

Editorial: Buttresses & Pillars

Winston Churchill was once described as a pillar of the Church. 'No, no,' he replied, 'not a pillar of the Church, but a buttress, supporting it from the outside.'

Presumably being a buttress in the Churchillian sense did not mean being physically or institutionally on the outside; it seems more like a less totalitarian state of the internal exile lived by the dissident in the eastern bloc. It is a happier state? Not necessarily, one surmises, if one is surrounded by fundamentalist pillars, hectoring in their certainty and demanding in their professions of loyalty.

We are told that the world is full of fundamentalists, from Teheran and Peshawar, from Bagdad and Bradford to Houston and Colorado Springs, not forgetting the fundamentalists of science and its 'public understanding'. Can this really be so? Are the pillars of faith really so sure of their facts, really so confident in their improbable dogmas? Are there really the million upon million of them claimed? Or, in *les hommes moyen sensuels* at least, in those whose character demands a degree of philosophical reflection, are there occasional seeds of doubt beneath the public displays?

It would be strange if this were not so, because even with those most certain of themselves thought has a tiresome habit of occasionally breaking in. Moreover, what the fundamentalists of to-day believe bears scant relation to what the believers of the early eras of their faiths believed. Fundamentalism, despite its appearance of permanence, is a changing and, arguably, a modern phenomenon, a response to the threats of scientific enlightenment and Western empire. Over the ages religions have survived as much because of the buttresses, holding the structures up while the pillars and interiors are changed, as because of the pillars which have only the appearance of immutability, and only over the short term.

For those in our day who believe that there may be much to be gained by fostering the spirit and practice which underlay the works of two great civilisations in very different circumstances, being a Churchillian buttress may be an honourable position.