

Madoc Cairns considers the future of the Catholic Church through the lens of futuristic literature

What does the future of the Church look like? The answer might be 'cyberpunk Maoism'...

CLIMATE change, economic chaos, corruption in high places. And then the fiction starts. Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age* is a classic of cyberpunk, a far-fetched near-future science fantasy. But the novel's grimly realist resonances reverberate underneath us.

In Stephenson's future, the centralised, monolithic, broadly peaceful human societies of our epoch are dead: what remains are fragments; shards of once-greater wholes. They're called 'phyles'; a deliberate archaism on Stephenson's part. The ancient Greek word for 'tribe' shares a common root with *philia*, love: and *The Diamond Age*'s phyles are united by the loves they share. There are phyles for race, class, gender, religion: there's a neo-Victorian merchant phyle. There's even – yes – a cyberpunk Maoist microculture. With guns.

It sounds like chaos. For chunks of *The Diamond Age*, it looks like it too. But the phyles don't play the role you expect: object lessons in the failure of the societies they inhabit. Our expectations are subverted – the phyles are demonstrations of their societies' success. The corporate overlords of *The Diamond Age* were giving their underlings exactly what they want: belonging within limits, community without communion. Love to keep them satisfied – and hate to keep them separate.

Apocalypse is boring. What happens when the world ends – when you lose a common culture – would have been an easy, generic premise for Stephenson's book. He chose to ask a far more interesting question: what happens when your world ends, but you don't?

It's the same question Matthew Arnold asked in his masterpiece, *On Dover Beach*, mourning the 'melancholy long withdrawing roar' of the once world-girdling 'sea of faith'. 200 years later, the sea of faith is now something closer to a puddle: Christianity, once the foundation of British society, occupies somewhere near the same level of public recognition as the Marvel cinematic universe.

We could expose bishops to radiation in the hope they become as talented or as popular as Spiderman (and I'm sure many in the Church would welcome the attempt). But in the quotidian world most Christians inhabit,

the decline of the faith is a tricky, intractable reality. Most years, in most parishes, the pews get emptier no matter what we do.

Due to a parallel explosion of religious illiteracy, most seculars struggle to understand what Christians are on about when we talk about the resurrection, let alone the trinitarian ontology of being. Disputes within the Church about whether to go with the flow or swim against the current are often complicated ways of avoiding an unpleasant truth: the river doesn't care.

So much the worse for the river, some bold souls respond. Quibbles and qualms notwithstanding, I'm with them. But formulations of the Church as 'counterculture' strike me as relics; yesterday's solutions to today's problems. They share an assumption of a common enemy, or at least a common battlefield: a shared cultural and political landscape to contest. What if none of that exists?

Richard Hoggart, cultural theorist, literary critic, and socialist, surprised many of his atheist friends by mourning, in his last published book, the passing of serious religious commitment from Britain. *The Way We Live Now* is a strange, melancholic book: Hoggart is looking back at a lifetime of critique and concluding it had roughly the same impact as King Cnut's contrempts with the Atlantic Ocean.

His books had followed the pattern of a minority of post-war thinkers who saw consumer culture as entrapment, not liberation. Hoggart charted the entry of 'popular culture' into working class homes. He discovered that, even in the mild forms of radio and pulp literature, it annihilated older, organic cultures of literacy. A disaster was in progress. A disaster so pervasive that a common culture wasn't just degraded. It was, Hoggart argued, destroyed. 'Hedonistic but passive barbarians' levelled the citadels of working-class culture; raising in their stead the 'slick and hollow puppet-world' of consumerism.

Here's where the cyberpunk Maoists come in. One possible outcome for the future is something like *The Diamond Age*'s phyles. Mix

polarisation with consumer culture, weak social bonds with a hunger for roots, and you get – well, a world hospitable to Christianity, at least in certain ways.

Christianity can provide a strong sense of identity, a clear system of ethics, an explicit Us, and an implicit Them. In an increasingly lonely world, those attributes are attractive ones. One problem, however: those qualities don't constitute Christianity. They aren't even unique to it. So a bunker Church – a Church of cyberpunk maoist *manqués* – could revive Christianity. But only to the level, and on the model, of a whole array of secular sects: subcultures that substitute for the real thing.

Hoggart suggested salvation might be found in an unlikely part of our culture: the outside. In a mischievous volte-face, the staid, besotted Hoggart broke from fulminating against the 'corrupt brightness' and 'spiritual dry-rot' of cinema and detective stories – to put in a word for the beatniks. Drunks, dropouts, dopefiends: these they were. But they 'resist the worst drugs,' said Hoggart. 'They stand for something.'

Should we all smoke ganja now, Father? Not quite, but Hoggart was on to something, I think, if not about a demographic, then an attitude. The future of the Church in an era of subcultures might be to reject the status of subculture entirely; to glimpse, across the particular rooftops of our present age, the high, bright spires of the republic of the world.

Building a universal culture in a particular age is a daunting prospect. The work itself would be slow, more akin to creating a language than winning a war. Avoiding unnecessary conflict and premature peacemaking, speaking to consumer culture without capitulating to it, all these would make the process a slow and seemingly fruitless one. In the eyes of the world, it would look like a failure. But not in the eyes of God.



Madoc Cairns is a former Newman intern at *The Tablet*, a postgraduate student based in Oxford, and a journalist with bylines in *The Tablet*, *Tribune Magazine* and *CathNews*.