

Cook books and celebrity biographies: that's what any publisher hoping to take advantage of the Christmas shopper's willingness to part with their cash will print. Recipes and memoirs reliably rush off the shelves come Christmas time, those are the staple-fare pot-boilers of the publishing industry, the safe bet workhorses that keep the wolf from the door and the administrators on the back foot. December cook book and biography sales are as predictable as they are profitable but every year there is always an unexpected soaraway seasonal publishing success and the surprise hit of the festive book-buying binge of 2018 was somewhat implausibly the slender tome 'A Field Guide to the English Clergy' written by the improbably named REvd Fergus Butler-Gallie. If that book could become a best seller, it is proof irrefutable that it is, truly, a funny old world. It's not a book I would ever imagine wanting to read myself ( after all the reaction of most clergy to other clergy is invariably like that of cats to other cats); it is however the sort of book other people imagine I want to read. So by a present predestination there it was, under the tree, cocooned in some excessively jaunty wrapping paper its gaudiness perhaps trying to make up for the disappointment within. There we go. It's the thought that counts. What were they thinking?

Anyhow, *A Field Guide to the English Clergy* comprises various short lives from several centuries worth of extreme eccentric Church of England clerics. Clerics like the Revd Robert Hawker, a Cornish opium addict who took to sitting on a rock in the harbour calling out to sailors dressed as a mermaid. The Very Revd Bill Buckland whose eat-anything exploits peaked at a dinner party with him scoffing the embalmed heart of King Louis 14th- it wasn't on the menu it was being passed round for people to wonder at. Or Reading's Canon Brian Brindley who would do his weekly supermarket shopping in cassock, Georgian periwig and bright red high heels. That's just a tiny sample. Just in case you're wondering, I'm not in the book, only dead people are, libel laws and all that. Plus, I never go shopping in my cassock.

Anyone leafing through *A Field Guide to the English Clergy* might come away with the impression that Anglican Priests are all free spirit oddballs, dyed-in-the-grain wacko individualists. How wrong they would be. The truth is the couple of dozen divines featured in that book are the exceptions and wearers of the dog collar, like pretty much everyone else, are now, have long been and always will be hopeless conformists to a man and just recently woman.

Let me illustrate. Not too long ago I found myself- not wearing a mermaid costume- by the checkouts in Wilko, Sutton, waiting to pay. I don't quite remember now what it was I was trying to pay for but it wasn't what I'd gone in for in the first place, rather

something I'd never thought I wanted which had inveigled its way into my hands while I was looking for the thing I did want. Pretty much a metaphor for life eh? Amazing how even a trip to Sutton High Street can quickly dive deep. So, I was waiting to pay. Two checkouts were open on either side of the aisle. Both were busy with the usual fumbling for coins, searching for bags, ooh! where's my purse etc. It was impossible to work out which checkout would clear first so I waited in the middle till one of the two became free.

'Which queue are you in?' piped up a voice behind me.

'I'm waiting to see which clears first' I replied, full of the warm glow of rationality and utilitarianism.

'Well usually people choose a queue here' was the huffy response.

I should have stuck to my guns, replied 'Well, I'm waiting to see which check out is clear first'. I could have tried to educate him in game theory or at least some probability: look, if we do it like this then on the whole each individual has a much better chance of getting out quicker, because this way nobody has to gamble on which is the quicker queue and risk getting the slower one: this way you always get the quickest queue. I could have stuck my guns, It's unlikely that my assailant would have huffed off to a checkout: after all that would mean he was committing the sin of queue jumping, a far more heinous social taboo breaker than merely not following local custom. Had he been knocked down by a bus on his way home before being able to confess that mortal sin to a priest he could have been looking at a long time in purgatory. Instead of course, I said, 'this queue' and guessed which would be the quickest of the two (needless to say, it wasn't).

I wasn't showing deference to my elders: you don't deserve it any more than anyone else. I wasn't intimidated: I'm no street fighter but my interlocutor couldn't have got further than clenching his fist before becoming overcome with breathlessness. True, a bit of me just couldn't be bothered with the hassle. But the biggest part of me, the part I'd not like to admit to myself, just automatically conformed. That's what people do in here; I'd better do that too. In spite of its many frustrations, queue etiquette at Wilko is a trivial thing but social conformity runs deep in all human societies, from the trivial to the vital the pressure is always intense to fit in and go with the flow. We ostracise people who don't conform. We punish them. Sometimes we kill them.

Despite the almost irresistible force of the majority, social conformity has often in two thousand years of our history often been a challenge for Christians and our relationship with it has been at times decidedly queasy. When Christians were a minority in a pagan world, not conforming could see us heading full speed to a sticky end. For those thousand or so years when conversely to conform meant *being* a Christian, in Europe at least not conforming could also see you heading full speed to a sticky or superheated end. Now Europe is overwhelmingly secular some Christians are again feeling themselves in conflict with the majority and feeling unhappy with the pressure of a social conformity which they are not dictating. You will probably have heard the cries of complaint.

So here's the question, in a secular culture should a Christian stick out, or go with the flow?

There is no straightforward answer.

Should the good Christian as St Paul wrote over and over again 'be subject to the governing authorities' whatever that entails?

Or should the Christian embrace the countercultural, even if it shocks, hurts, upsets and scandalises?

Should we keep our heads down, be all things to all people as Paul urges? Or do we take Jesus's teaching to its logical conclusion, leaving the dead to bury their dead, refusing to say farewell to those at home, have nowhere to lay our head and fearlessly break social taboos for the sake of the kingdom? Should we be tottering into Sainsbury's in our sling-backs, or doing the done thing in Wilko?

There is no straightforward answer.

I think one thing we can note to help our thinking is that, for a Christian, social conformity is not a goal in itself: even when Paul was writing 'be obedient to the authorities' he qualifies what he's saying. There is a 'because', in this case, because those authorities have been instituted by God. When Paul tells women to be obedient to their husbands and slaves to obey their masters, he offers his reasoning, however specious that reasoning may be and however much subsequent believers may in good conscience have decided to reject it. Social conformity is never presented as an end in itself.

So perhaps then we need the prophetic voice, the one that cries out in the wilderness, the one willing to stand up and speak truth to power? Perhaps, but then as *Christians* we need to swallow a hefty dose of humility and admit that in the last hundred or so years secular culture has often got to the right answer before we have, sometimes culture changes for the better long before Christians are willing to. And so we have been taught many things: that there's no job a man can do that a woman can't, that suicide is a tragedy not a sin, that family planning is a positive thing, that divorce is a matter of sadness not shame. Because conformity is such a fundamental part of how we are, we inevitably import it into our faith lives, so when faith rules the roost pretty soon what are majority mores become what is religiously right. If we recognise that that process has been behind much of how we might previously have thought and behaved, it will allow us, perhaps to be able to move forward as society moves forward without necessarily feeling conflicted in our faith.

But still, there are times when society gets it wrong- badly sometimes- and Christians are required to go against the flow. Christians should, must be countercultural when that culture is counter-Christian. In a Europe shaped irrevocably by its Christian past yet now overwhelmingly secular Christians can be countercultural by trying to ensure that the things of God are *consciously* in their lives. And that means we are countercultural not by trying to regulate the lives of others- controlling women's bodies, restricting the right to contract or end a marriage, opposing the teaching of respect in schools- but by regularly setting aside time for worship, devoting a portion of our life to prayer, taking seriously the need to deal with the log in our own eyes. We are countercultural not by trying to bargain with God to get ourselves better, richer, easier lives, but by risking our own comfort by daring to demand justice for the weak, the neglected, the despised and the oppressed.

To repeat, Christians must be countercultural when culture is counter-Christian. If culture is demonstrably not concerned loving neighbour as ourself, then we are duty bound to object. If that is our criterion, we should be objecting about a *lot* more than we actually do. And whenever we see love at work we should rejoice.