
A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

George Orwell: 'pious atheist'

ARTHUR POLLARD

> You are the town and we are the clock,
> We are the guardians of the gate in the rock.
> The Two.
> On your left and on your right
> In the day and in the night,
> We are watching you

In 'The Witnesses', Auden had imagined not one, but two Big Brothers years before Orwell's horrifying vision of *1984*.[1]

The fascist dictatorships of the thirties had set up such fears. The strange thing is that communism in Russia still managed not only to conceal an even more terrible reality but even to receive the praise and support of these deluded young men. They scorned western democracy, they flocked off to Spain in defence of a dubious cause, their naivety matched only by their credulity. Orwell was one of this collection of idealistic ex-public-school men assiduously nursing their middle-class guilt complexes prominently on their sleeves. In *Homage to Catalonia*[2] he tells us something of the ruthless and totally unethical standards by which in internecine quarrels, reminiscent only of the Reformation church at its worst, communist hunted and killed communist.

So much then for the young man who had sought that way after rejecting his own public-school upbringing and subsequent service in the colonial police in Burma. Orwell could never conform; he could not even accept the original name he had been given. His sojourn in Burma can only have been like some black comedy,[3] and we know from his own lips that his schools, particularly his prep school, found everybody out of step but Eric Blair. He was in fact, in colloquial terms, the archetypal 'Bolshie'—except that that too palled upon him in due course. And we should not be surprised. Nobody much liked him, and it is doubtful whether he much liked anybody. Even when he got 'right down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against the tyrants', he could not stand the smell of the working-man in *The Road to Wigan Pier*[4] and even less the tramps in *Down and Out in Paris and London*.[5] Orwell may have had that theoretical love of his fellow men, of which socialists so often boast, but when it came down to actuality, it was a different matter. In this he seems to have been the converse of Jonathan Swift, with whom he is often and inappropriately compared.

It is not surprising either that it was no peculiar hatred of Soviet Russia that sparked off his later and best work that is now regarded as

such an imaginative protest against communist tyranny. Orwell was more troubled by the concentration of power which he found existing in wartime Britain, and especially that exercised through the media of communications, not least the BBC where he himself worked. He derived ideas, of course, from literary sources. James Burnham suggested to him that there never was real freedom and equality, but only rulers and agitators to exploit such ideas. From Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*[6] he extracted what is there the light-hearted suggestion of rewriting old newspapers, and in Zamyatin's *We*[7] he found the models for oversight, torture and confession that are developed in *1984*. By 1946, when he was writing essays such as 'The Prevention of Literature'[8] and 'Why I Write',[9] he was fearing for the autonomy of letters because he was fearful for the future of the individual.

In Orwell, therefore, we have the classic situation of authority versus the individual, but he goes beyond that to explore the ethics of rebellion and their relationship to the integrity of the individual, the experience of suffering and its purpose, the application of rigorous zeal and austerity and its distortion by maniacally indoctrinated torturers, the apparently predestined course of individuals, the place of man in a world without God or immortality, and the reduction of faith to morality or decency. All these are largely religious questions and Richard Rees, in a letter to Malcolm Muggeridge, was not wrong therefore to write: 'His value consists in his having taken more seriously than most people the fundamental problem of religion ... [*1984*] does reveal his full and permanent preoccupation; and that is why I always think of him as a religious or "pious atheist".'[10]

Before he articulated his post-war traumas of man reduced to nothingness beneath the crushing activity of the state machine, he had pondered, particularly around 1944, the absolute problem of the individual. At least twice in that year he wrote of it. In an essay on Arthur Koestler we find:

> It is quite probable that man's major problems will *never* be solved ... The only way out is that of the religious believer, who regards this life merely as a preparation for the next. But few thinking people now believe in life after death ... The real problem is how to restore the religious attitude while accepting death as final. Men can only be happy when they do not assume that the object of life is happiness.[11]

And again, in an *Observer* review of a book by Alfred Noyes, he remarked:

> The real problem of our time is to restore the sense of absolute right and wrong when the belief it used to rest on—that is, the belief in personal immortality—has been destroyed. This demands faith which is a different thing from credulity ... One cannot have any worthwhile

> picture of the future unless one realises how much we have lost by the decay of Christianity.[12]

God, immortality, duty—one is reminded of this same trio, as George Eliot had discoursed about them near a century before to F.W.H. Myers in the gardens of Trinity, Cambridge: 'How inconceivable the first, how unbelievable the second, how peremptory and absolute the third'. To such a level had Victorian 'high thinking' brought the world by 1944.

Without God there is no authority to appeal to above the state; without God the individual has no goal beyond this life. When the state therefore commands without resistance, the individual is left without hope not only in the next world but in this as well. It may have been the result of his background or upbringing, or it may have been part of his nature: whatever it was, Orwell abhorred authority of every kind. Dismissively he could say in his notes for an article about Waugh: 'One cannot really be Catholic and grown up.' As Alan Sandison, in a valuable study, has commented: 'Agnostic as he formally is, [Orwell] out-Protestants the Protestants in disregarding the institution and getting back to first principles.'[13] The danger of such rebellion, of course, is that, unrestrained, it ends in anarchy.

By contrast, however, *1984* shows discipline and regimentation to such a degree that they almost nullify the individual—indeed, that, attempting to oppose them, they do nullify him. He literally disappears, all trace and record of him expunged. Moreover, as with any sort of rigorous predestination, not only is individual responsibility annihilated, but within the seeming individual life there is always a barely concealed awareness that the path being followed is not of one's own choice. Thus Winston Smith's apparent rebellion in *1984* is not the assertion of individual will that it might seem, because the end is foreordained. The misleading and superficially friendly invitation from O'Brien, Winston knows, is going to lead to the Ministry of Love and Room 101: 'What was happening was only the working out of a process that had started years ago.' In this way one is compelled to read *1984*, as Christopher Small does, 'as a religious parable, or rather as a monstrous parody of one. The Party is God, Big Brother the divine "embodiment" or incarnation. His tabernacle and dwelling-place is the Ministry of Love.... he is immortal, all-seeing, all-knowing, and omnipotent ... The Party can alter "laws" at will, and perform the impossible: in such terms 2 +2 = 5 is simply the formula of a miracle.'[14] The choice thus becomes belief not in God or no God, but in God or a blasphemous and destructive alternative.

Small goes on usefully to parallel Winston's sufferings with those of Job. O'Brien is the Adversary, the Accuser. Winston by successive tortures is pitched past pitch of suffering, overwhelmed and finally crushed into twofold disloyalty: first, of asking why his beloved Julia

is not made to suffer in the same way (the ultimate in human disloyalty) and, second, in transferring his affection and confessing that he loved Big Brother (the ultimate in organizational idolatry). That is submission to, and worship of, a false god. Job could endure and exclaim, 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.'[15] In the world of *1984* there is no heroism in suffering, because there is no faith in the reasons why it has to be undergone.

Those who inflict the suffering do so with single-minded and, synonymously, mindless devotion. The horrors of mass indoctrination are a commonplace recollection of *1984* and, even if they did not lead to what they do, they would be intolerable in themselves. O'Brien's omniscience, and his ruthlessly skilled and calculating but totally polite interrogations until the latter stages, are evidence of that austere and pitiless zeal that marks the obsessed (and incidentally not without reminiscences of that Puritan cross-examination of the helpless child, with anxious mother standing by, portrayed in the painting 'When Did You Last See Your Father?'). If O'Brien illustrates the oppression of this tyranny, Parsons cheerfully and hollowly displays the unthinking adherence of its disciples. He is the equivalent of the willing carthorse in *Animal Farm*,[16] and he meets the same end. And all is done in subservience to the hypocritical profession of the state's allegiance to just those qualities that have been the watchwords of regard for humanity from the times of the Greeks onwards—liberty, equality and fraternity.

But that religion, in the form of thirties communism, had failed Orwell once and for all. By the end of his life he recognized it not only for the corrupt idealism that it was but, worse, for an annihilating reality before which the individual was destroyed in its path. He could not believe in God or immortality—the best he could manage was decency: 'The churches no longer have any hold on the working class ... On the other hand you can always appeal to common decency, which the vast majority of people believe in without the need to tie it up with any transcendental belief.'[17] That was something, but Orwell knew and had confessed that it was not really enough. There is something appropriate in the fact that, by his own express direction, this 'pious atheist' chose to be buried in an Anglican churchyard.

ARTHUR POLLARD is Professor of English at the University of Hull.

NOTES

1 G. Orwell, *1984* (Secker & Warburg, London 1949 [latest edition 1984]).
2 G. Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (Secker & Warburg, London 1938 [latest edition 1980]).
3 G. Orwell, *Burmese Days* (Harper, New York 1934; Secker & Warburg, London 1968 [latest edition 1984]).

4 G. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Gollancz, London 1937; Secker & Warburg, London 1980).
5 G. Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (Gollancz, London 1933; Secker & Warburg, London 1980).
6 A. Koestler, *Darkness at Noon* (Jonathan Cape, London 1940; Hutchinson, London 1973).
7 E. I. Zamyatin, *We* (Dutton, New York 1924; Jonathan Cape, London 1970).
8 G. Orwell, 'The Prevention of Literature', *Collected Essays*, vol.4 (Secker & Warburg, London 1968).
9 G. Orwell, 'Why I Write', *Collected Essays*, vol.1 (Secker & Warburg, London 1968).
10 M. Gross, ed., *The World of George Orwell* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1971), p.167.
11 *Forum*, 2, 1946.
12 *The Observer*, 27 February 1944.
13 Alan Sandison, *The Last Man in Europe: An Essay on George Orwell* (Macmillan, London 1974), p.6.
14 C.Small, *The Road to Miniluv: George Orwell, The State and God* (Gollancz, London 1975), p.160.
15 Job 13:15. See Small, op.cit., p.161.
16 G. Orwell, *Animal Farm* (Secker & Warburg, London 1945 [latest edition 1984]).
17 G. Orwell, 'Letter to Humphrey House', *Collected Essays*, vol.1 (Secker & Warburg, London 1968), p.530.