

I'd rather be a Catholic than be 'respectable'

Hilary Mantel says the Catholic church is no longer a place for 'respectable people'. But respectability is a problematic notion



Hilary Mantel

'All those years writing favourably about Thomas Cromwell seem to have got to Mantel (pictured), herself a lapsed Catholic.' Photograph: Eamonn McCabe for the Guardian

One of the heartaches of being a Roman Catholic in recent years has been the clerical abuse scandal. No pain that any of us suffers from discovering that some of our priests abused children – and even worse – that senior clergy covered up their crimes – can compare with the victims' plight, of course, but it has knocked for six many devout Catholics' faith. Some have left the church because of it; others are certainly more sceptical, or even more cynical about the way the church is run and the way that power is used and exploited. Quite a few are clinging on by their fingertips, fretting not only about the abuse crisis but the way that a church that flung open the shutters to the world 50 years ago because of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, appears to be going backwards, becoming more clerical, more obsessed with ritual and gesture.

According to novelist Hilary Mantel, we're all guilty by association. This weekend the author of *Wolf Hall* and the newly published *Bring Up The Bodies* told interviewer Lynn Barber that Catholics weren't quite the ticket. "I think that nowadays the Catholic church is not an institution for respectable people", she said. Even Barber, one of the most experienced interviewers around, seemed taken aback, describing this remark as "strong", although it also had a curiously quaint and dated feel to it, as though being genteel is what counts. When she got Mantel to expand, she discovered that much of her remark

was down to the abuse crisis. But there was more, with Mantel going on to damn priests and nuns for being "among the worst people I knew".

All those years writing favourably about Thomas Cromwell seem to have got to Mantel, herself a lapsed Catholic. Not respectable, the worst people she knows? It's the talk you would expect from advocates of "no popery in England". And of course her claims will be persuasive to some because they do touch on the truth: the abuse crisis and the way the Church has dealt with it has been deeply shocking, and many people have ghastly memories of priests and nuns from their childhood. But as Esther Rantzen, the founder of Childline once pointed out to me, child abuse and its cover-up is not a Catholic issue. It's about power over children, and paedophiles will always seek out ways in which to exercise their distorted power over children, whether it's in the church, or through the Scout movement, or in children's homes. And the Catholic church in Britain has painfully learnt lessons about abuse, improving its safeguarding methods.

But there is something else about Mantel's comments that bugs me. I think she's unwittingly come up with the best line possible for a new marketing campaign: "The Catholic church – not an institution for respectable people." It reminds me of a priest a few years ago who told me that a young woman came to him who'd got pregnant and been thrown out by her parents. He told her story to one of his parishioners, saying he didn't think the girl could cope on her own in a flat but wasn't sure what to do to help. Simple, said the parishioner, she comes to live with me. And it makes me think of another priest I know who was trying to help some asylum seekers living in lousy accommodation, and in the end decided they might as well move in with him. Or the young kids living on the street, often with drug problems, who have been helped by charities such as The Passage and the Cardinal Hume Centre. None of these people are exactly respectable – with complicated, chaotic lives – but Catholics and their institutions have tried to do their bit and have welcomed them in.

Mantel did admit to Barber one benefit of Catholicism: that it had been the best training ground possible for a writer. She's said it before, too, talking about "the real cliché, the sense of guilt". But that sort of Graham Greene Catholicism is fading away. It's hard nowadays to be terrorised by your confessor. They're more likely to say – and I quote verbatim from inside the box: "You're too hard on yourself. Life's so bloody difficult nowadays". Perhaps if the Catholic church does go backwards, as many of us fear it is in danger of doing, it might produce another generation of novelists. But we'd be much better Christians if we stayed unrespectable.

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