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Did John Paul II perform a miracle? Am I Mother Teresa?

During Holy Week we are treated to a variety of decent-sounding people in print and on the airwaves explaining that religion — or “faith” as they now prefer to call it — is basically all about shared moral values, making the world a better place and gaining a proper sense of awe at life’s mystery. We are given to understand that the great world religions are all really fumbling towards the same truth.

And by dove-ish voices we are urged to join what is essentially a campaign for increasing the amount of goodness in the world. Who could be against that? Such faith sounds so reasonable. Churlish non-believers like me are made to feel it is we who are being arrogant, dogmatic, closed-minded. How can we be so sure? And then this. A nun has apparently been cured of Parkinson’s disease through writing the name of John Paul II on a piece of paper.

Ecclesiastical authorities in the Roman Catholic Church have been investigating the alleged miracle, interviewing neurologists, graphologists, psychiatrists and medical experts. The diocese of Aix-en-Provence is now satisfied that

it has a putative supernatural intervention on its hands, and this week submitted its dossier to Pope Benedict XVI, who may declare an official miracle and begin procedures for making the late Pope a saint.

Meanwhile, Gerard Baker (“‘Israel right or wrong’ is not a grown-up debate”, March 30) writes that one determinant of US foreign policy towards Israel is the belief, widely held on the Religious Right, that before the prophecy of the Second Coming and the end of the world can be fulfilled, the Israelites must be given their Biblical lands of Judaea and Samaria.

Where are you, intelligent Christians? Where is your voice, your righteous anger? Where is your honest contempt for this nonsense? Take that claimed recent miracle, for instance. I know lots of nice, clever Catholics — friends, thoughtful men and women, people of depth and subtlety, people of some delicacy, people who would surely cringe at the excesses of Lourdes. Do they believe that John Paul II may have cured this nun from beyond the grave?

Where are the shouts of self-respecting bishops and cardinal-archbishops, raised against

the woeful confusion of faith with superstition? I have a theory about their reticence. I think they know this stuff is the petrol on which the motor of a great Church runs; that without these delusions to feed on, the unthinking masses would falter. And they may be right. But what a melancholy conclusion: that the thinking parts of a religion should be almost extraneous to what moves it; far from the core; just a little fastidious shudder; a wink exchanged between the occupants of the reserved pews.

There is, of course, an alternative: that they too believe the nonsense; that the Prime Minister’s wife (and maybe the Prime Minister), and the Communities Secretary, and the Chancellor of Oxford University and

former Governor of Hong Kong — not to mention several of my colleagues on these pages in *The Times* — honestly entertain the possibility that from beyond the grave the late Pope John Paul II interceded with God to cause a woman to be cured of Parkinson’s disease.

You are living, dear reader, at a watershed in human history. This is the century during which, after 2,000 years of what has been a pretty bloody marriage, faith and reason must agree to part, citing irreconcilable differences. So block your ears to the cooing voices on *Thought for the Day*, and choose your side.

“But how can you be sure?” Oh boy, am I sure. Oh great quivering

mountains of pious mumbo-jumbo, am I sure. Oh fathomless oceans of sanctified babble, am I sure. Words cannot express my confidence in the answer to the question whether God cured a nun because she wrote a Pope’s name down. He didn’t. Mere language does no justice to my certainty about whether God might be waiting for the return to their Biblical lands of the Israelites, before arranging the Second Coming. He isn’t.

Shout it from the rooftops. Write it on walls. Carve it into rock. He didn’t. He isn’t. He won’t.

● This summer Gordon Brown is to publish a book, *Courage*, profiling eight human studies in that quality. Whom has the politician chosen? Anyone dangerously controversial? Mr Brown has selected Martin Luther King, Nurse Edith Cavell, Robert Kennedy, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Raoul Wallenberg (who saved Hungarian Jews), Dame Cicely Saunders (of the hospice movement), Aung San Suu Kyi and Nelson Mandela.

Courageous choices, Chancellor. No place here for Copernicus, though?

No, still a bit risky — he was only pardoned by the Vatican in 1993.

Comment

Gerard Baker

I am a new man this week. I am freshly armed with a most potent, perhaps life-altering, weapon... times2 column, page 7

Giles Smith

It’s unlikely to detain you unless your fancy is tickled by bokes in leather trousers dicing each other through chicken mesh Sport on television, page 101