

Religion and public doctrine in Russell

by Kirk Willis

Maurice Cowling. *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England*. Vol. II: *Assaults*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge U. P., 1985. Pp. xxvii, 375. US\$49.50.

FOR THE PAST twenty-five years Maurice Cowling has been one of the most prolific and influential historians of modern Britain. In a succession of meticulously researched, closely argued, and densely written books, he has explored subjects ranging from the passage of the Second Reform Bill, to the political philosophy of John Stuart Mill, to the attitudes of the Labour Party to the rise of Nazism. Broadly speaking, these works have run along two closely parallel tracks. One series has chronicled what has come to be called—chiefly through Mr. Cowling's own usage—the “high politics” of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain. In such works as *1867: Disraeli, Gladstone and Revolution* (1967), *The Impact of Labour 1920–1924* (1971), and *The Impact of Hitler 1933–1940* (1975), he has examined legislative maneuverings, parliamentary machinations, and intraparty intrigues in exquisite detail and has popularized a genre of historical writing that has come to be much imitated, not the least by several of his own students. To Mr. Cowling and his disciples, political history is best pursued not as an inquiry into the vagaries of public opinion or the minutiae of constituency organization, but as the study of the behaviour of the two-score-and-ten politicians who clamber near the very summit of parliamentary power. It is in the description of the conduct pursued of this rarefied elite, that is, that the history of “high politics” consists.

Similarly, Mr. Cowling's other line of books, most importantly, *The Nature and Limits of Political Science* (1963), *Mill and Liberalism* (1963), and *Conservative Essays* (1978), has been devoted to the contemplation of the higher reaches of political theory—to abstract arguments and theor-

etical musings on modern social and political thought. As with his other series of works, moreover, these theoretical studies have all contained a full measure of Mr. Cowling's confident command of sources, admirable instinct for the important topic, combative intellectual temperament and unashamed Conservative sympathies, and have won for him a wide reputation as one of the finest contemporary historians of modern Britain.

Within the last ten years, moreover, Mr. Cowling has boldly set off down yet another path—this time in pursuit of the study of the role of religious argument in modern British public life. As he well recognizes, such a journey promises to be both a lengthy and arduous one. It threatens, indeed, to be nothing less than an intellectual history of modern Britain, and, not surprisingly therefore, Mr. Cowling projects at least five volumes under the general title of *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England*. Beginning with the end of the confessional state in Britain in the 1820s (as a consequence of the passage of Catholic Emancipation and the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts), the projected series will discuss both the leading defenders and the chief critics of religious thought in Britain for the past two centuries. Because “public life” and “public doctrine” are the expansive focuses of this project, a truly astonishing range of thinkers will be discussed—from theologians to historians, philosophers to poets, literary critics to politicians, novelists to scientists—anyone, that is, who contributed to public debate in Britain since the early nineteenth century. It is scarcely possible, indeed, to imagine a major thinker who could slip through the finely wrought mesh of Mr. Cowling's historical net.

Two volumes have thus far appeared. The first, published in 1980, was a remarkable intellectual autobiography—not so much a confessional as an account of what Mr. Cowling modestly described as “the contours of a narrow mind”. It was, therefore, devoted exclusively to Mr. Cowling's own Cambridge education, Peterhouse career, and intellectual and professional maturation. Although full of insight into the Cambridge history faculty, university politics, and college business, it was more remarkable for its discussion of the intellectual progenitors of an entire generation of Tory, Anglican historians (of whom Mr. Cowling is the most distinguished) and for its acknowledgement of intellectual debts. Handsomely generous in his confessions to the formative influence of such figures as Lord Salisbury, R.G. Collingwood, Evelyn Waugh, Edward Norman, Herbert Butterfield, Michael Oakeshott, and Arnold Toynbee, Mr. Cowling produced an absorbing account that is of importance not merely to students of Cambridge but to all those interested in the writing of history in late twentieth-century Britain.

The second volume of *Religion and Public Doctrine* is a very different document. Bearing the extremely apt and accurate subtitle *Assaults*, it is indeed chiefly a discussion of the leading critics of Christianity in England over the past century and a half. Mr. Cowling's method is simple

and straightforward: to focus on the leading arguments of selected thinkers and to demonstrate the coherence and influence of their thought. *Assaults* consists, therefore, of a series of discussions of individual thinkers ranging from the 1820s to the present. All the usual suspects are there: John Ruskin, T.H. Huxley, Herbert Spencer, Leslie Stephen, H.G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, Havelock Ellis, D.H. Lawrence, and Bertrand Russell. Most of the once celebrated but now forgotten names are there as well: Hugh James Rose, H.L. Mansel, George Henry Lewes, Henry Thomas Buckle, Frank Harris, and John Tyndall. And in order to flesh out the context and to offer a sense of the incessant disputation and controversy that has marked religious thought in Britain over the past two centuries, some of the defenders—both orthodox and otherwise—of Christianity and Anglicanism are also discussed: John Keble, John Henry Newman, G.K. Chesterton, W.H. Mallock, Graham Greene, W.E. Gladstone, and Frederick Copleston. As such lists might suggest, *Assaults* is a study in the “high politics” of religion—a study of intellectual not public opinion and one which makes considerable demands on its readers.

Mr. Cowling’s treatment of Russell is one of the longest and most detailed in the book, and it demonstrates both the real strengths and unhappy weaknesses of his approach. Appearing at the end of a section devoted to the thought of Wells, Ellis, Shaw, Lawrence, and Somerset Maugham, Mr. Cowling’s discussion places Russell’s thought squarely within the tradition to which it historically and self-consciously belonged. As Mr. Cowling demonstrates convincingly, both Russell and his readers were well aware of the tradition in which Russell wrote and argued, and it is the great merit of Mr. Cowling’s approach that that sense of context is recaptured for Russell’s thought. Only after such necessary “locating” has been done, after all, is it really possible to assess Russell’s singularity and conventionality with precision.

The weaknesses of Mr. Cowling’s approach are similarly instructive. As a committed Tory and Anglican, he is plainly out of sympathy with virtually all of Russell’s religious, political, and ethical views and that hostility occasionally leads him to snappish judgments and impatient dismissals—as of Russell’s “utopian politics” and “progressive, anarchistic pessimism” (p. 269). Moreover, Mr. Cowling’s want of sympathy leads him to ignore certain of Russell’s best-known and most influential works on religion such as “Mysticism and Logic” and *Why I Am Not a Christian*. More serious, however, is his refusal to appreciate the evolution of Russell’s religious and ethical views over the course of the latter’s long life. Mr. Cowling therefore presents an analysis of a remarkably static Russell—the Russell of the 1920s and 1930s.

Maurice Cowling promises that at least three additional volumes will be necessary to complete his examination of religious thought in modern Britain. When completed, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England* will be a major intellectual achievement and required reading for all serious students of modern British history. Although one might

wish that Mr. Cowling’s pen become more fluent and his humour less astringent, one can but envy his learning, admire his industry, and await his achievement.

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