

## Charterhouse Column for “Catholic Herald”

*Catholic Herald* readers don't miss a theological trick. Sharp-eyed Mrs Eileen Jolliffe sent me a newspaper article in which it was reported that "...the Church of England is considering rejecting England's Patron Saint St George on the grounds that his image is too warlike and may offend Muslims". It wasn't the offence to Muslims that Eileen was worried about but, as she said, "Am I wrong, or is it only the Holy Catholic Church which has the authority to appoint saints?"

You're dead right, sweetheart, and the good old C.of E. (of which of course I am a long-suffering member) had better keep its nose out of these high affairs. And on the issue of offending Muslims, I'm afraid it's a bit late in the day – because George became an English hero during the Crusades against the Muslim armies which captured Jerusalem in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. A vision of St George appeared to the Crusader army at the Battle of Antioch in 1098.

Predictably, the senior bishops in the C.of E, in pursuance of their general policy of appeasement, are keen to ditch St George: they have already apologised for the Crusades. I wonder how far we are going to take this policy of appeasement and apologising for our history? We recently apologised for the slave trade, though the Muslims – the biggest slavers of all – have not apologised for their part in it. Do I have to apologise to the Germans for winning the Second World War? And must I stop teaching the decline and fall of the Roman Empire for fear of upsetting the delicate sensitivities of Italian ice cream sellers?

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It's at times like this that I recall my dear late Yorkshire mother's dislike of *The Goon Show*, dismissing it, as she did, in her nice phrase, "Too daft to laugh at". I was reading an American religious magazine and fell about hysterical upon learning of the latest antics of the Episcopal Church's "only openly gay bishop and favourite recovering alcoholic" Gene Robinson. His autobiography is unpretentiously titled *Going to Heaven: The Life and Election of Bishop Gene Robinson*. (You would think humility might have urged a question mark after the word "heaven").

Robinson's blurb for this masterpiece describes it as "One man's journey into his own otherness". Well, we know he famously likes a bit of the other. But the too daft to laugh at bit? The name of the book's publisher: *Soft Skull Press*. Can you hear me, mother?

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News from the Episcopal Divinity School in New York where they mounted a display of "Sacred Condoms" – these rubber items exquisitely inflated into the shape and form of famous cartoon characters. Give it the full Disneyfication, I say: "Hi ho, Hi ho, we're for safe sex you know..." How cute. And at the church of San Romero de Las Americas in the West Bronx they place a bowl of condoms on the altar next to the bread and wine at the Holy Communion. You couldn't make it up. I feel as if I'm wasting my time as a satirist: anything I might invent from the depths of my deranged imaginings in the morning has usually been overtaken by actual events before tea-time.

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The City of London half-closes for August so I have a bit more time for uninterrupted reading. I took St Augustine's *City of God* into the garden and sat in the shade marvelling. Of course Augustine was one of the cleverest and wisest men who ever lived, a poet who wrote prayers to melt your heart, but his most striking gift was his ability to answer questions of cosmology and philosophical theology which we moderns arrogantly imagine we were the first to come across.

For instance, what does this remind you of? "Who can fail to see that there would have been no time if there had not been creation to bring in movement and change. Thus there can be no doubt that the world was not created in time but with time". It's a pretty good description of the Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe.

And one of the most exciting recent developments in philosophical theology is the so called Anthropic Principle which says there is abundant evidence to suggest that the world was designed with human beings in mind. For example, if the mathematics of crucial physics had been ever so slightly different from what it is – the precise strength of the strong and weak nuclear forces, gravity and electromagnetism – we would not be around at all. So it is statistically preposterous to claim that the universe began by accident.

Well, the numbskull atheists and universe-by-accident-mongers try to get round this argument by saying that the world we live in is but one of an infinite number of alternative universes. Really? Augustine had got there before them. He derides alternative universe supporters as, "...those who are compelled to share the Epicurean fantasy of innumerable worlds". It's the elegance of expression combined with the savagery of the put-down that makes Augustine a genius.

In another place he says he hasn't patience with, "...men with time on their hands and with a curiosity for fine points – the sort of people who are more ready to ask questions than capable of understanding the answers".

His observations of the natural world and people are penetrating and amusing: "Some people can even move their ears, either one at a time or both together. Some can swallow an incredible number of various articles and then with a slight contraction of the diaphragm can produce, as if out of a bag, any article they please in perfect condition. A number of people produce at will such musical sounds from their behinds (without stink) that they seem to be singing. I know from my own experience of a man who used to sweat whenever he chose".

In *The Confessions* Augustine tells us how he walked into a garden with a book and was told "Tolle Legge" – "Take and read". I walked into my garden with his *City of God*. I took and read. The result: inspiration, instruction, enlightenment and entertainment limitless. And hope for us all: "It is not the case that every bad man will become good; but no one will be good who was not bad originally".

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