

What Is Happening on the Intellectual Scene in England?

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General Background

IT IS TYPICAL of high culture in England to be allergic to the notion of an intelligentsia, which is deemed by the reading public to be a concept distinctive to the French, though the more historically minded are aware of its origins in nineteenth-century Russia.¹ And yet principled thinking plays a major part in cultural life—the advances of demotic style and idiom through the “dumbing down” effect of contemporary communications media notwithstanding.

The two ideas most influential in England, at least until recently, have been, first, cultural empiricism (the English are rarely happy for long unless they can amass, or at least keep in touch with, concrete facts) and, secondly, political constitutionalism (taken as the key to the relatively harmonious historical development of the civil society). We must add that, since the late seventeenth century, natural science has enjoyed especial esteem. Where no other social, philosophical, or religious commitment intervenes, an admiring confidence in the explanatory achievements of the physical and life sciences remains the “default position” of educated English people.² The interface of religion and science is consequently the single most important area in which Christian apologetics must succeed.

Owing to the individualism—the tolerance of, and delight in, individuality and indeed idiosyncrasy—which has marked the culture for centuries,

¹ S. Collini, *Absent Minds. Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: 2006).

² For an egregious example of such scientism, see N. Fearn, *Philosophy: The Latest Answers to the Oldest Questions* (London: 2005).

perhaps since the Anglo-Saxon period,³ the English do not easily warm to “schools” of thought. Those that have existed in modern times (English Hegelianism in philosophy between 1870 and 1920, Marxism in social criticism in the 1930s and 1970s) have been relatively short-lived. Today Post-Modernism remains rather marginal, and is best observed in some departments of English: its constant “playful” refusal to settle truth-claims does not go down well with a “common sense” oriented culture. By and large, then, thinkers are influential as individual voices, a pattern especially clearly discernible in the Victorian epoch (Coleridge, Carlyle, Newman, Ruskin, John Stuart Mill, Arnold) but equally true now.⁴ It remains the case, as for the nineteenth century, that in quality journalism (whose flagship is *The Times Literary Supplement*) the best imaginative writers and commentators on politics—in the broad sense of that word—enjoy considerable respect. This reflects the regard in which the English continue to hold their own literature, and their belief in the political genius of the nation (its capacity for moderation, negotiated compromise, inclusiveness—though these qualities were called into question during the breakdown of the working relations between organized labor and the State in the 1970s and 80s, and remain vulnerable to bouts of cynicism about political life since).

The formal study of philosophy and theology (unlike that of history) carries little kudos. The public image of philosophy as useless and even trivial derives from continuing impressions of the ordinary language analysis of the hegemonic Oxford philosophy of the period 1930 to 1980, for which philosophical problems were deemed to be largely pseudo-issues arising from conceptual confusions. The word “theological” has attracted connotations of remoteness and impracticality, just as “doctrinal” and “dogmatic” have come to mean doctrinaire and carelessness of evidence. This suggests not only the anti-metaphysical bent of the culture but also the intellectual weakness of the historically dominant form of Christianity, Anglicanism, which, with some few exceptions, has been feeble in systematic thinking (though strong on historical theology).

Theology

Academic theology in English universities is on the defensive at the present time. “Religious Studies,” a phenomenological discipline deriving ulti-

³ For the (obviously, partial) continuity of English attitudes from the Anglo-Saxon period, see P. Ackroyd, *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination* (London: 2002).

⁴ Thus the late Maurice Cowling saw no need to abandon a basically prosopographical approach to intellectual history when he reached the last, near-contemporary and contemporary, instalment of his *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England*, published as: *Volume III: Accommodations* (Cambridge: 2001).

mately from the German research universities of the early nineteenth century (notably Berlin), acquired its first institutional base at the University of Lancaster in the 1960s, and is now dominant in most of the erst-while theology faculties. Many of the latter have changed their names, either by bracketing together “Theology and Religious Studies” or by suppressing the word “theology” altogether. Attempts to combine the two methodologically—as at Cambridge—with a view to securing the continuing support both of ordinand-sponsoring bodies, such as the Church of England dioceses, and of secular-minded university senates or bureaucracies are not widely credited. South of the Scottish border, where academic theology manages to persist, it suffers from a manifest ecclesial deficit. Even where certain posts remain tied to holy Orders in the Church of England (three canon-professorships at Oxford, one at Durham) there is a widespread reluctance to affirm an epistemological link between theology and the life of the Church.⁵ As the Catholic lay theologian Dr. Gavin D’Costa has pointed out, by comparison with the English nineteenth century (in, for example, different constituent colleges of the University of London) modernity has homogenized the university, making it “a place of rational discussion, without adequate attention to tradition-specific forms of enquiry or the *telos* of *ratio*.”⁶

Theologies which make comprehensive claims for hermeneutical sufficiency are especially controversial. Unlike Scotland, English Barthianism has proved unable to sustain itself in a university setting. An attempt to institutionalize an inculturated Barthianism (notably by invoking the somewhat cryptic theological thought of Samuel Taylor Coleridge) under the leadership of the United Reformed theologian Colin Gunton at King’s College London, did not survive his death, though it left behind a journal, the *International Journal for the Study of Theology*.

Seemingly more successful, though far more mired in polemics, is “Radical Orthodoxy,” arguably the first fully indigenous theological movement in England since Tractarianism (or possibly, given the latter’s neo-patristic and therefore derivative character, the “Cambridge Platonism” of the seventeenth century). Radical Orthodoxy derives from the work of John Milbank, a Methodist turned Anglican, who, under the influence of his wife, also an academic, has identified himself with the Church of England’s Anglo-Catholic wing. For Radical Orthodoxy, which first came to prominence in Cambridge but whose “site” is now the University of Nottingham, most secular thought in the West—including Liberalism in its

⁵ G. D’Costa, *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy, and Nation* (Oxford: 2005).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

ostensibly theological form—is parasitic on revelation. The *de facto* evolution of that Western thought which now, in Post-Modernism, has ended in a nihilistic version of Nominalism, confronts contemporaries with the challenge to embrace Christian Trinitarianism as the only kind of thinking that can deflect metaphysical despair while doing justice to human “otherness” and thereby facilitate the securing of social peace.⁷ The journal *Modern Theology* is chiefly Radical Orthodox in orientation. But the perception that Radical Orthodoxy takes no intellectual hostages has aroused much academic hostility to it (notably in Oxford and Cambridge); at the same time, its sweeping characterizations of writers from the Church’s past of whom it disapproves (such as Scotus) have gained it a reputation for slipshod and inaccurate historical reportage. Finally, Radical Orthodoxy lacks ecclesial moorings. It has been described as a theology in search of a Church.

Not that Radical Orthodoxy could readily find an intimate union of Church and theology should it look toward English Catholicism. The lack of an adequate institutional base for Catholic theology in England is striking. A number of Catholics are teaching theology and ecclesiastical history in British universities (especially at Cambridge), but this is not in relation to a syllabus devised with Catholic concerns in mind. Indeed, a number of such Catholics have specialized in figures who are Anglican (Paul Murray at Durham, an expert on the Cambridge Anglican thinker Donald MacKinnon), or Jewish (Michael Purcell at Edinburgh, a Levinas scholar). Heythrop College, a Jesuit-run institution within the University of London, functions largely as an ecumenical college; the seminaries and the study-house of the Dominicans at Oxford naturally concentrate on ordination courses. D’Costa has argued for the creation of a Catholic university in Britain not least for this reason, namely, to free a theology “held captive within the Berlin-Babylonian University,”⁸ but also—along the lines of Newman’s *The Idea of a University*—to permit a new “marriage of the disciplines” in a symphonic Catholic Christian world-view.⁹ (Conceivably, the Maryvale Institute of adult theological education in the archdiocese of Birmingham could eventually serve such a role.)

Philosophy

Perhaps the most striking thing in philosophy is the—at any rate partial—crumbling of the barrier wall between English analytical philosophy and

⁷ For a good, brief characterisation, see R. Shortt, *God’s Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation* (London: 2005), 103–25.

⁸ D’Costa, *Theology in the Public Square*, 215.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 184–95.

its more metaphysical—or at least epistemologically diverse—Continental counterpart. In one sense, analytical philosophy has lost its dominance. In another, its concerns are merging with an appropriation of the Continental tradition in what really needs to be called not English, or even British, but “Anglo-American” philosophical culture.¹⁰

Thanks especially to the Oxford logician Michael Dummett (as it happens, a Catholic), a new awareness dawned that the Anglo-American philosophical attempt to formalize language as a bearer of propositional meaning through contemporary logic really derives from Frege, who through a common inspiration, has an affinity to Husserl (and thus phenomenology) and Brentano (and so some version, at least, of Scholasticism).¹¹ This discovery boosted the movement of “Analytic Thomism,” whose beginnings may be associated with Peter Geach at the University of Leeds and his wife G. E. M. Anscombe (now deceased) at Cambridge and which today is actively represented by Professor John Haldane at St. Andrews across the Scottish border. But as Dummett admits, while “most of us [that is, Anglo-American philosophers] believe once more that philosophy has a constructive task, . . . so thoroughly was the demolition [by earlier philosophers of the analytic school] accomplished, that the rebuilding is of necessity slow.”¹² Though “logical positivism” has few if any defenders, the abandonment of ground once serenely occupied by such English disciples of the Vienna Circle as A. J. Ayer has not necessarily been noticed by the “metropolitan elite,” much less the media establishment.

Allied to the (inchoate) recovery of metaphysics has been a more critical reading of the later philosophy of Wittgenstein, who enjoyed in the 1960s and 70s an almost oracular status. In particular, Wittgenstein’s apparent insistence that the task of philosophy is restricted to describing the ontological implications of human practice (including notably its linguistic dimension, in “language games,” which are also “forms of life”) is now often regarded as excessively severe. Why, it is asked, should philosophy not revise as well as describe? (The contrast derives from the Oxford philosopher Peter Strawson for whom “descriptive metaphysics” was acceptable, “revisionist metaphysics” was not.)

Characterization of academic philosophy as currently practiced in England must take into account, however, a greater pluralism than in the second half of the twentieth century. Oxford is no longer so dominant.

¹⁰ There is a typical example of this trend in S. Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard* (Oxford: 2001). I am indebted to conversation with Father Francis Kerr, O.P., of Blackfriars Edinburgh for help with this section.

¹¹ M. Dummett, *The Origins of Analytic Philosophy* (London: 1993).

¹² Dummett, *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* (London: 1991), 1.

At the University of Edinburgh, which early sponsored a Department of Artificial Intelligence and Perception, “cognitive science,” a synthesis of philosophy and neuro-physiology, prevails. The Universities of Essex and Warwick are redoubts (not necessarily much admired) of Post-Modernism. At the University of Reading, Professor John Cottingham, who edits the highly analytic journal *Ratio*, has now espoused—perhaps owing to his recent conversion to Catholicism—a broadly theistic philosophy of religion based on disparate metaphysical, literary, and religious sources, as well as psycho-analysis, which criticizes Enlightenment thinking in the name of a fuller rationality.¹³

The single most widely accepted revision of an earlier reductionist philosophical culture is undoubtedly in ethics. There the recovery of Platonic-Aristotelean (and in some cases frankly Thomist) “virtue ethics” is the order of the day. Such an ethics of virtue could always be found as a distinctly minority report in the otherwise subjectivist or Kantian climate of thinking about morals in the middle decades of the twentieth century in England. Though not without its critics, such “Neo-Aristoteleanism,” as it is often called, is now well entrenched.¹⁴

History

Marxist historiography has almost disappeared from British universities, in contrast to the position in the 1960s and 70s. To a limited degree, Post-modernism has some impact on historical studies, not least where it is allied to “oral history,” to which its themes of discourse in relation to control and power are germane.¹⁵ Most British historians, however, adopt a briskly matter-of-fact approach to their discipline. They consider historical study to be based on the close reading of texts together with a basic sympathy of understanding generated by immersion in the artefacts and mentefacts of some given period. Thus documentary analysis and close-up interpretation are the order of the day. It has always been difficult to get a *Methodenstreit* going in English historiography.¹⁶ Though such topics as the “history of the body,” linked to the “history of gender,” are investigated here and there, with historiography subsumed into

¹³ J. Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge: 2005).

¹⁴ Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the Passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics* (Cambridge: 1998).

¹⁵ See C. Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians* (Harlowe: 2005). I am grateful to correspondence with Dr. Simon Ditchfield of the University of York for bringing me up to speed on recent trends in the study of history.

¹⁶ M. Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism, 1870–1970* (Cambridge: 2005), 218.

cultural studies, the predominant emphasis falls on public narrative history of a more or less traditional kind: “traditional” inasmuch as it joins, say, Thucydides with Ranke. For the median British historian, history writing consists in an interpretation which places evidenced facts in a wider context furnishing an “interesting, coherent and useful narrative about the past.”¹⁷

Curiously, such public narrative history has disappeared from much secondary education, and as a consequence is disappearing likewise from popular consciousness.¹⁸ Among the general population there is an increasing vacuum where historical knowledge of England’s past should be.

At the most sophisticated level of professional historians themselves there has been a revival of interest in the origins of the Reformation, which to some extent has created a new divide between Catholic and Protestant writers (though some non-Catholics, such as Christopher Haigh, have taken the Catholic “side”). But the use of English/British history to mount a critique of Catholicism—the staple of anti-Catholic feeling in the nineteenth and early twentieth century—is now rare. (A scandalous—but instructive—exception is the burning of the Pope in effigy at Lewes, the country town of Sussex, on “Guy Fawkes Day,” which commemorates the discovery of a Recusant plot to detonate gunpowder as James VI opened Parliament.) Where the educated public is concerned, the view that the English Reformation entailed major losses, not only artistic but also spiritual and in the tenor of the life of local communities, is rather widely diffused.¹⁹

The most important debate in public narrative history concerns the main lines of the development of the English/British nation state. One school of writers insists that, owing to, in particular, the Celtic cultures on the geographic periphery, the British Isles have never been homogeneous, and that their best future lies in a multi-culturalism which would affirm not only the national and regional loyalties of (Northern) Irishmen, Scots, Welsh, Cornishmen, and others, but extend the same parity to ethnic minorities, notably those born of economically fuelled immigration from the “New Commonwealth,” that is, countries such as India

¹⁷ J. Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: 2000), 13.

¹⁸ For anxieties about the teaching of history in secondary schools—concerns shared by successive British governments of differing political complexion—see R. Phillips, “Contesting the Past, Constructing the Future. History, Identity and Politics in Schools,” in *History and Heritage: Consuming the Past in Contemporary Culture*, ed. J. Arnold, K. Davies, and S. Ditchfield (Shaftesbury: 1998), 223–35.

¹⁹ Notable here is E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven and London: 1992).

and Pakistan, which lack a sizeable British-ethnic component, and, more recently from Eastern Europe and elsewhere.²⁰ For other writers, however, these factors are being over-stated. The bulk of the population of the island recognizes itself as English, and the chief thread which unifies its historical story is the development of the English nation-state which came to include Wales (by conquest) and Scotland (by dynastic, and subsequently parliamentary, union). Catholicism, in the opinion of the present writer, has, potentially, a unique role to play in this debate—and not just the debate but the construction of culture in a pertinent sense, because the Catholic Church combines a continuous presence in England since the formation of the first Anglo-Saxon kingdoms with a commitment to the Celtic (or Anglo-Celtic) peoples of the British Isles (above all Ireland) as well as commanding loyalties among more recent immigrant populations (notably Italian, Polish, South and East Asian). It can present itself both as quintessentially English and as generously inter-ethnic at the same time.

Conclusion

The present-day intellectual scene in England carries mixed messages for the Catholic Church.

It seems true to say that, thanks to the modest revival of metaphysics and the continued growth of virtue ethics, the future of philosophy is more encouraging for the Church's mission than is that of theology, which suffers from a lack of ecclesial rooting. (From this point of view, such influence as Liberation theology enjoyed in the United Kingdom of the 1980s was beneficial to the degree that it drew attention to the proper location of theology in the Church—albeit, for Liberation theology, a “popular” Church rather than the mysteric organism of the integral hierarchical body.) The recovery of ecclesiality is the greatest need of theology in England—and this alone can render theology a help, not a hindrance, to the Church's mission.

Historiographically, few writers would now openly embrace the once influential “Whig philosophy of history,” for which ever-widening constitutional liberties, secured not least by the sixteenth-century triumph of reformed religion, was the manifest destiny of Englishmen (and, to a lesser extent, women). Doubts about the unidirectional nature of the relevant historical trends, estimates of the rights and wrongs of the constitutional crises of (especially) the seventeenth century, and awareness of the more oligarchic character of English society after a Reformation

²⁰ N. Douglas, *The Isles: A History* (London: 1999).

settlement, which by the transfer of Church land and patronage massively strengthened the territorial nobility, are among the factors concerned. Attitudes to the historical past retain a relevance to the “image,” and to some extent the fortunes, of the Catholic Church. For many English people, Catholicism remains a “foreign” religion, a prejudice aided by the High Anglican insistence that “Roman Catholicism” is a consequence of the Counter-Reformation, while pre-Reformation history and sanctity belongs in principle to the *Ecclesia anglicana*.²¹ The Catholic Church in England needs to counter this impression by deliberate and reiterated reference to its native past.

Among such opinion-formers as the columnists of the daily newspapers, however, objections to Catholicism are now based less on the historically rooted Protestant “black legend” (corrupt medieval Church, internal and external conspiracies to reverse the gains of the Reformation settlement), and more on novel secular-Liberal criteria, for which Catholicism is (with Islam) a uniquely oppressive religion, in matters of—above all—sexual ethics. This is, of course, the same sexual ethics which, certainly up to the inter-war years, and in most respects until the 1960s, were common to both Protestants and Catholics in England. Recent research would seem to indicate that it was the moral revolution of the 1960s which most undermined the mental habits of the Christian population—their inhabiting an “evangelical narrative,” so that subsequently for many (though, thankfully, not all) “the search for personal faith is now in the ‘New Age’ of minor cults, personal development and consumer choice.”²² This indicates the *anomie* into which a self-confident Catholicism, sure of its doctrine and its health-giving effect for human beings, individually and in society, could efficaciously move. N.V.

²¹ D. MacCulloch, “The Myth of the English Reformation,” *Journal of British Studies* 30 (1991): 1–19.

²² C. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800–2000* (London: Routledge, 2002), 196. Brown remarks on the near-simultaneity of the emergence of a youth culture centered on pop music (the Beatles: 1962 onwards), legalization of abortion and homosexuality (1967), the ending of censorship in the theatre (1968), the recreational use of drugs, the fashion revolution, and student rebellion (1968 onwards), easier divorce (1969). He emphasizes the crucial role played by the alienation from Christian discourse of women, who in the modern period had been, for him, its chief carriers.