We live in an age where becoming a public intellectual is simple. All you need to do is appear authoritative to academics and sell yourself to the public. Success depends on whether your message is fashionable, and you can exploit it before fashions change, or can adapt it to changing fashions. A lot depends on the way you spin your message and on the public knowing less than you. You should convey a sense of caring about something important, apart from yourself, and you should notice wrongs that need to be put right. It will help if somewhere in your message there are good guys and bad guys, or victims and oppressors, and if victims aren’t readily available you can always tweak your journey of self-discovery to serve this purpose. Don’t forget to speak truth to power. This is crucial and best accomplished with well-spun half-truths.

If you run into difficulty, do what many aspiring public intellectuals do, criticise the church, as it has become a soft target; an all-purpose scapegoat for everything wrong with the world. Imply that you know more about Christians than they know about themselves, which isn’t likely, but that won’t matter. Remember that fundamentalists, conservatives, evangelicals, creationists, homophobes, racists, xenophobes, misogynists, wife oppressors, child molesters and self-loathers are all your aids and abetters, necessary for your straw-man arguments. Point out their stupidities, hypocrisies, evils and tragedies but remember to ignore your own. Never admit your message is commonplace. Pretend to be original. This is neatly done by spinning your message in a way that avoids its broader context.

If criticising the church is an aspirational necessity, it will help if you were once in the church but saw the light and left. This will allow you to claim insider knowledge, which is difficult to challenge, and useful for wrong-footing your straw-man opponents. Remember, everything is weighted in your favour, as most people, including many within the church, want to see the church painted in a bad light, and will assume you left it for altruistic reasons. Know your audience. Manipulate it. Exploit its weaknesses.

Speaking of manipulating and exploiting, Karen Armstrong—one of those public intellectuals who saw the light and left the church—gave a keynote address in 1997 at a Sydney conference on religion, literature and the arts. Her address was full of insights from comparative religion and the historical-critical method. While those insights weren’t wrong, neither were they original, but she spun her message in a way which suggested that those insights were unknown to the church, and she was deceptively leading her audience to believe the church was on shaky ground and would collapse like a house of cards once it discovered what she’d discovered. As I found this spin mischievous, I raised my hand during question time: “Are you aware,” I asked, “that everything you’ve told us in the last hour—all your insights from comparative religion and the historical-critical method—is taught to students in first year theological college?” This caught her off-guard. She said no while avoiding eye contact, which suggests an evasion if not a lie, but then she couldn’t have said yes, as that would have thrown a different light on her well-spun half-truths. In her address, the church had to look naive, and about to be crushed under the juggernaut of modern historiography, while she had to look wise for leaving the church before getting crushed along with it.

Two years later, David Marr—another public intellectual who saw the light and left the church—published The High Price of Heaven, a mixture of personal reflection, contemporary history and investigative journalism. The book is about his tortured adolescent faith (he even once considered ordination), about his coming out, about how he thinks the church works, about its attitude towards homosexuality, and about the history of law reform.
around homosexuality, censorship and the church’s exemptions from anti-discrimination legislation. It’s also about how Marr’s mind works, and once we know that, we know where he’s coming from, and we know he isn’t telling the whole story, since there’s always another aspect of the story to tell.

Marr left the church because he realised he was homosexual, and he understood the church to be anti-homosexual, so he couldn’t stay in the church without continuing to be conflicted. While part of his conflict was resolved by leaving the church, there’s always an unresolved part of the conflict waiting to be resolved. To his credit, he doesn’t buy into the religion—poisons—everything argument, as he’s convinced that religion—even the remains of lost faith—is a key to understanding our lives and our politics. But that leaves him with a dilemma, since he wants the church to be everything—or to be responsible for everything—even as it refuses to become what he wants it to become.

Symbolism is powerful. The cover of *The High Price of Heaven* features an attack dog with bared teeth protecting a timid bishop wearing a mitre and holding a crosier. If the symbolism is obvious, it’s also misleading, as Marr isn’t timid and is something of an attack dog himself. Perhaps there should have been another image on the cover, of Marr with bared teeth, or perhaps we should admit the attack-dog symbolism was ill-advised. More importantly, Marr doesn’t represent the theatre of homosexual identity, including homosexuals within the church who are neither tortured nor conflicted. He represents himself. There’s a broader issue here, as if we’re honest we must admit the theatre of homosexual identity is a modern liberal democratic phenomenon. Homosexuals and the church are actors in a contemporary drama, and each actor is reading from a different script, and there are dozens of scripts.

In February 1981, the Church of England’s General Synod debated the Gloucester Report, commissioned as a discussion document on homosexuality. Robert Runcie, then Archbishop of Canterbury, made a statement during the debate, which contained several relevant observations:

On the term homosexual: “It was around 1897 when the word homosexual was first used as a noun by the psychiatrist Havelock Ellis and he apologized for such bad usage. Until then people spoke of homosexual acts and not homosexual persons, and this was one of the reasons why students and others in the nineteenth century could write letters to one another with expressions of affection few would dare to use today.”

On the category homosexual: “Once we were encouraged by Freud to define people in terms of their sexual feelings, the danger was there of tyrannically imposing the categories heterosexual and homosexual on a range of relationships and feelings which cannot be categorized in such a banal and crude way. One of the results has been the eclipse of friendship as a profound spiritual relationship which inspired some of the greatest art and writing in the world. I detect much ungenerous suspicion surrounding friendship in our own day.”

On gay rights: “Just as I would deprecate automatic suspicion attaching to friendship, so on the other side I cannot but believe that those who are obsessive about so-called gay rights contribute to this unhealthy atmosphere.”

On gay clergy: “One of my rule-of-thumb tests for ordination would be that if a man was so obsessive a campaigner [for gay rights] that it made his ministry unavailable to the majority of church people, then I would see no justification in ordaining him.”

On judging homosexuals: “To deprecate the casual and unthinking talk about homosexuality does not mean that we should abandon any moral judgment altogether.”

On homosexual equality: “I do not believe that it is possible for anyone to be loyal to the Christian tradition and to see homosexual and heterosexual relations as having equal validity.”

On the report itself: “The caution shown by the authors seems to me to be courageous and responsible in view of new evidence, both medical and social, and new ways of evaluating the evidence.”

On the nature of homosexuality: “The best way forward now, I would suggest, is for the church to combat with vigour the hatred and denigration of homosexuals which is widespread in our society and to try to come to a balanced understanding of their difficulties and their potential by seeing [homosexuality] not as a sin or as a sickness, but more as a handicap, always bearing in mind the new ways in which we have come to view those who are handicapped, and to learn from them.”

Runcie’s rule-of-thumb test for ordination needs to be properly understood. He isn’t against the ordination of homosexuals. He’s against the ordination of homosexuals so obsessed with gay rights that their ministry would be unavailable to the majority of Anglicans.

I bought a copy of Diarmaid MacCulloch’s *Silence: A Christian History* because it looked attractive—rather than an attack dog there’s a beautiful Giotto on the cover—and because I mistook it to be a spiritual history of silence within Christianity. It took months to read, something of a record for me, as I kept picking it up and putting it down, not knowing
why it annoyed me. Not that it isn’t well written, and not that it isn’t erudite, but something about it doesn’t add up, at least to me.

MacCulloch is one of those Armstrong and Marr types, who’ve seen the light and left the church, but he operates on different level; for one thing, he’s a distinguished academic; for another, he’s a smooth operator: Professor of Church History at Oxford, Fellow of the British Academy, multiple prize-winning historian and television presenter, knighted in the New Year’s Honours List of 2012. As this makes Sir Diarmaid a creature of the Establishment, the fact that his book annoys insignificant me is irrelevant.

According to his Wikipedia entry, MacCulloch was made a deacon in the church but declined to be ordained to the priesthood because of the church’s attitude to his homosexuality, and now describes himself as a “candid friend of Christianity”. Note an evasiveness or ambiguity here, since “declined” suggests he didn’t seek ordination, he was offered ordination but turned it down, because the church disappointed him. This means he’s special, as the journey to priesthood doesn’t usually work that way; it usually works the other way around. The candidate seeks ordination, and undergoes a lengthy process of mutual discernment, during which the church reserves the right not to ordain the candidate until the ordination actually takes place. In other words, the church usually calls the candidate; the candidate doesn’t usually call the church.

In MacCulloch’s acknowledgments he speaks fondly and movingly about a deceased friend, Robert Runcie:

At a time when my feelings towards institutional Christianity were not very positive, he gave me an example of cheerful, practical spirituality, rueful self-knowledge and sheer joie de vivre which all leaders in the church would do well to ponder. His friendship was one of the most important, enjoyable and enlightening that I have known.

True, Runcie was a great church leader in difficult times, and his bravery and humanity are sorely missed, but his 1981 statement to General Synod about the Gloucester Report sits uncomfortably alongside MacCulloch’s views on homosexuals and the church. Hence the reader may wonder about the nature of their conversations about homosexuality, assuming such conversations took place.

Although MacCulloch isn’t obliged to tell us, I wonder what he means by Runcie’s “rueful self-knowledge”. As the reality of Runcie’s life as a Christian was different from the reality of MacCulloch’s life as a Christian, I wonder whether Runcie’s “rueful self-knowledge” has something to do with the difficulty of clerical vocation and indeed the difficulty of Christian discipleship more generally. The son of man came to serve, not to be served, to give his life as a ransom for many, and he had nowhere to lay his head. Vocation and discipleship aren’t about sexual identity, heterosexual or homosexual, they are about something else.

This book grew from MacCulloch’s 2011-12 Gifford Lectures, which were established in the late nineteenth century to promote and diffuse the study of natural theology, which is the knowledge of God reason can acquire without the aid of revelation. In MacCulloch’s introduction, he says he hopes to accomplish this goal by exploring the tension between language (logos = word + reason) and silence (apophatic theology = the via negativa). He’s the first to admit the difficulties, since language cannot codify silence, which of course begs the question: “How does silence relate to the Christ who is Logos?”

There’s a problem here, as natural theology relies on a Greek concept of “the natural” as “the rational” (Logos), and it belongs to an age that tended to pit reason (Athens) against revelation (Jerusalem). While natural theology was fashionable in the romantic period, we’re now returning to a pre-romantic awareness of the ancient rapprochement between reason and revelation in the Hellenistic Period (before Christ). In other words, we’re discovering that reason cannot be pitted against revelation, and as a result, the boundaries between natural theology and revealed theology are becoming blurred and harder to defend. MacCulloch doesn’t know that, or doesn’t want his readers to know that, hence his well-spun half-truths.

MacCulloch also explores another tension, as his book is equally about exposing the church as a source of power “often sustained by distortions of the truth or reality, particularly when power takes the form of claiming a monopoly on truth”. This is another evasive and ambiguous observation since—like Armstrong and Marr—he’s made a career out of speaking truth to power himself; first within the church, as a church historian who declined ordination; then without the church, as an actor on a larger stage more suited to his temperament, talent and will. At some point the reader will realise his book’s focus is primarily on chronicling the church’s abuse of power, history of shame, and loss of authority—and notice his exploration of language and silence is somewhat thin—but we’re not meant to make a judgment about this, since he admits to bias at the outset, and his candour is meant to dis-
arm us. He’s less aware of the Eastern rite churches than he wants to be, and his focus on the Western rite churches apportions most blame to Catholics—the papacy "has gathered to itself more silences of shame and distortions of the truth than other sources of authority in the Christian tradition”—although "Protestants should not be complacent; in their days of power, they have had a good deal to answer for as well".

Can these two tensions be reconciled? Yes and no. Either way it’s a difficult balance. While MacCulloch believes he’s struck the right balance, he hasn’t, as his exploration of language and silence never has a life of its own apart from his exploration of power and shame, and, like many public intellectuals on the make, he’s a master of spinning half-truths out of context. True, he may be subtler than Armstrong and cleverer than Marr, but he hasn’t said anything that hasn’t been said before, and he’s chosen not to say a great deal. If readers are to make sense of Silence: A Christian History, rather than be intimidated by his erudition and mesmerised by his smoothness, they need to maintain a sense of what he studiously avoids, which is as significant as what he studiously confronts. They also need to notice that homosexuality is his book’s leitmotiv, elevated to the level of a moral principle, at the expense of more urgent moral principles facing society and the church.

This is where things get complicated for MacCulloch, as it’s easier to pass judgment on the past than struggle with the present; also, as most of his judgments are alluded to behind smoke and mirrors, he never has to own them as judgments. The effect is slippery, and there’s something hypocritical about his slipperiness, as homosexuals living in the modern liberal democracies of the twenty-first century don’t have to confront what homosexuals throughout history had to confront. They can now choose from a menu of choices. They can act out one of the bewildering variety of roles in the theatre of homosexual identity. One of those roles is to simply be homosexual, without making it the focus of their identity, since their relationship with humanity, and their relationship with divinity, is greater than their homosexuality. They can have pretty much any kind of relationship with the church they want, provided they realise the church is about their Christian faith, not their identity politics, or the identity politics of any other sub-population.

MacCulloch wants us to know he’s gay and has come out, and we’re meant to see this as brave, as some kind of moral statement, but it isn’t brave, and he doesn’t represent the theatre of homosexual identity—he represents himself—and there are clearly gays he doesn’t want to be identified with. This is most obvious in Chapter 7, “Silences for Survival”, where his discussion of Anglo-Catholicism is particularly disconcerting, and somewhat cowardly, as he treats it as “gay noise”, and only as “gay noise”, and as a different kind of “gay noise” than anything issuing from the mouth or pen of Sir Diarmaid of the Establishment. There’s something unfortunate about an influential church historian, who’s left the church, who prides himself on having come out, who trades in commonplace half-truths, who takes those half-truths out of context, and ends up sounding as if he doesn’t like homosexuals.

Anglo-Catholicism deserves better than this. Presumably because it doesn’t suit MacCulloch’s purpose, he avoids mentioning what he must surely know. Whether ordained or lay, most Anglo-Catholics aren’t homosexual, and to dismiss Anglo-Catholicism as “gay noise” is to ignore one of the most influential movements—if not the most influential movement—in nineteenth-century Anglicanism. True, it was famous for being camp, but that’s a cliché which ought to be beneath him, and camp doesn’t necessarily mean gay. The movement was also famous for its focus on social justice, and, apart from that, it’s widely accepted that Anglo-Catholicism influenced what mainstream Anglicanism became in the twentieth century, and still is in the twenty-first century. Because of this, Anglo-Catholicism is widely recognised to have become a victim of its own success, and outlived its usefulness, but that’s not an excuse for telling half-truths about it, and telling those half-truths out of context.

At this point, MacCulloch is faced with a divided readership; between those who can’t see through him and those who can. He’s lost a great deal of credibility—after his startling harangue about Anglo-Catholicism as “gay noise”—and many of his readers are no longer intimidated by his erudition and mesmerised by his smoothness. It’s now obvious that, while he knows a lot about church history, he doesn’t know everything about church history, and his credibility lessens as his magisterial journey transitions from ancient to modern. Clearly, church historians aren’t experts...
on the contemporary church, or the broader world in which the contemporary church subsists, and clearly the content of his message has been framed by his subjectivity as a messenger. Of course, he’s already admitted to this subjectivity, as a basic hermeneutical principle, but somehow that doesn’t help. It merely reinforces what Benedict XVI has called the dictatorship of relativism, under which there is no absolute truth and every point-of-view contains its own relative truth. In this dictatorship, the difference between Jesus Christ and Oscar Wilde is purely relative.

From the outset, MacCulloch has argued the necessity of exposing stories of power, because in this way, “Christianity may learn a lesson. Strident proclamation has many dangers, and silence has its own eloquence. Sometimes, as we shall see, the gap between them can be bridged by laughter.” But the way he constructs his stories of power is itself a kind of proclamation, and the laughter he envisages is probably at someone else’s expense. The problem here is obvious, as we live in an age where exposing stories of power is commonplace, has lost its prophetic currency, and has become little more than media fodder, or worse than that, entertainment. By now he’s clearly operating somewhere along the same spectrum as Stephen Fry, another gay man, who travels the globe looking for newsworthy evidence that all’s not all right in the world as long as there are homophobic bishops in Africa or narrow-minded Christians somewhere else.

When MacCulloch’s style is deconstructed, the reader can see him writing to a formula. Each time he introduces a new story of power, he begins with mock humility, then notices that every church has a case to answer, although Catholics always have more of a case to answer than Protestants. But of course, he’s above it all, as he’s left the church, and made a career out of speaking truth to power. He’s a consummate performer, a storyteller with interest in opportunistic way he dips into them to spin his message.

As far as the Catholic Church’s concealment of child abuse is concerned, MacCulloch forgets that all institutions—secular and religious—managed this problem inappropriately before it was openly discussed, and before statutory guidelines were issued for managing it appropriately; also, there’s no quantitative evidence that the problem is more prevalent among Catholic clergy than any other clergy, and his hinting at a connection with celibacy is strained, since there’s no quantitative evidence that children are more likely to be abused by a celibate clergyman than a married one; also, apart from that, the overwhelming majority of child abuse occurs within families, not within churches, a fact that few people seem to care about. In the case of Christianity’s responsibility in relation to the Holocaust, he’s apparently unaware of the large body of Jewish scholarship that disagrees with his spin on this subject.

At the conclusion of his Gifford Lectures, MacCulloch was no doubt given rapturous applause, as his message perfectly matches what contemporary Christians living in the shadows of romanticism, modernism and postmodernism want to hear. He sincerely believes he’s made a contribution to natural theology—the knowledge of God without the aid of revelation—and his goal was to locate God as much outside the church as within it, which of course makes the church somewhat redundant, and places God on his side against the church. The fact that his message is commonplace is irrelevant, as he’s now become what he’s always wanted to be, a public intellectual, which he could never be in the church.

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