

## St ANTHONY AND THE HALF BLOOD PROJECT



I was half way through the latest Harry Potter book when the press ran the story saying that, at the end of his premiership, Tony Blair planned to lead some sort of global, inter-faith initiative. It was described as the 'clean break' option from politics. What it made me do, however, was to think about the nature of good and evil in society, and the current links between fanaticism, faith and global politics.

In Harry Potter, the struggle between good and evil is made fairly easy for you. Potter and his friends stand in opposition to Lord Voldemort (who wants absolute power to dominate the world) and his followers, the Death Eaters (whose obsession with being 'pure blood' drives them into a hatred of everyone else.) In between stands the Ministry of Magic, which generally doesn't have a clue about what to do but would rather lock up innocent people than admit that the system is

beginning to fall apart. Sound familiar?

In the global struggle against terrorism we are told it is absolutely necessary for states to be able to lock up people without access to a charge, a trial or a legal representative. Those getting a trial may do so without access to the evidence against them, or any detailed claims that can be substantiated or rebutted. Al Qaida is used as the pretext for a far wider erosion of civil liberties than its threat ever justifies.

Definitions of terrorism have been widened from actions which threaten the survival of the state, to actions which threaten property. The WTO agenda, that gives corporations greater rights than citizens, requires laws that prevent citizens from taking action against property that corporations have stolen from them in the first place. The terrorist threat offers the perfect cover for doing so. It isn't only the Ministry of Magic that is happier locking up its innocent citizens than facing up to the more serious things going wrong.

In our own world faith and fanaticism combine in producing their own version of the Death Eaters. For sure, these would include suicide bombers; those who have already decided that death is simply a path to greater glory. But it doesn't stop there. The list would also include those whose faith is premised on its superiority over other faiths, on hostility towards the 'less pure', and doctrinal closedness that simply discounts the lives of the poor in favour of its own theological purity. I am, of course, talking as much about religions of the West as of the East (or Middle East).

The relationship between Church and State has always been a complex one. R.H.Tawney's 'Religion and the Rise of Capitalism' gave Britain's social and labour movements ample evidence about the role of the church in teaching the poor to know their place (while the rich got on with exploiting them). The counter case is that liberation theologians and Christian socialists have been just as pivotal in working with the poor in the most emancipating of movements for change. Today it is just that the religious Right

have cornered the politics of influence.

Liberation theologians would weep over the way that church dogma on contraception consigned millions to early graves in the African Aids pandemic. Jews who set up kibbutz and the Peace and Coexistence movements, would weep too over the power of religious hatred wielded by the religious Right in Israel. And the Anglican Church is now torn between those whose faith would reach out to the devastation of tsunamis and climate change, and those who would want (first) to know how many of the victims were gay.

The US churches have always ploughed this furrow of contradictions more deeply than anyone else. The ease of serving God and Mammon at the same time has taken the most influential of churches into the boardrooms of global corporations. It has also made them key players in Presidential, Senate and Congressional politics. The latest twist is for this to have given birth to a variety of Death Eaters in a league all of their own. These are Christian believers in The Rapture and the Last Days.

George Bush is not alone in his support of The Rapture movement. Apparently some 40% of the Senate and Congress believe it too; including the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the Chair of the Senate Environment Committee. Check out their website ([www.raptureready.com](http://www.raptureready.com)) to see how hungry they are for the end of the world. It is a 'bring it on now' approach to ecological disaster and climate change. Perhaps it also says much about Bush's indifference to the subject.

Needless to say, there is a symbiotic admiration shared between Last Days believers and the oil industry. So too with gung-ho free-marketers. It is the love-in at the end of the world. All that the faithful are waiting for is the arrival of the Anti-Christ.

Lord Voldemort doesn't figure in their Top 10 candidates list for the Anti-Christ, but George Bush does (at number 8). After all Bush has been doing to bring about the end of the world, it seems tough on the guy to put him so far behind Bill Gates, King Juan Carlos, Kofi Annan and Prince Charles. But Armageddon is unforgiving.

Privately, there is apparently much speculation amongst the faithful about whether they are just going to have to be patient over the Antichrist, and to wait for the final arrival of Hillary Clinton. Meanwhile, at the bottom of the Top 10 list stands the name Anthony Blair. It is worth pondering on the global, inter-faith role the religious Right would like him to fulfil.

Just as capitalism required the church to authenticate its moral rightness, as the natural order of things temporal, so globalisation requires a theological consensus in its favour; a consensus that crosses faith as well as national boundaries. Of course it won't work, but it is inevitable that it should happen.

In the great European upheavals that led into the industrial revolution the church faced a similar crisis. It had always sided with the rich against the poor, but the poor were becoming restless. The Establishment were desperate for a theology of containment that would cross national boundaries and stave off social revolution. It was then they coined the phrase 'the Third Way'. The plan was to get employers to 'consult' employees about their conditions of work, without conceding any transfer of rights of powers. The clergy who fronted such a faith initiative simply wanted a kinder form of exploitation. Globalisation wants the same, today, from an inter-faith initiative.

The reason it won't work is that it is neither within the gift of the church nor the poor to dig globalisation out of the hole it is in. It is hard to say whether the rise in social unrest or the rise in sea levels, hurricanes, droughts and floods will kick in first. What is clear is that globalisation has thrown the world into the unsustainable pursuit of ever cheaper surpluses. It is a pursuit in which the poor have to support the rich, drawing on environmental resources from which they can no longer support themselves. As the insurance industry constantly reminds us, the planet is now giving Big Politics a kicking that can no longer be paid for. No amount of faith in the Half Blood Project, of everlasting exploitation of the earth, can make it work.

Tony Blair may hope that, at the end of a war-torn premiership, he can emerge in a more evangelical role that can unite the world, and save it. St Anthony's Fire would then be directed, not at bombing but at healing. The trouble is that he would have to break faith with the current (Washington) Consensus to stand any chance of success. St Exxon, St Bechtel, St Halliburton and the Blessed Monsanto would all have to be stood down in favour of a faith based on ecological sustainability. It is a big step from where we are now.

Before he makes any judgment call on his next move, the Prime Minister might just recall that St Anthony's Fire was a disease rather than a devotion. Named after the 4<sup>th</sup> century hermit, the earliest description of St Anthony's Fire was that a "Great plague of swollen blisters consumed the people by a loathsome rot, so that their limbs were loosened and fell off before death." (Annales Xantenses, 857 AD).

It is just about what globalisation is doing to the planet now. If there is space for a global inter-faith initiative it is for a faith in something different. If he can't make the step on his own, Blair may just wish to put out his own call to Harry Potter.