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Subversion Through The Old Boy Network

The British spy scandal offers insights into the power of homosexual clergy.

Article by James Hitchcock, history professor at St. Louis University, from the June 2002 issue of The Catholic World Report magazine.

By now it is apparent, as has been suspected for some time, that there exists in American Catholicism a network of homosexual clergy and that this network, which extends into the ranks of the episcopacy, has significant influence on the life of the Church.

In some areas of society, for example, the arts, the homosexual presence is completely open. In other areas, especially the Church, its mode of operation remains largely hidden, with only an occasional public scandal affording glimpses into its inner workings.

But there is a known historical model of how such a network functions, one which offers suggestive parallels for the present Church — the nexus of British spies working for the Soviet Union from the 1930s to the 1960s.

A Time of Confusion

The 1930s, in Britain as everywhere in the Western world, was a time of both severe economic distress and of a deep intellectual confusion partly resulting from that distress. There were Westerners who admired Fascist regimes, but in intellectual circles an open espousal of Marxism was far more common.

This espousal derived both from moral indignation at a capitalist system which was condemned as inherently unjust and from the exhilarating conviction that the forces of Communism would inevitably triumph, that Marxists would be on the winning side of history. Such an outlook was by definition opposed to the established social and political order, which was condemned as outmoded, inherently unjust, and decadent. To be a Marxist meant being subversive, whatever form that subversion might take.

In Catholicism the Second Vatican Council was followed by a quarter-century of intellectual and spiritual confusion which was especially acute among the clergy, and most especially among those clergy educated during the two chaotic post-conciliar decades.

Some clergy actually became sympathetic to Marxism. More commonly, however, the “spirit of Vatican II” became a spirit of antagonism towards the “institutional Church” comparable to the Marxist hostility to democratic capitalism. The ecclesiastical system was also denounced as oppressive, outmoded, and decadent and, like Marxists, the most radical clergy believed that they had a vision of the future Church which was bound to triumph, that they too were on the winning side of history.

The Homosexual Connection

Homosexuality was not endemic to Marxist subversion; indeed, Marxist regimes have generally been intolerant of homosexuals. But in an environment in which all received wisdom was called into question, in which it seemed as though every doctrine proclaimed by “the establishment” needed almost to be turned on its head, it was inevitable that homosexuality would flourish.

What is this whole scandal about? It's been about three things: fidelity, fidelity and fidelity. If the priests and bishops had talked and lived according to the teaching of the Catholic Church, and if they had been faithful to their sacred vows, there wouldn't be any scandal.

— Father Richard Neuhaus
NBC “Meet the Press,” April 28

Homosexuality is a subversive social identity because homosexuals feel themselves to be despised and marginalized, even the “compassion” sometimes extended to them merely a form of condescension. This gives some homosexuals a large psychological stake in subverting the established social and moral order, which they inevitably see as oppressive and as inimical to themselves. By no means do all homosexuals have those feelings, and most do not act on them. But some do, in major and minor ways.

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The key to understanding this subversion is the famous proclamation of the homosexual novelist E.M. Forster, “If I were forced to choose between betraying my friend and betraying my country, I hope that I should choose to betray my country.” Although there are patriotic homosexuals, homosexuality is a way of life which tends to undermine great loyalties and to reduce everything to personal relationships.

Thus British homosexuals were recruited by the Soviets in disproportionate numbers during the 1930s, even as homosexuals — announced or unannounced — have played a disproportionately large role in movements to “reform” the Catholic Church in radical ways. Homosexual Catholics not uncommonly feel a deep resentment against an institution which imposes a sense of guilt on them, and they tend to support a whole range of radical “reforms.”

Old School Ties

Cambridge University was the most fertile ground for the recruitment of Soviet spies in the 1930s. When the ring was finally unmasked, decades later, it was found to have four principal members — Anthony Blunt, Kim Philby, Donald Maclean, and Guy Burgess — all of whom had been at Cambridge around the same time and knew one another.

Perhaps in England even more than in the United States, friendship and loyalties formed at school (elite secondary schools as well as universities) prove remarkably enduring, lasting throughout people's entire lives. Such ties are, among other things, institutionalized networks for personal advancement, with friends and schoolmates promoting each other's careers over

decades. The network of Cambridge spies was, with one exception, homosexual (Philby was a compulsive philanderer), and it could also rely on contemporaries who were themselves neither sexually nor politically subversive but who were loyal to their old friends and classmates.

A similar sense of identification and loyalty, extending over a lifetime, seems often to exist among priests who were together in the seminary, a loyalty which sometimes transcends ideological differences and makes orthodox priests indulgent of fellow priests who are themselves far from orthodox.

Elitism

At Cambridge, Blunt was chosen as one of the Apostles, a secret society which had been in existence for a century, the members of which considered themselves an inner circle of superior young men, whose bonds of loyalty were therefore even tighter than usual.

When the spy scandal broke in the 1950s, a notoriously left-wing member of Parliament, Willie Hamilton, scathingly pointed out that the subversives were not from the ranks of Labor but were Tory homosexuals protected by social privilege. The spies of course detested the Conservative Party and its ideology, but they moved easily in Tory circles and for decades exploited the fact that socially they were part of the British elite, on terms of ease with others of the elite to whom they were ideologically inimical. One reason why the spies went undetected for so long was the reluctance of the British establishment to believe that any of their own could be guilty of such activities.

The Old Boy Network served a double function. Not only did it promote the careers of its members, in doing so it also provided the establishment with an easy way of recruiting men for responsible positions. Although in some ways a meritocracy based on such things as examinations, the British civil service also relied greatly on personal recommendations. Government officials wanted to recruit people like themselves, which was most easily done through the network.

There is an obvious sense of clerical elitism in terms of the priestly state itself, which sometimes causes orthodox priests to protect their unorthodox brethren. But the clerical homosexual network, it is now obvious, extends into the most elite levels of this elite profession — bishops, seminary rectors, chancery officials, superiors of religious orders — who feel strong bonds of loyalty to one another and are reluctant to acknowledge misconduct by residents of those rarified circles.

The North American College in Rome is by no means the only incubator of this elitism, but it has been an important one, because it brings together young men from all over the country who have been identified as the most talented candidates for the priesthood, the most likely to rise to high positions. To a great extent the process of choosing bishops also seems to proceed through personal recommendation and personal ties, many of which date back to seminary days.

But the tales above clearly indicate that having good policies is not enough. For not only are a small but significant number of priests preying upon the young people in their care, some of the men chosen to lead the Catholic Church in the US are protecting the priests rather than the victims. This cannot continue. Candor and full disclosure are a must if the reputation of the Church is to be protected. As Catholics, we believe that Christ is the light of the world, and we must allow that light to shine through this Church.

— William J. Bennett,
Co-director of Empower America
Wall Street Journal, March 18

Respectability

Because of both the Old Boy Network and their own talents, the British spies achieved important positions which made them automatically respectable. All of them were in intelligence work at one time, and several were in the diplomatic service. Blunt did not want a career in government and instead became one of Britain's leading art historians, eventually rising to the office of Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures, as well as getting a knighthood. Positions of such stature naturally protected their occupants from suspicion and allowed them to flourish effectively long after less exalted people might have fallen from power, a pattern which seems to operate also in the Church. (For example, no bishop ever seems ever to be removed for misconduct unless his transgressions are first revealed by the media.)

Shamelessness

This respectability was stretched amazingly far, even to the point of covering activities which might have been considered a negation of that respectability. All the British spies at one time or another openly expressed Communist sympathies, yet this never served to count against them. In later years Burgess and Maclean engaged in increasingly bizarre and grossly offensive behavior: urinating in public, drunken brawls, vandalism, boasting of their homosexual affairs in crude and obscene terms, spewing out hatred of the United States even as they held official positions requiring good relations with the United States. Somehow such things were always excused or overlooked.

The most obvious clerical parallel at present is the Boston priest Paul Shanley, who not only made no secret of his homosexuality but even gave speeches advocating child abuse, yet still remained a priest in good standing, someone whom two cardinals endorsed as a man with no serious blemishes on his record.

Protectiveness

The story of the British spy network is astounding in terms of the way it flourished unhampered for decades. There were numerous incidents where damaging evidence pointing to particular people was ignored, where highly classified information was shared with men whose loyalty ought to have been suspect, where foxes were sent to guard chicken coops. In 1951 the American Central Intelligence Agency at last pointed to Burgess and Maclean as Soviet spies, but they were warned in time to escape to the Soviet Union. Philby, despite strong suspicions against him, continued to function in British Intelligence until 1963, when he too was warned in time to escape behind the Iron Curtain.

This pattern inside British Intelligence is so striking that it is impossible not to suppose that the ring of subversion extended well beyond the four principals. Active subversion, and concealment of subversion, masqueraded as indifference, inattention, naivete, laziness, or ineptitude.

The parallels to the Church today are obvious. As the sexual-abuse scandals continue to unfold, the baffling question remains why the offenders were consistently protected, even promoted, for so long, and the hypothesis of a shadowy network of protection seems inescapable... (For example, the pedophile Rudy Kos was accepted as a candidate for the priesthood in Dallas even though his ex-wife had revealed his pedophilia, and there were accusations against Bishop Patrick Ziemann even before he was sent to Santa Rosa.)

When a man puts his hands on an adolescent boy, there's a word for that in the English language, and it's called homosexuality. It is intellectually outrageous and deceitful to pretend that we don't know what's going on here. Too many active gays have been in the priesthood, and it's about time they were rooted out.

— William Donohue
President, the Catholic League
"The O'Reilly Factor," Fox News Network, April 25

Bureaucratic Secrecy

Once again, not all those who protected the British spies were themselves homosexuals, nor were they necessarily in sympathy with the spies' ideologies. In 1955 the future Tory Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, a devout Anglican who was a close friend of Msgr. Ronald Knox, lied in Parliament, denying that the government had any knowledge of internal subversion, a denial which occurred after Burgess and Maclean had fled and while Philby remained a suspect.

In 1964, the year after Philby fled, British Intelligence finally uncovered Blunt, whose activities were by then common gossip in some circles... He was never prosecuted.

One director of Intelligence who suspected Philby of being a spy decided to continue employing him because to do so otherwise would "upset the morale of the service"...

Church officials at present appear to follow a policy of not acting against unchaste clergy until and unless their activities become a public scandal... Church leaders in general appear willing to allow the homosexual clerical network to continue rather than to undertake the difficult, and undoubtedly disruptive, work of trying to break its power.

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