

*CHRISTIAN FAITH AND MORALS AT
THE SHARP END*

by

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“Lofty moral principles and statements of ‘Business Objectives’ are one thing: the day to day grind is another. The two worlds need to be brought together.”

(Dr Peter Vardy, ICF Annual Lecture 1991)

This has been a rough, tough autumn. From Maastricht to the coal mines, from the pound sterling to women priests, from arms for Iraq to transatlantic trade wars, there has been acrimony and grief. Whether we have been arguing the toss in the House of Commons or the General Synod; or clinging to jobs which are about to come to the end of the line; or simply following events anxiously through the media; it has been hard to escape the impression that Church, State and Nation are all three uncertain and adrift. Many of our problems are common to the West as a whole – as Governor Clinton will discover on his second day behind the desk in the Oval Office. But others seem specific to these islands, on which we have been warned by the Chairman of the Independent Schools Association that the jobs available to our undereducated nation, in tomorrow’s Single European Market, may be confined to those of waiter, porter, cleaner and lavatory attendant.

Against this troubled background, I propose to leave to one side current theories of capitalism and the State, and to look instead at one or two basics. I want to clamber down from my habitual tree-top, to grub around the roots of the behaviour of the individual. It was with this in mind that I took as my text the words from Dr Peter Vardy’s lecture last November, with which I began.

The elegant court sword which I used to wear with my Diplomatic Service uniform was a glittering object of display. With its gilded hilt and golden pommel, it was by tradition never unsheathed, but carried in a shiny black scabbard. But the chased and ciphered blade, so discreetly concealed in lacquered leather, was long and thin and endowed with a wickedly sharp point. Beneath the urbanities and apparently civilised conventions, diplomacy, and the promotion of the nations interests overseas, can be a fierce affair.

In this lecture, I shall observe the Japanese distinction between “tatemaē” and “honno”, between the keeping up of appearances and the acknowledgement of inner realities. My theme is Christian faith, and especially Christian morals, at the sharp end. By that, I mean what we

genuinely believe, and what we in practice live up to, in the real world of our daily work. In that real world, there is often no time for us to deliberate at leisure, like some latter day Marcus Aurelius; and mostly there is no clear “staff solution” which suggests itself, to the series of dilemmas and difficulties with which we find ourselves confronted, seriatim. What do we do in practice? What should we have done, realistically, that would have been better? At the sharp end. When it comes to the point.

Who am I, to talk of such matters? And why to the ICF? I do not have the kind of “hands-on” manufacturing experience of last year's lecturer. But one man in his time plays many parts. My own have included 17 years in political work both at home in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London, and abroad in Western Europe, the Middle East and SE Asia; plus 15 years of economic management and international trade negotiation with the EC Commission in Brussels and Tokyo: plus, most recently, 5 years as the Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive of a modern university in the South of England. In money terms, my earliest financial responsibilities at work extended to little more than my personal diplomatic entertainment allowance: or than His Excellency, my Ambassador's, ink, blotting paper, and Lapsang Souchong. My University budget was a mere £70 million per annum. As a Director General in Brussels, I was responsible for annual discretionary expenditure well over ten times that amount. But even that would have been peanuts to some members and supporters of the ICF. Moreover, my experience, embracing far away conflicts in now forgotten countries, has more often than not been untypical, exotic, and remote from the way most people operate.

Yet the basics of earning our living are pretty constant: the underlying issues do not change: and, in the last resort, we are all morally and creed-wise adrift in the same fragile human coracle. So I make no very great apology – only an appeal to your imagination and patience.

I propose to talk now about truth and integrity; about the linked matter of whitened sepulchres and self-deception; about courage and cowardice; about one's own people and other people: and about that most delicate of judgements, the necessary minimum respect for and preservation of the self. In terms of Christian faith and morals, the central theme is that of The Way – sometimes the way of the warrior; sometimes something much less glorious and heroic; but, always. The Way of The Cross.

Let me begin, at the sharpest end, with truth and integrity. The media have had a field day recently with banking and insurance scandals, and the surge of the so-called “fraud barometer”. And it may well be that standards generally have fallen. But, in my belief, most businessmen and professional people (like most Christians) are fundamentally honest and fair dealing. Liars and cheats tend to be incapable of running long-lasting enterprises. Temptation, when we are conscious of it, is often in the little things. But the greatest temptation, and the biggest treason, is often the one of which we are only subconsciously aware: to improve on the truth; and to practice and proclaim an integrity which is in fact subtly flawed.

Language, paradoxically, is both a strut and a strumpet. We need words with which to communicate: but we are all capable of using those words to our own advantage, to cast ourselves in a favourable light, or to soften the asperity and ugliness of what we have to convey.

Military lingo is good at the latter. In “Soldierspeak”, positions are “secured”, there are

“mopping-up operations”: snipers are “taken out”: losses are reported as “sustainable”. In the famous American euphemism, the “marines have landed” and the situation is “well in hand”. The reality on the ground is, however, liable to be chaotic: and hideous to behold at close quarters. The minutes of commercial companies can cast a veil over the true nature of the row at a disputatious board meeting, by omission if not by commission. British Cabinet records, when I was last authorised to read them, were accurate enough in their synthesis of debate and summary of points agreed: but deliberately passed over the moments of drama and confusion. They tended to read too serenely and dispassionately, like accounts of a Diocesan Synod in the English shires, or the AGM of a New Zealand South Island bowls club. The official accounts of the weekly meeting of the EC Commission in Brussels were kept blander still, in case they ended up being leaked to the press.

British diplomatic despatches and telegrams, on the other hand, in the days when I had the duty to read and compose them, came closer to the realities they treated. Their circulation was restricted, their confidentiality defended, and their frankness deemed indispensable to good decision taking in London. They never concealed confusion of thought behind atrocious and impenetrable in-house jargon, as in the report of the US Charge d’Affaires mishandled meeting in Baghdad with Saddam Hussein, shortly before the invasion of Kuwait. Carlton-Browne of the F.O. whatever his other faults, furthermore never left things out simply for fear that they might get him into trouble. Whereas, in the EC world, I remarked the flagrant absence, in reports sent to me by certain underlings of continental nationality and training, of words and deeds of theirs which had provoked vigorous complaint from outside governments.

Yet even a faithful and conscientious UK diplomatic emissary can record an interview with a foreign luminary in a way which suggests that it was our envoy who had the better arguments: and that it was the alien Prime Minister who was slow off the mark, imbued with prejudice, or ready to cut off the nose to spite the face. As a young Charge d’Affaires in the 1960s, I had consciously to guard against a superior and supercilious twitch to my own quill. A year or two back, even the leaked Civil Service conclusions of a ministerial meeting at Chequers to discuss Germany and the Germans, otherwise succinct and purposeful, seem to have contained a touch of caricature and condescension.

(Why should foreigners be such a joke – and Europeans, to boot? As I said in an “Analysis” programme on Radio Four the other month, devoted to British Foreign Policy, there are still too many in political life in the UK who feel more at ease with Hausa tribesmen or Malaysian Dayaks than with Italian, French or even Dutch EC colleagues!)

Another temptation is to oversimplify the background, so as to highlight – albeit accurately and in good faith – the issue on which a decision is required and where fresh instructions need to be drafted. What may seem helpful and modest – the very quick thumb-nail sketching-in of a foreign political context, accompanied by the discreet but flattering implication that Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs is too busy and too important to bother with it in detail – can conceal the condescension of a player towards a gentleman, of an avowed professional towards a supposed amateur.

In a variant deviation, there are sprats to catch mackerel: submissions and dispatches from the field can concede a few points to the prejudices of headquarters, for tactical purposes, in order to secure recognition of other realities. When formulating trade policy recommendations to Brussels from my Delegation in Tokyo, I occasionally judged it necessary to work with some European prejudices in order to circumvent others. And a spoonful of sugar can help the medicine go down. When Director-General in Brussels, I was once driven to describe negotiations which I had conducted as “hard-nosed”; and their outcome “realistic and workman-like”, to save the faces of all concerned.

Finally, I pass over in embarrassed silence the euphoric “mission accomplished” reports which I have seen dispatched from time to time by emissaries at the end of their negotiating trips overseas, or terms of duty in the field. One pompously returning diplomatist of my acquaintance boldly proclaimed that, during his five years as Commercial Attaché in Rumania, British exports had increased by 30%. In a way, this was true. But he was counting the flow in monetary rather than real terms; and it was in any case not he who had any sort of serious hand in the modest substantive increase which in fact took place.

In all these matters, the truth is complex: and complete integrity is elusive. Pontius Pilate, in his own unwitting part in the redemption of the world through the Cross and Passion of Jesus, was neither knave nor fool. His rhetorical question, posed in jest, was nevertheless meant seriously. It continues sempiternally to torment the scrupulous and searching Christian, beavering away in the disorder and ambiguity of his particular work place. I am not a Moral Rearmer, and anyway am deeply suspicious of truth games. But how much reality and truth can people take? Where does integrity shade off into double-think and deception? During Sir Winston Churchill’s last Ministry, one of our aircraft came down close to the Soviet border in mysterious circumstances. As the bevy of Air Marshals picked up their papers at the end of the briefing and made for the door of the Cabinet Room, his truculent parthian shot was said to be a growled rhetorical question: “And perhaps some day someone will tell me what really happened with that bloody aeroplane?”

Since the saddest deception, in business and professional life, is probably self-deception, I come to the “whitened sepulchres” which we erect around ourselves, and which a few of us find it convenient to make our permanent abode.

The cultivation of an image, a public persona, is a normal part of the professional life of anyone in a position of command or control. It can be rooted in a healthy and necessary self-respect. The boss would never do this, nor stand for that. Asked how he came to give up smoking, General de Gaulle once replied: “It was easy: I simply informed my staff of my intention”. Therefore, the man was his image. On the parade ground at my National Service Officer Cadet School, at Aldershot in 1952, the Adjutant was an impeccable, even an exquisite, figure. His Sam Browne belt and riding boots were as highly polished as his Guardee wave or nod was studiously casual, when he acknowledged the vigorous salutes of the officer-cadets. The image was the man.

I thought I thought of both these personae, when I found myself, once upon a time, strolling

nonchalantly back into a tense, high level GATT negotiation in Geneva. It was after a recess which I had sought for the purpose of securing fresh instructions. The crowded chamber fell silent, as I re-entered. The EC held the balance: our position would make some and break others. My Jermyn Street shirt was crisp: my delivery of the European Commission's new initiative, brisk and authoritative. I was not the rubicund and slightly dreamy Leslie Fielding, baby-bather, cordon bleu cook, composer of zen "Haiku" and devotee of discotheques. I was, for the purposes of the hour, and indeed for the space of any all-night negotiating session which might have to follow, no man to be taken in the least lightly, but rather the mouthpiece and mover of the world's largest trading bloc. The Director-General. Himself. In Person. No Messing! I was, of course, scared. I happened to be short of court cards. The internal consensus between the 12 EC Member States which we had just succeeded in cobbling together could unravel at any moment, particularly if Paris, say, got cold feet and decided to pull the plug on me. The Americans might jump in with their usual outsize hob-nailed boots and kick away the planks of the bridge across which I was inviting the Third World countries to cross over and join our consensus. If it backfired, it was going to be my fault: if it succeeded, the proud parents of the international agreement would be legion. So it was "stiff upper lip", while the process of cajoling, beguiling and wheeling and dealing got under way. Indeed, I saw to it that people were, if possible, slightly apprehensive of me – especially my own side.

At this kind of game, one usually has no alternative. In fact I had quite often to perform so, for example when defusing trade war time bombs with the US in the 1980's – my greatest single responsibility as Director General. The snag comes if the persona separates from the man, and – God forbid – actually extinguishes and replaces the man. Even Christians can be stick insects. We accept official motor cars, expense accounts, secretaries, titles, honours and awards. When deprived of them, in a corporate take over, or a BP-style weed out, or even at the outset of an anticipated step-down at the appointed time, we suffer some form of identity crisis. The effect is comparable to "sensory deprivation" in certain techniques of prisoner interrogation.

I have known middle ranking EC officials, not only those invited to leave early, but even those shuffling off to retirement at 65, beg to be given the title of the next rank up – that of "Honorary Director" for example. Was it sought in order to face the neighbours in Angouleme, or relatives in Erps-Kwerps – or was it to help them not to be completely faceless in the shaving mirror? Even EC Commissioners, the political appointees in Brussels, were glad to be awarded the title Vice-President before finally leaving the Berlaymont. I was surprised how eagerly I accepted the offer of an Honorary Doctorate of Laws at my own University, when I stepped down as Vice-Chancellor.

All that is human. And it is no bad thing to be kind to the departing, if only to hasten their departure. But what of those who become permanently encased in their professional carapace; get so busy reinforcing megalomania, idiosyncrasy and false image that they are subsequently never able to revert to being fully themselves? Hitler lived in such a corset, long before he took his life in the Berlin bunker. Napoleon and Pope Gregory VII were each trapped in one, during their final exiles. Bertrand Russell, Somerset Maugham and Evelyn Waugh died entangled in, were denied breath and authenticity by, unnatural webs of their own manufacture. If to

dehumanise members of other races and religions is the necessary preamble to cynical crusades and “ethnic cleansings”, so the acquisition of the trappings and perquisites of authority, if pursued for its own sake, puts us in a position – with originally the best of personal intentions and with impeccably sound corporate motives – to do the deed from which in other circumstances we might shrink. To tell the lie, apply the squeeze, purloin the pension funds, and run the lives. And to do so with the outward appearance of honour, and the proclamation of utmost faith – or *ultima fides* –, as it is known in some City quarters. Whatever we do, we like to do it smelling of roses, even if we are writing off the possibility of the OBE or dismissing the prospect of getting asked back to Royal Ascot.

A Monk-Bishop of my acquaintance said to me recently that many so called sins and weaknesses were not as deadly as people supposed. Sexual extravagance, even violence against the person, was forgivable. What was deadly was bunging up the channels of Grace, through hypocrisy, through the construction of a self that was empty, through exclusive reliance on money and the apparent power and protection that it buys. For my own part, I have never had a massive amount of money: and do not greatly envy or despise anyone else’s. I think it is in the interests of society as a whole that when we defend the equality of man, we should also acknowledge the inequality of men’s talents, and accept the need to reward generously sometimes even lavishly – those who use their special abilities for the generation of value-added, and thereby the augmentation of national economic strength. But I mistrust the whitened sepulchres, and I fear the spirits of those entombed therein, as much as the Hobbits feared the “Barrow Wights” in the “Lord of the Rings”.

I turn next, to courage and cowardice. Physical courage I do not know much about, but suppose that you either have it or you don’t. It is easier to practice when you are young, and lacking not so much in imagination as in experience. It can all seem fun, as it did to the young infantry subaltern in “Journey’s End”, about to go out on a raiding party into No-man’s Land. A fellow undergraduate at Cambridge in the 50’s who, just before coming up, had been awarded the MC for leading a successful raid on the Chinese lines at the Hook in Korea, was modest, laconic and – I thought – genuinely self-amused by his exploit, I am immensely relieved never to have been called upon to do anything comparable in my eventful but mostly well-padded existence. However, I once had my way blocked by an excited religious crowd in a remote spot in the Middle East, when serving there as a young Oriental Secretary. A group of us were returning from an expedition in the hills. The girls were, not without reason, apprehensive. As I spoke the language, I left my companions inside their Landrovers while I improvised a calm and conciliatory speech to the mob. The latter reluctantly opened up to let us all through. On another slightly “hairy” occasion, I had to take the late Patrick Gordon Walker through a mob of political agitators and thugs who were attempting to sack an American embassy building in Indo-China: we passed through, pretending to be Norwegian merchant seamen. Both these incidents were exhilarating, straight out of the Boy’s Own Paper. If I had then been fat and in my fifties, I would certainly have turned right round and made a run for it.

More difficult is the other kind of courage; more frequent, the other cowardice. To be silent when things need to be said: to be “out to lunch” when one’s presence is required: inert when action is imperative yet professionally risky. There was once an impasse in Britain’s diplomatic efforts to prevent Cambodia being swallowed up in the Vietnam war – efforts which were later

moreover to fail, leaving the field first to Lon Nol, the misguided and rather thick police general, and then to the half-educated and wholly evil Pol Pot. I was young, isolated and apprehensive diplomatic agent in the field, confronted with a sudden opportunity to act effectively: but in a tense and risky situation, without time to check back first with London. Walking to and fro under the palm trees, I thought it over for an hour – calling, in my solitude and anguish, on all the gods I knew (none of them true gods, at that time in my life, as it happens). Then I made my demarche direct to the local Head of State on my own authority. It worked: I got my backing from London post hoc: and for a space things looked better. But I recall another occasion, much later on in Brussels, in a touchy intergovernmental negotiation, when the wind blew the other way. No real damage was done, except to my pride and self esteem. It was just an opportunity I lost, through moving with the grain. It still makes me wince. Cowards do not make good company, least of all to themselves.

Equally invidious, and much more common, is the extent to which we allow ourselves to be intimidated by a force of which I have for some years felt the clearly identifiable pull when it had no name; but which is now out in the open, as “The Politically Correct”. Vice-Chancellors are frequent victims of it, because the thing thrives on the damp and mossy banks and in the dripping groves of academe, where it remains institutionally unchallenged through a misplaced respect for intellectual freedom. The latter is theoretically of vital importance; but, like diplomatic immunity, can in practice serve as cover for phenomena and motivations which do not look well in the broad light of day.

To be sure, most dons, at least in universities which still follow the Oxbridge tutorial system, take a genuine interest in their pupils; and wish them to become responsible adults in a functioning community. Rather fewer dons, however, will risk unpleasantness in debunking idiocies which are “politically correct”; or will see it as part of their function to be morally normative in any conformist sense. The undergraduate is these days legally an adult at 18; parents have no access, as of right, to his or her dossier; and university authorities are no longer, for the same reason, in loco parentis. The student is assumed to be, or encouraged to become, the ultimate free individual. In a way, I am not too sure we have got this right. More of us need to stand up in the defence of moral ethos, family values, and collective self-improvement; of the bourgeois ethic of personal responsibility guided by social conscience which we inherited from the 19th Century. The libertarians have become too powerful, their assumptions too pervasive.

Take the matter of gays and lesbians. I am not what they call “homophobic”. When a Vice-Chancellor, I exerted myself to protect them from “queer bashing” – to the extent of touring the campus at night with officers of the Student Union. I dutifully respected such convictions as these individuals had about their own sexual natures and norms; and I defended the study of gender and sexual dissidence, in deconstructionist Marxist Freudian literary discourse and analysis. Even today, I do not regret doing so. But I wonder in retrospect whether other Vice-Chancellors and I were not in other respects too deferential. In recent years, the thought police of the Looney Left, and the social engineering Gurus of the Politically Correct, have been calling upon every student body in the country to make provision for gay and lesbian representation on

their local committees. They have encouraged the setting up of gay and lesbian stalls and posters at open days held for freshers, alongside the usual political groups, the philatelists, the thespians, the ice skaters, the free fall parachutists, the rugger club and the OTC. Yet what does an 18 year old virgin (and there are still a few of them left) know of his or her inner sexual orientation? Should they be actively invited to make a leap in the dark, clutching copies of “How to become a lesbian in 5 minutes” or “Safe sex for gay men”?

This leads me on, still at what I see as the “sharp end”, to the matter of people – especially one’s own colleagues and employees. Leadership is sometimes likened to an elephant among Eskimos: the latter would recognise the former if they saw it, but could not readily describe it in the abstract. If only this were true. Good leadership is often heavily disguised; and not infrequently misinterpreted or resented when detected.

I once knew a German EC official who was paranoid: he needed enemies in order to exist: and invented what he could not discover. Inevitably, he had a “hire and fire” way with vulnerable local employees on short term tenure. One clerk whom he particularly disliked was said to have been given a letter after the boss had gone on leave in December: “Your contract is terminated – Happy Christmas!” Perhaps it was the right decision, conveyed in the wrong way: but I utterly deplored it.

Why? Because of the Bible or the Church? Actually, because of David Niven, Noel Coward, and the English romantic tradition. Men of my generation were often quite deeply marked by “In Which We Serve” and “The Way Ahead” and, in case we had missed these movies before we were put in uniform, we were marched off as trainee officers to watch them in the OCS cinema. There is indeed much to be said for this kind of leadership – brave, fair-minded and, if need be, self sacrificial. To be sure, it is the very stuff of muscular Christianity and the embodiment of Dr Arnold’s Christian gentleman, which my own particular Headmaster in the 1940’s greatly commended to all his pupils, but which makes us feel awkward today. In reality, however, the ideal is as old as the hills, as classic authors from Homer and Xenophon to Sallust and Tacitus attest. Even in the contemporary world, far removed from Hornblower and pulp fiction about the Peninsula War, command can be not only a heady, but also a noble experience – one capable of bringing out the best in us: and, through us, in those whom we lead and for whom we should think ourselves intimately and compellingly responsible.

But there is no Christian ideal, whether of faith or morals, from which in practice we do not quite soon deviate. People do matter. The individual does count. Yet we overlook it at some times, and overdo it at others.

It was in Phnom Penh, for three years in the 1960’s, that I first experienced what it is to be the head of a diplomatic mission. It was a testing experience for a young man, because the UK was then playing an active political role in the area, through the Co-Chairmanship with the USSR of the Geneva Conferences on Indo China. It was also testing in other ways: the location was remote, the local conditions worrying. The Embassy had already been sacked once by a politically directed mob, shortly before my arrival: and was to be attacked again, if only half-heartedly, once I was there. We were “in Coventry”: the Cambodians had been forbidden by their leaders to speak to us – an interdiction later lifted. The Embassy and British Council staff

were small, vulnerable and potentially a prey to demoralisation and fear. The solution lay in energy, optimism and immense sociability. The wreckage had to be cleaned up, staff reorganised, defences rebuilt, non-essential dependants moved out. Contingency plans for emergency evacuation of the remaining personnel overhauled, political contacts and channels of communication restored, and a new diplomatic approach attempted. To take this on, I found myself transferred from another assignment in Singapore at two weeks' notice. Not because of my merits, but because I was single and unencumbered. There was a lot to do. I had to improve my French fast and pick up some Cambodian even faster. It was the stuff of which light romantic novels are written. But what it did involve, in terms of the personnel policy I decided to operate, was in retrospect an overkill of care: to know where everyone was, for their own safety: to keep everyone too busy in the office, and too well catered for outside it, to get nervy or fall into trouble. Suppers, excursions, water skiing parties, bridge sessions and Scottish dancing had to be organised and led for the staff and the tiny expatriate community, on top of the diplomatic round of outside activity proper to the normal duties of a Chargé d'Affaires. My people enjoyed it at the time but my own role in it was probably nanny-ish and untrusting, and I now regret it. There are also other extremes. One self-centred and self-satisfied diplomatist used to come back to the office from an important but over ample lunch engagement, only to fiddle about, read the papers and look out of the window. It was late afternoon when he began to unload a pile of dictation, which his unfortunate female amanuensis was then expected to type up that evening; while the cipher clerk had to labour into the night. Another ostrich-plumed figure whom I used to know would deflect half his staff into the organisation of spectacular entertainments (and was rightly sanctioned by a visiting inspector for his egotism).

But at least these foibles were human, and forgiven by their willing victims. More invidious and de-humanising can be the distinction a busy and responsible top person will often make between the more able and the less able among his minions.

Once upon a time, at a tough UNCTAD ministerial meeting in Belgrade, which was in danger of breaking up in acrimony and mutual injury, I proposed a small negotiating group of the key players and invited them to negotiate night and day until an acceptable compromise was reached. I called this group "The Death Squad", and it went on for three days and two nights with almost no break. Into it, I sent the best man in my team; and I myself waited outside for three days and two nights to give him his instructions and fix the necessary top level deals. It worked: but at a human cost. We both survived; other colleagues on other occasions collapsed under comparable pressure; one of them died.

I am ashamed to admit that I have always had a tendency to drive my first class people into the ground, because they were capable of delivering the goods that mattered, with the minimum of fuss. I usually tell myself I am entitled to do this because I work as hard as they do. What I should rather be telling myself is that I ought to take more trouble to spread the load. The less able. I generally tend to neglect, telling myself how merciful I am. In reality (boring and time-consuming though it can be), to groom them, and raise their threshold of performance and responsibility, is good not only for them, but for everyone else, and ultimately also for myself. Training people up; hearing what they have to say (and at my last IBM Europe board meeting,

managers were invited to “Listen, Listen, Listen”); getting the best out of everyone: letting your employees have the chance to do less well the thing that you yourself can do better – all this is a sensible course for any decent manager. For a Christian, it ought to be a “must”. Yet in the short term, in the panic of the moment – and somehow such moments extend to become the normal routine – it is the thoroughbred that gets overloaded and the stumbling mule that can go with its saddle bags half empty, even where the trail boss is a follower of Jesus.

An awkward double standard can also enter into our working relationships with third parties – with other Top Persons like ourselves, or with negotiating partners, or superiors to whom we are in some way accountable. Affability and graciousness towards them may be all very well: but it sometimes turns into unwarranted appeasement of the powerful and potentially threatening. Until the knives are out, and the third party in question needs to be decisively confronted, or until the moment arrives to spring the well laid ambush or slip the banana skin into place, the temptation is to skirt around the awkward customers and be all things to all men – with the resultant impairment both of personal integrity and professional poise.

A new book recently reviewed in the “F.T.” is called “Working Ourselves to Death”. So I will complete this lecture, because it is inherent in what I have just been saying, with a word about self-preservation among workaholics. Top People can be amazingly bad at it. They service and conduct themselves as they never would their BMW's or Bentleys; they relate to their families as they would not dream of treating their mistresses, if they had the energy to acquire them. It suffices to read the profiles of tycoons which are appearing episodically this year in the quality national press. This one has no close friend: that one's spouse never sees him; a third is overweight. I am not talking of the disgraced or the discredited – at Lloyds, say, or in the Maxwell empire; but of the outwardly and continuingly successful. Direct personal acquaintance with overachievers in politics, the law, banking and industry amply confirm my impression that too many “Top Guns” are up-tight, pushed out of shape, isolated. They are not, for all that, in my eyes necessarily unhappy people. At their own sharp ends, they find much that is fulfilling, and indeed also irresistibly addictive. But private misery in macho public figures, when I suddenly come round the corner, as it were, and bump right into it, can surprise me by its depth and intensity. Executive suites, lop hat pensions and health care, boxes at Glyndebourne, first-class air travel, holidays snatched in the Bahamas, dollars piling up on the barrel, are none of them a real palliative, not do they bring back to life the souls of the living dead. Exceptional men and women pay a high price for the smooth running of our society and the generation of the resources from which welfare reaches the many. They are not to be pitied, because they have their rewards: but they are I think to be respected, and occasionally to be thanked. I pray for some of them regularly: and mean it when I do so.

This is a lecture and not a sermon. Notwithstanding that part of me which fulfils the function of a lay minister of the Established Church, and a member of its General Synod I will therefore resist the temptation to tie up my remarks this evening with a neat and pious homily. Nevertheless what I observe going on at the sharp end, and what I have felt when impaled there, is evidence of a fallen world, in an age which is exceptionally confused, and full of paradox.

On the one hand, earlier reports of “The Death of God” now seem to be greatly exaggerated. The Universe is no longer seen as the Newtonian clockwork machine; as the theologians – behind their times, as usual – withdraw from dogma, it is the scientists who have become the mystics; and it is the grosser materialisms, and the wilder manifestations of Karl Marx which have died. On the other hand, conventional faith and morals seem to be on the defensive throughout Europe. Our Lord Himself is satirised on “Spitting Image”: the Cardinal of Paris tells “Le Figaro” that traditional Catholicism in France has all but disappeared; our own national Church is in no better nick – increasingly anything goes among Cabinet Ministers and the Royals, as in Eastenders and even the Archers. And over the time horizon loom the problems of the 21st Century: the deepening divisions within capitalism; the anticipated dislocations of successive future technologies; the dilemmas of genetic engineering; and the three terrors runaway environmental deterioration; mass migration of peoples; and nuclear weapons in the hands not only of dictators, but of organised crime.

Perhaps the next veneration will rise up in response: great dangers provoke great deeds. Meanwhile back in the humdrum world in which the older among us have become accustomed to living and have managed to prosper. I recommend Modesty and Self-Knowledge. Our struggles, if we hold some kind of Christian Faith, and keep where we can to some form of moral order, carry us where our Bibles teach us to expect – to a point well short of the mark, where we stand in need of salvation. We do not, in practice often succeed in bringing the worlds of “lofty moral principles” and “day-to-day grind” together as Dr Vardy said last year was needful. Yet this is the way we must all travel. Without blasphemy, we can call it “The Way of The Cross”. It calls for sacrifice and courage patience and humour too. It confronts us with our own separation from one another But we march to an eternal destiny, guided by a God who knows all about life at the sharp end, from when He took flesh and dwelt among us.

