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The Fear of Christian Sincerity? The Shape of Things to Come

Monday, February 26, 2007



David Cameron is the leader of the Conservative Party in Britain, a post to which he was elected after just four years in Parliament. His goal is to lead his party to victory in Britain's next national election, and then to serve as Prime Minister. Michael Portillo is also a well-known leader in the Conservative Party, and a man of considerable controversy. He has added to that controversy in recent days by attacking Mr. Cameron.

Mr. Portillo made his own bid to lead the Conservative Party, but was unsuccessful. The party has been in disarray since the premiership of former Prime Minister John Major, and many Britons remember very little of any Prime Minister other than Tony Blair. Now Mr. Portillo attacks David Cameron for something rather unusual — he evidently believes in God.

Portillo launched his attack in yesterday's edition of *The Sunday Times* [London]. He began his article with these words:

When last week David Cameron revealed that he hopes his daughter will go to a Church of England school, his aides rushed to say that he attends Sunday worship in Kensington not as a ploy to help her chances but out of genuine religious conviction. I would be more reassured to hear that the Tory leader goes to church because that is what it takes to get a child into the best of state schools, not because he is a believer.

You read that right. Mr. Portillo clearly would prefer Mr. Cameron to be a hypocrite than a believer in God. His words are astounding, and demand attention on both sides of the Atlantic.

Portillo is not satisfied to attack the leader of his own party. He also insists that Prime Minister Tony Blair also believes in God, and rather sincerely. As Portillo observes of Blair, "He is apparently serious about religion. Reportedly he takes on holiday 12th-century theological texts for poolside reading. A year ago he told us that he had prayed to God about his decision to join the American invasion of Iraq and that, since he is a believer, it is how God will judge his actions that most concerns him."



So Mr. Portillo fears a national leader who fears the judgment of God. One might think that we should instead fear the man who fears no judgment. Not Mr. Portillo. "I worry because men of power who take instruction from unseen forces are essentially fanatics," he writes.

He also provides interesting background analysis for his fears:

In Britain the problem may seem more theoretical than real because Christianity in this country today is by and large a gentle thing. We should remember that it was shaped that way for good political reasons.

At one time religion was the greatest threat to the integrity and safety of the realm. Under the brief reign of Bloody Mary 300 Protestants, including bishops, were burnt at the stake for refusing to accept Catholicism.

Mary's Protestant successor, her half-sister Elizabeth I, was determined that religious struggles would not wreck her kingdom. She dismissed most religious controversy as "disputes over trifles" and forbade clergymen from straying from their biblical texts into questions of rite or politics. She crafted a Protestantism that created as few problems as possible for Catholics — for example, one that tolerated candles and crucifixes.

If today the Church of England is wishy-washy and middle-of-the-road, that is no accident. It is the long-term result of Elizabeth's design. Britain has benefited enormously from a weak clergy that has mainly remained aloft from politics. Britain's established church, headed by the monarch, has made few demands of our leaders or people.

Clearly, Mr. Portillo wants his nation's leaders to hold to a faith that is as "gentle," "wishy-washy," and "middle-of-the-road" as possible. In fact, he seems to demand that Britain's political leadership forfeit any belief in God — or at least any belief in God that matters.



He insists that he is not a "militant secularist," but then writes:

But if our political leaders cite faith as their political guide, then how do we distinguish ourselves from the religious extremists who wreak havoc in our world? It may seem harmless to "do God" a little in an essentially moderate country like ours. But once you claim that He is judging you or telling you what to do, there is no logical defence against another who claims that his God is instructing him to blow up discotheques or fly planes into buildings. If one God sent the Americans into Iraq, why shouldn't another insist that by every means it be defended against infidel attack?

My guess is that historians will look back on the early 21st century in puzzlement. How was it possible, they will ask, that man had such deep scientific understanding but clung so tenaciously to his gods?

And, finally:

It would be good to know from Cameron that for him going to church is just a metaphor for wanting to be a good man and a good leader, and that he hears no voices, receives no divine instructions and looks only for the judgment of his fellow citizens. We could then sleep more easily at night.

William Rees-Mogg, a former editor of the paper and current member of the House of Lords, responded in today's edition of *The Times*:

*We live in an age when modernists regard religion with something approaching panic. It is like the Devil's attitude to Holy Water. There was a comic example of Christianophobia in *The Sunday Times* yesterday. Michael Portillo, who used himself to be seen in Brompton Oratory, was hyperventilating at the idea of David Cameron going to church. "I worry," he wrote, "because men of power who take instruction from unseen forces are essentially fanatics . . . I would be more reassured to hear that the Tory leader goes to church because that is what it takes to get a child into the best of state schools, not because he is a believer."*

Perhaps this neurotic response to Mr Cameron's habit of going to church reflects Mr Portillo's recognition that religion is again becoming an important influence on society. Many of the current news stories show that religion is back in public consciousness; for those who feel uneasy about religion, that is unwelcome.

Panic seems just about the right word for Mr. Portillo's broadside. This kind of attack seems very strange to American observers . . . but for how long? Similar arguments are now heard in some quarters here. Americans used to worry that their politicians were insincere in their identification with Christianity. How long before they are more concerned that their leaders could be *sincere* believers?

