Comment

A paradise lost

When the British went to the polls on June 11, just how much thought—or, rather, how little—did they give to the issues which the Church says should be in the minds of responsible citizens? Writing on May 29 about 'the appeal to self-interest which lies at the heart of the Conservative campaign', *The Guardian* said 'the surprising and encouraging thing is that so many voters continue to resist it. But they do—three out of every five of them.' The British are made of rather better stuff than some politicians would like to think. But measurements of good intentions are no guide to how people are actually going to vote.

All the same, there is one thing we can say for certain: Mrs Thatcher should thank her lucky stars that Catholics hardly ever read Church documents. Three weeks before the election the bishops published some guidelines for voting, with a list of issues for the good Catholic voter to keep in mind. And, just before then, the Vatican-based secretariat of this autumn's synod on the Laity put out the working paper for the Synod, a synthesis of the reports from all the bishops' conferences round the world. Any Catholic who had read these two documents could not easily have voted for Mrs Thatcher and slept the sleep of the just afterwards.

The Vatican document bewails the growth of doctrines of self-interest 'at an alarming rate', the disproportions in opportunity, the scandal of mass unemployment, the marginalising of people through 'the pure logic of profit, materialism and consumerism'. Both documents say that lay people ought to be concerned with politics—always, though, 'for the common good'.

How far all this is from the Thatcherite rhetoric about ladder-climbing, its hymns to self-centredness. Yet how little does the idea that we are bound together, that we somehow have a responsibility for each other, now touch people—at any rate in Britain. The well- intentioned southerner may feel uneasy about the jobless northerner, but good intentions alone are not enough.

All sorts of reasons are being suggested why the British electorate has voted in the way it has. What is rarely mentioned is that political attitudes are partly shaped by a society's mythologies, by the interpretations of the world offered to it by its culture-manufacturers.

The art critics—some of them, at any rate—have been slamming the current London exhibition 'A Paradise Lost' (Barbican Art Gallery until 19 July; illustrated catalogue published by Lund Humphries £14.95). Undoubtedly there are things to criticise, but it is only people who feel

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they are being got at who go in for such extravagant assaults. What, though, has this collection of pictures and photographs got to say about the mythologies of Thatcher's Britain? After all, its subtitle is 'The Neo-Romantic Imagination in Britain 1935—55'.

It says something to us precisely because it is about a trend in ways of seeing the world belonging to a very different Britain, the Britain which fought against Nazism, produced the Beveridge Report and voted for the welfare state. On show in this exhibition are samples of the work not only of Graham Sutherland, John Piper and Henry Moore but also of some formerly prominent but now little-remembered painters like Michael Ayrton and Leslie Hurry. These are the artists who, for better or worse, did much to shape the vision of some of us who were adolescents at that time. Little of their work was explicitly political, and some of them would never have dreamed of voting Labour. All the same, these neo-romantics were, in their different ways, conscious of a profound link between the human being and that being's world, and a frequently recurring theme in their work is 'the quest'—the search for the good or the holy or the wonderful lying beyond the picture. They were deeply conscious of the spiritual deficiencies of what the critic Geoffrey Grigson called a culture of 'cold ham and salad'.

At its worst their work was narrowly nationalistic and escapist, and a lot of it was not quite good enough to last. Maybe Moore is the only one exhibited in 'A Paradise Lost' who is going to have a firm place in Western art history. But this neo-romantic phase, and its ideals, temporarily affected most of the arts in Britain, including the then-influential cinema. It was the growth of a trans-national mass culture, and of abstract expressionism, that ended it.

It would be daft to be nostalgic about the forties. 'A Paradise Lost' is interesting because the artists exhibited there helped to spread a world-view different from the current one. At this moment it is tempting to look around and shrug shoulders and say there is no solution except flight, for the ad-man has conquered on every front and clearly even well-intentioned people have swallowed the mythology of consumerism lock, stock and barrel. Facing more and yet more years of Thatcher rule, is there anything more for a publication like *New Blackfriars* to say?

We believe that the ad-man, or, rather, the Supreme Ad-woman, has not got us under control for good. There are at least a few writers and artists and thinkers who even now are beginning to conceive far more powerful and more humane mythologies. It will take time for these to become part of the wider society's world-view, but surely their time will come, and meanwhile it is our job to cheer these sort of people on.

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