

## **THE DEMISE OF UNPOPULAR ASPECTS OF POPULAR RELIGION: OUT, OUT, DAMN SMOKE**

BY

TIMOTHY R. GRAYSON

The single real problem with popular revolt, as opposed to the myriad unreal problems, is not the revolution itself. Actually, changes forged in the fire of open rebellion are often for the best. A case in point being the genesis of the United States of America. The *real* problem is that somebody is going to be pissed off. This poses a significant, inescapable, and possibly explosive dilemma. Even in the most tolerant of environments, such as the Church, tumult will come; like the furor over incense back in the eighties.

For a very brief time, several years ago, I grudgingly sat in on the fetid meetings of the board of elders at the Church parish of St. Andrews. My lackluster piety and perpetual absence from a pew was compensated for by my publishing the newsletter of all the holy gossip worth ink.

Because of my attendance I was witness to the Church reversing a canon that dated back to the creation (the Church's) itself. The elders of my parish staged the revolution toward the end of the boomer decade. It was a savage act of selfishness that needs to be told. After all, what is more sacred to remain impervious to assault by a splinter group's wrath?

The Church to which I belong: the one where I was baptized, took communion, and married last year, is very old and very established. It worked its kinks out during the middle ages, and has been essentially coasting since. The Church doctrines are hundreds, if not thousands of years old; and although many laymen have wished it, rarely are its laws changed.

Like all grown up religions, this one has survived because it takes hold of the young. Children are inculcated with the Church's values and virtues before they can reasonably weigh the validity of what they are being taught. The social mores and religious rituals are then carried through mindlessly by adults. I, for example, can't seem to escape the Church's pervasive grip despite dropping out of practise.

The burning of incense is a Church ritual with little apparent point. I remember it most during the too long, too somber funerals I was forced to attend as a child. The sweetly acrid smell of that incense reeks of death. I like it, actually; others do not. They complain about the smell, the smoke, and anything else with even the flimsiest connection with their distaste.

So what began as an innocent beef about incense at one meeting in the early eighties broke trail for a cavalcade of zealous, pent up aggressions from the masses. Pope Gregory IX's request to Bernard Gui, "Find me a heretic," and Martin Luther's self-voiced epithet, "That's a tough door," had far less impact on modern religion.

Trouble began when the meeting turned to new business. Mrs. Wells mentioned that perhaps it would be nice if Father O'Reilly would not use so much incense. A friend had said that after Roberta Burns's funeral, his sinuses were infected by an allergic reaction to the smoke. So for the sake of people with such problems, it would be a nice gesture.

Don Russell made the polite coughing sound of someone wishing to have the floor. The rest of the genteel group, pleased to be so privileged and proper, acquiesced.

"I was nearly sick from all the damned incense in the air by the time we were ready to put her in the hearse," said Don as a pall of stunned silence covered the room. Even the steam radiator stopped pinging.

"It's absolutely sickening: the stench is awful; you can't breath, your eyes burn and you can smell it in your clothes for days." He was preaching now like a missionary on quota, with conviction and righteousness reserved for the converted. Don's indignation was shocking because of his long years in the church and widely admired, pleasant demeanor.

I tried to disrupt him with a reminder of tradition. He would be wise to remember that the incense was there long before he was part of the Church.

"And," I said, "you always liked the smell. Besides, at funerals, it's really for the dead."

Don was now tight-lipped, yet loose-tongued, which created a comical picture. "If the dead want it, light it and throw it in the box. If you want to enjoy the stink, climb in too. As for whether I liked it, maybe I did. But I've outgrown it and know we don't need it."

It was true. Don had been, for inexplicable reasons, attending the funerals of many friends lately. Most of those late friends had belonged to other religions which felt that the souls of the departed would survive - so to speak - without the benefit of a halo of incense.

Don continued arguing that incense is offensive and unnecessary. He even suggested that it's nothing more than a bad habit the Church got into, and if other churches didn't use it neither should we. He demanded that henceforth there be no incense in the church.

Father O'Reilly was stunned. His cleric grace and Irish blarney had gone for coffee, and he couldn't answer. The priest's ruddy pallor was suddenly white and wet like a fat man's armpit. Hoping someone would come to the old priest's defense, I searched the room for signs of sympathy.

"You know," began a frail fellow generally presumed mute, "I feel better at funerals in other churches. I guess I never really noticed how much nicer it is without the incense."

The tide turned as other voices joined the chorus. Father O'Reilly and I knew we were defeated because of our guilt and our charity. The mob, fortunately for it, was in no way so handicapped.

"I think you're right. It's rude of you, Father, to subject all of us to that horrible smell – especially those who don't like it."

"Darn right," joined in Mr. Fowler. "You're used to it. But what about the rest of us? If you like it so much, do it in your own house."

"Well, it *is* tradition," wheezed the asthmatic widow Webster. "I can't take it for health reasons. But the smoke was unusually thick at Roberta's service. Maybe you could do it outside? Or, I suppose I'll have to stay away from funerals here."

"Nonsense!" Don bellowed. "We've been coming to this parish for more than forty years. We deserve to keep coming. If it weren't for the likes of us, there wouldn't be a St. Andrews for kids like him," he said, so I should suffer under the weight of twenty-six fierce eyes.

Father O'Reilly had found his voice and said, "But of course you have to stay Donald."

"Then the incense has to go. Anybody who wants it can burn it at home like I did in the sixties." Donald Russell, religious insurgent, had spoken.

On behalf of those who needed the incense for religious comfort, Father O'Reilly pleaded for charity: to little avail. A deal tolerable to Don and his own twelve apostles was struck; a deal that greatly curtailed Father O'Reilly's freewheeling use of incense.

In the future, in St. Andrews, there would be two distinct parts to every funeral service. First, near the altar at the front, the bulk of the service would take place without incense. Second, within the designated area near the door, Father O'Reilly would quickly spread the nasty clouds around the casket. Incense would not be permitted inside the church for any other mass.

The deal worked primarily because those expecting the incense succumbed to guilt. We felt guilty that the stench, which had no *real* purpose, was inhibiting others' welfare. Our thinking was that simply because we could not shake an ingrained belief was no reason for the others to suffer.

There were, of course, those who felt that the people who didn't like the incense were welcome to convert and go elsewhere. They were usually voted down not only by the revolutionaries, but by anyone with an eye on the collection plate. A large portion of the money came from parishioners in the non-incense movement, so principles took a back seat to economics.

Sadly, the deal didn't last long before the current arrangement was deemed unsatisfactory. Mourners who didn't like incense had to walk through its cloud on their way out. It was unhealthy and unfair, even if for only a single breath; and it would have to change because it had gone on long enough.

Father O'Reilly didn't like the new deal very much, but he diligently left his censer outside after that. It hung in the vestibule like a brass flag of surrender. I found the "incense free environment" signs on the doors more than a little distracting, not to mention distasteful.

Over time, many of the congregation moved on, carrying with them their new non-ritual. Not five years had gone by before the force of the non-incense movement overtook the nation, and within a decade the Church banned the use of incense entirely. It was a stunning blow to everyone who, like me, had grown up in a Church where incense was ubiquitous as candles.

Eventually the radical zealots, calmer but empowered by their victory, tired of my rabid, bitter defense of the vanquished.

I would repeat my mantra, "You *have* to allow it, *even* if you don't like it. This is more appalling by far. You are self-righteously legislating out others who aren't like you. It goes against everything the Church is about. Beliefs that the Church ingrained in those people for thirty or forty years can't just be turned off because *you* no longer believe."

"You are corrupt and overbearing fascists. Enjoy yourselves now because there's a mighty judgement coming and you too will be marched over."

Church life became unbearable for both Father O'Reilly and me (for obvious reasons). So last year we left. Rumor has it that the old priest renounced his vows and left the Church.

I heard he has begun his own religion somewhere on the west coast. At every mass he fires up incense in a pit the size of a Volkswagon, and taunts anyone to complain through the thick smog. Choking with him is a fairly sizeable following of former members of his old church.

I would talk to him now and then, before he moved. We both hoped the revolutionaries were satisfied with what they had accomplished for themselves. There's that guilt again.

But the persecuted often respond more tolerantly and charitably than their persecutors. Then again, the persecuted have also been known to hunt down and torture their former tormentors. Who's to say what might happen? Just remember that nothing is over until the fat angel sings.

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