasting; in the 1906 and 1944 Education Acts, which provided for a non-denominational study of the Bible as 'religious literature' without mediation by particular doctrinal creed; and, finally, in the setting up of new universities offering (under the initial aegis of the two ancient university foundations) the full panoply of humanistic studies. Over all these institutions, unnoticed, there hovers an ecclesiastical pall, its 'hebraic' presence nonetheless warmed by 'hellenic' sweetness and light, fraying to aestheticising

dissipation at the edges.

It is with all this that Thatcher has no patience: not for her the delicate qualms and flutterings of a refined sensibility; not for her that Oxford 'reserve' in the face of modernity which to the perplexed undergraduate from Grantham seemed to mix an addiction to triviality with elusive claims to transcendence. Thatcher realises, as Arnold and his descendants did not, that to ask what are health, industry and freedom *for* is a superfluous luxury in a capitalist system: this system works best when freedom, production and wealth—which hitherto had always appeared to be only a means—are themselves treated as ends. Now, finally, the logic of a public philosophy of 'do as you please' is to be carried through with a remorselessness undreamt of by Arnold's nonconformists (who had certainly not reached quite the stage of individualist decadence which he attributes to them). Public guardianship of aesthetic and moral values now has no place because this notion cannot be subject to the arbitrations of the principle of the sovereignty of individual choice. Hence, public service broadcasting should be dismantled: in place of a guardianship of quality, one must hand it over to the operations of market preference on the one hand, and to government judgements of national security and private moral health on the other. Hence, also, there can be no important place in education for the humanities, for philosophy, because a government confined to the upholding of a market economy and the interests of national security no longer requires men and women possessing Aristotelian *phronesis*, or a finely attuned sense of what is just and appropriate, what is due to whom and on what occasion. Thatcherism carries the process of secularisation further because it removes *ethics* from the public realm, in refusing to recognize any common goals beyond the maximisation of wealth and individual freedom. (So when Edward Heath compared to attack on higher education to Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, he had it exactly right.)

This extrusion of ethics *might* appear to be belied by the puritanical bent within Thatcherism. What, however, one has here is really a tendency to reduce morality to disciplined self-control, permitting a better economic functioning on the part of the individual, along with a preference for further reducing this purely 'private' morality to a set of simple prescriptions which minimises the amount of time one needs to spend in moral anguishing and liberates one's energies for the essentially amoral tasks of so-called 'enterprise'. It is not that the Thatcherites *deliberately* reduce morality to what is economically functional, but rather that their preferred virtues, which supposedly give evidence of our 'spiritual' status —discipline, self-reliance, literal truthfulness, preparedness to take risks—are all more to do with motivations than with ends, and therefore imply no public, substantive goals, but only the

formal regulations of the market place and bureaucratic control. This diagnosis simply extends Arnold's interpretation of the moralism of nineteenth-century nonconformity, but one needs, I think, to note, that *this* part of Thatcherite ideology exists alongside, and could well be overtaken by, a much more purely hedonistic celebration of capitalist culture which it has itself helped to nurture. Even the contemporary successors of the nonconformists, the neo-evangelicals of our day, embrace an increasingly *ersatz* religion which is not so much to do with disciplining for the market as with an elevation of the processes of economic risk and reward to the status of religious significance in themselves, as the safeguards of 'spiritual' freedom and evidence of divine grace and favour.

Thatcherism aims, admittedly, to eschew aesthetic decadence, the loitering of the *flâneur* with intent not merely to work, not merely to choose, but also to gaze: this, perhaps, is the secret reason for its profound homophobia. Yet in the banishing of all concern with public style, with the appearance of the common surfaces of things, which is the level at which we interact, the only level at which we really, concretely exist, it is Thatcherism itself which is truly decadent. Instead of resting content with the succession of surfaces, this credo suggests that instead we should pursue, perversely, merely the means of our own public engagement—namely our own subjectivity or freedom—and merely the aggregate of concrete surface objects—namely wealth, in the abstract. And yet, however often we may point out this decadence (and this can degenerate into obsession) it seems that our public institutions are themselves too mired in the same degeneracy for them to be able to mount a principled resistance. This is, perhaps, for two reasons: firstly, Arnoldian vision was in decline long before Thatcher; secondly, the Arnoldian vision was always a deficient one.

The Arnoldian vision was in decline long before Thatcher: the classicist-idealist tradition in English philosophy already gave way in the inter-war years to a renewed empiricism which eventually could not sustain notions of objective goodness and beauty. Philosophy and, considerably later, literary, historical and social studies began to confine themselves to the supposedly detached classification of positions, theories, and social and textual structures. Analytic philosophy's most ambitious claim in its English heyday (before it crossed the Atlantic and became something more interesting) was to be able to resolve conceptual confusions between 'matters of fact' and 'matters of value' and so to confine ethical and aesthetic matters to a non-discussable realm of personal choice and preference. The 'brilliantined positivists' of the 1950's who still stalk the provincial universities of the 1980's, were, for all their greyness, in a sense portents of our contemporary market hedonism. For they helped to *banish* from universities serious areas of

public discourse—about politics, about moral issues. The Arnoldian illusion of a rational viewpoint above the ‘interests’ of the various classes still survived in this period, but it had now lost its Platonic grounding, so that transcendence no longer consisted in the attainment of a higher standpoint of virtue and aesthetic appreciation, but simply in the cold gaze of truth upon the many varieties of non-rational preference. In too many disciplines—in philosophy, English, history, sociology—the illusion has been fostered that in a university one discovers special privileged words which re-express, re-describe, or re-interpret the varieties of social discourse in a way which renders them immune to the ordinary preferences, prejudices and practical purposes of such discourse. As for Arnold, culture was still to stand in judgement, but now this was a cold judgement whose claim was to position and classify, yet not to advise. Once the universities had refused the old humanist rationale for the relevance of liberal studies to the political realm, it is not wholly surprising that their political masters should eventually judge these studies to be a superfluous luxury or at least as undeserving of public money. Of course *now* there comes a great revival of moral and political philosophy, now philosophy recognises that there is no reason to see judgements of value as any more subjective or imposed than our other judgements. The Owl of Minerva has taken its flight; but its medium of transport remains, as ever, belatedness.

The universities, then, had already claimed an agnostic transcendence of such merely human questions as: What is industry for? What is freedom for? So they can hardly complain about Thatcherism, which is, as it were, ordinary language philosophy in action. The louder Thatcher insists that commitment to freedom of choice is *all* we have in common, the more our secularized society knows this to be really true in present practice, and thus one sees desperate expedients, like the attempt to ground socialism in the principle of maximisation of choice alone. This attempt ignores the way in which over-concentration on libertarian goals on the left in the 1960's in fact helped to pave the way for the libertarian right—such that Mick Jagger has to join the brilliantine boys in the dock as a forerunner to Thatcherism. The transition is a logical process, because, if one maintains freedom of choice and expression as the ultimate principle, then it remains the case that the market is the most efficient, most minimally violent way of mediating diverse choices. One may say that there should also be a real, substantive equality of opportunity to choose, and that this entails an equality of provision of resources for choice, including educational resources. But in selecting which educational resources to provide for people, one is moulding their capacities, developing certain skills rather than others and so one has already started to choose *for* them—because there is no skill not partially defined by the end it has in view. To choose publicly a certain provision

of means for freedom is also to decide publicly the ends of true freedom. (Reflections like these still made sense to thinkers like R.H. Tawney, but are largely incomprehensible to modern Labour party pundits, who tend to water down what is meant by 'positive freedom' to equality of opportunity alone.)

In this sense, then, the Arnoldian point of view remains valid: one can *only* resist the philosophy of 'do as you please', of unfettered market freedom, one can only add equality to freedom, if one is open, beyond libertarianism, to the idea of public goods, to the view that we should publicly encourage certain aesthetic appearances, certain kinds of human character rather than others. It is not an accident that socialism flourished in an era when the 'lost cause' had a final fling before the shades of secular night fell upon us all.⁵ And yet, as I have pointed out, Arnold's new establishment, his 'new church'—the universities, the BBC, the Christian churches themselves—have singularly failed to develop a culture of shared values. And this is not really surprising.

For the Arnoldian vision was always a deficient one: it fell into the Hegelian trap of supposing that the modern state could really be the equivalent of the antique city-state and support a *paideia*, meaning an educational process which is the nurture of its citizens in human flourishing, understood as participation in political processes. There were two things wrong with this. First of all, the modern state is essentially alien to the notion of participation, it is born out of the perceived need for there to be a centre of absolute sovereign power in the face of irresolvable religious and moral conflict. Hence Arnoldian education may have helped to train bureaucrats and schoolmasters but it has not helped to train *citizens*, and this appears scarcely surprising when one notes that Arnold himself held in disdain both local government and corporate associations not directly subordinate to the state.⁶ The second thing wrong with Arnold's vision is this: the growth of a consensus about values which supports *paideia* only occurs in the context of a *tradition*, and in a real sense the modern state does not situate itself in a tradition—its paradigm in the United States of America, which claims to accept as citizens people from each and every tradition with favour given to none. But, going much further back, one could even claim that the writers of the New Testament, and the Church Fathers, already helped to separate *paideia* from the *polis* by promoting a new community of primal allegiance and primary nurture—the church—outside the political state. In a way the modern attempt to re-establish a state monopoly on education begins to look, historically, like a strange anomalous attempt to revert to antiquity. Because the *polis* cannot really be reproduced, the latest, Thatcherite attempt to impose an 'Arnoldian' common curriculum in fact reinforces precisely the 'philistine' conjunction of merely aggregate public goals with a private morality reduced to mere

self-control or 'freedom through strength'. But earlier Arnoldian programmes — like Leavisite English studies — themselves already sustained the modern *political* fiction of a 'culture' detached from community, and accessible to a properly purged intuitive sensibility.

In the modern world the communities that might support genuine notions of the common good, and common standards of character and beauty, do not exist at the political level. And yet it may be that it is only these communities, which are often religious in character, which are able—for the logically clear reasons I have tried to point out—to go beyond the *rationale* of right-wing libertarianism and sustain a critique of this new political hegemony. In support of this contention I would point to Jesse Jackson's campaign in America with its notably religious and ethical tone, in contrast to the world-wide failures of both Marxism and state socialism.

And this returns me, via the question of religion and community, to the question of religious studies in the university. Reading through Ninian Smart's inaugural address as professor of Religious Studies in the University of Lancaster—given in the *Annus Mirabilis*, 1968—one gets the impression that, on the whole, his agenda fitted into the retreat from the Arnoldian vision I have already described.⁷ Envisaging a kind of *Literae Humaniores* on a world scale, Smart wanted an external, objective description of religious traditions, plus a certain scope for these traditions to 'express' themselves theologically, leaving the place of honour for analytic philosophy to get conceptually clear, though not to judge, what the different traditions were trying to say. And, on the whole, religious studies has tended to be dominated by too condescending an attitude to religious traditions, treating their intellectual explorations as mere 'expressions' of a faith with which the outsider can supposedly empathize and resonate, rather than as exercises in reason undertaken according to their own diverse notions of rational criteria. On the other hand, at its very worst—and more in the United States, perhaps, than at Lancaster—religious studies has maintained the Arnoldian vision in the shape of searching for an ultimate object of religious reference, or an essential religious experience, or a universal religious culture of which the particular religious traditions would be themselves mere 'expressions'. Both tendencies, especially in their implications for religious education in schools, cannot be held to be finally unrelated to an exaggerated respect for the political state as the community of primary loyalty.

But if, today, we now recognize, unlike Arnold, the importance of participation, and of communities below the level of the state, then we should realize that our difficult, perhaps impossible, quest for some measure of moral and aesthetic consensus between different traditions, cannot be won by trying to *bypass* those traditions. On the contrary, we must help to give these traditions, when they are serious, substantive and of long-standing, a voice in the public conversation. And this means that within

religious studies departments of universities we must abandon the claim to a spurious perspective of final judgement on all traditions, and instead encourage the development of their different intellectual perspectives according to their own lights, and, where possible or sensible or necessary, bring them into dialogue. One should note that whereas the claim to represent a purely academic, rational culture, unbound by tradition, is *necessarily* 'ideological' and self-deluding, it is at least *possible* for a tradition to become clearer about its own social insertion, because real traditions always include a self-awareness of their own supportive communities.

But this more positive attitude to traditions, if embraced in academic life, might imply, in certain circumstances, that the holding of certain beliefs sometimes helps to qualify one for the holding of a certain job. For, as Alasdair Macintyre points out in his most recent book, it is only a modern prejudice to suppose that personal commitments are irrelevant to certain rational tasks.⁸ Beyond the level of formal logic there is no single 'reason' without presuppositions, there are only many different, complexly overlapping, traditions of reason. So to suggest, in *some* circumstances, that one requires for a post a Christian, a Jew, a Buddhist or a Nietzschean atheist would not be so much to ask for a person with a particular 'inner' attitude as for someone with a certain irreplaceable intellectual training, a certain facility, a certain linguistic competence. By contrast, the preference since the eighteenth century for a single 'neutral' enquiry in philosophy and the humanities may have much to do with the academic community's all too intimate relationship with the sovereign state, a relationship surreptitiously confirmed precisely at the point where academics claim to stand aloof to public issues. But today, unless the many 'traditions of reason'—the local, rather than the metropolitan logics—are represented in universities, these institutions may once again fail to make a contribution to the vital public debates of our time.

- 1 Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge University Press, 1960).
- 2 Arnold, 63.
- 3 Arnold, 43–45.
- 4 Arnold, 58.
- 5 For the argument that some aspects of socialism are 'anti-modernist' in character, see my article 'On Baseless Suspicion: Christianity and the crisis of socialism' in *New Blackfriars*, January 1988, pp. 4–19.
- 6 Arnold, 62.
- 7 Ninian Smart, 'The Principles and Meaning of the Study of Religion' (Lancaster University Library, 1968).
- 8 Alasdair Macintyre, *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* (Duckworth, London, 1988) p.399 *et passim*.

With minor changes, this article is the text of the Annual Public Lecture given in the Department of Religious Studies of the University of Lancaster in April 1988.