

What should *really* set the Church's "agenda"?

Our True Agenda

In the later-1960s/early-1970s, when I was a theology student, a favourite catch-phrase in the Church was that "the World must set the Agenda" – a phrase that had its origins in a pronouncement from the World Council of Churches; and while I don't remember who, exactly, popularised it, that thinking was very much the tenor of the times, and (looking back) it surely went hand-in-hand with the *Honest to God* controversy, the New English Bible, and the triumph of vernacular language and other products of the Liturgical Movement.

The idea was that the Church must be outward-facing, not inward looking, and that the Church must serve the world, specifically, those outside it (the Chapel of Christ the Servant, at Coventry Cathedral - and no doubt other such dedications - were from around this era also); the Church's own members were thought (subconsciously, no doubt) as effectively coming second.

The Church, and not just the Church of England, was keen to throw off its old cloying mantle of other-worldliness and seeming-pietistic preciousness. But was this move, this climate, the beginning of a drift towards losing the balance – as we have certainly done – between *this* world and salvation, between service and sanctity, between the here-and-now and eternity? It is, after all, no distortion that, soon after that time, Christianity began to be seen – as Fred Hoyle and Chandra Wickramasinghe put it – as "a rather mild social philosophy" (*Evolution From Space*, 1981). Was it not *that* process that led (inevitably?) to the Church being fully subordinate to purely-this-worldly powers, values, ideas, and fashions, what I have called "the Church Compliant" (and others have described as a church ruled by the *zeitgeist*)? A possibility which occurs to me – it requires much further thought and investigation – is that it was the Christian acceptance of evolution, early in the 20th century, which first set our feet on this road.

But ... the world beyond the Church, its people ...? Of course we have to be among them "as one who serves", but whoever considered that this involves accepting their world-view/value system? Being *in the world* but not *of the world* involves rejecting "philosophical" materialism as well as the (related) kind that's about money, possessions, and greed – indeed, we should be militant theists, whenever and wherever we get the opportunity, above all exposing and countering the attitude that "we have only one life", and all things must be ordered and valued by that common assumption. In truth, our agenda should come from Jesus himself, from the "great commission", and not from anything purely-this-worldly - even if it *seems* to issue from the mouths of the poor and oppressed.

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