



Monday 2 June 2008

Demonology

A British bishop's hysterical comparison of climate change deniers to Josef Fritzl shows how zealous the hunt for modern demons has become.

Frank Furedi

Gordon Mursell, the Bishop of Stafford in England, is a man of the cloth. He is also a member of a posse of disoriented clerics, who have become so estranged from morally literate theology that they have embraced a new brand of *demonology*.

At a time when moralisers cannot give any real meaning to classical ideas about right and wrong, they try instead to make people feel guilty about their impact on the environment. So instead of targeting those traditional demons – Satan, say, or witchcraft – Gordon Mursell attacks climate change deniers.

In a parish newsletter, the bishop said that people who refuse to join the fight against global warming are like Josef Fritzl, the insane criminal in Austria who locked his daughter and her children in a cellar for 24 years. For Mursell, being sceptical about the conventional wisdom on climate change is akin to the monstrous crime committed by Fritzl. He says: 'You could argue that, by our refusal to face the truth about climate change, we are as guilty as he is.'

Mursell has not called for climate change deniers to be burned at the stake – yet. But the idea that they should be punished is implicit in his message.

For some time now, religious and moral entrepreneurs have been searching zealously for demons. Some have argued that AIDS is God's way of punishing immoral sexual behaviour. Big catastrophes such as 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina have been portrayed as retribution for people's degenerate and sinful behaviour. One Christian writer described Katrina as 'the fist of God'.

However, these religious-tinged fantasies tend not to resonate with the public imagination. In contrast, focusing on the current anxieties about the future of the planet seems to be a far more fruitful way of rediscovering Satan. And the linking of the crime of child abuse with scepticism about today's received green wisdom exemplifies the new demonology.

How demonologists work

Demonologists are moral entrepreneurs. They turn the problems faced by our communities into *moral threats*.

One of the most striking illustrations of such demonology was the plague that is frequently referred to as the Black Death. The transformation of a fast-spreading disease into an epidemic of evil continues to excite people's imagination and fears today. According to one study, it was 'only after Europeans had experienced this epidemic' that 'they were ready to accept witchcraft as a real threat' (1). The moralisation of what is referred to as the 'AIDS epidemic' shows that modern plagues are still used to convey a culturally meaningful message about 'evil'.

Demonologists are intensely hostile to anyone who questions the way they interpret and talk about threats. As moral entrepreneurs, they regard their opponents, not only as irresponsible, but also as potentially evil. From this standpoint, dissidence comes to be seen as an act of moral subversion. The moralising of hazards serves to shut down discussion. At the very least, anyone who questions claims about the alleged gravity of a threat facing mankind is depicted as the

stooge or accomplice of a malevolent agenda.

The act of raising questions about a 'warning' is now discussed as an insidious deed of denial. Increasingly, questioning things is seen as the moral equivalent of Holocaust Denial. In recent years, people who have questioned the warnings about climate change have been labelled 'deniers'. The allusion to Holocaust Denial is clear. The implication of this moral condemnation of questioners – the denouncement of critics as 'deniers' – is that disbelief itself is a sign of moral bankruptcy.

Believing in a statement of warning is considered to be morally principled; disbelieving the statement, or even just questioning it, is stigmatised as morally corrupt. This transformation of disbelief into a sin was also widespread during the witch-hunts that plagued Europe in earlier centuries. In the era of the witch-hunt, anyone who questioned the existence of demonic forces could be denounced as an 'associate of Satan'. Such was the power and influence of demonologists that few were prepared to question the existence of witchcraft.

In the 1980s and 90s, American crusaders against Satanic Ritual Abuse adopted a similar approach. A report published by the California Social Services Committee on Child Abuse Prevention described the widespread 'denial of the problem of ritualistic abuse' as one of the main barriers to tackling it. Campaigners frequently argued that such denial was the moral equivalent of the depraved act of abuse itself (2). If you questioned the idea that Satanic Ritual Abuse was a real existing threat, you could be charged with complicity in the crimes of child molestation.

The dogmatic demand to 'believe' has become a kind of moral imperative. Moral entrepreneurs argue that victims have a 'right to be believed'. So crusaders against Satanic Ritual Abuse attempt to disarm sceptics by insisting that the worst thing that can happen to victims of abuse is not to be believed. Patrick Casement, author of *Treating Survivors of Satanist Abuse*, tries to guilt-trip sceptics:

'It may be that some accounts which are reputed to be of "satanic" abuse are delusional, and the narrators may indeed be psychotic in some cases. But we must still face the awful fact that if some of these accounts are true, if we do not have the courage to see the truth that may be there... we may tacitly be allowing these practices to continue under the cover of secrecy, supported also by the almost universal refusal to believe that they could exist.' (3)

In other words, those who refuse to believe accusations of Satanic Ritual Abuse are themselves complicit in the act of victimisation. During the outbreak of the satanic abuse panic in Britain in the 1980s and 90s, zealous witch-hunters claimed that an 'insidious and dangerous' disease was sweeping the country: that is, incredulity about the existence of ritual abuse. According to one account, 'this contagion takes the comforting form of sceptical and rational inquiry, and its message is comforting, too: it is designed to protect "innocent family life" against a new urban myth of the satanic abuse of children.' (4)

Shutting down debate

Through vilifying their opponents, demonologists attempt to close down discussion and debate. Such intolerance towards alternative and dissident opinions betrays the powerful anti-democratic impulse underpinning contemporary demonology, best expressed most recently by the Bishop of Stafford.

This censorious attitude has all the worst features of religious zealotry, and it is strikingly similar to *traditional* demonology. Demonologists in pre-modern times argued that scepticism about witchcraft was a form of heresy that had to be punished. The *Malleus Maleficarum*, one of the most influential manuals for witch-hunters, noted that 'the question arises whether people who hold that witches do not exist are to be regarded as notorious heretics, or whether they are to be regarded as gravely suspect of holding heretical opinions'. It then says: 'The first opinion is the correct one' (5). This depiction of scepticism as a form of moral transgression is still around today.

Scepticism towards the received wisdom on global warming, or public health issues such as AIDS,

is described as 'denial' – and today, 'denial' has been transformed into a generic evil. The denial phenomenon has become a kind of free-floating blasphemy, which can attach itself to a variety of issues and problems. One environmentalist writer argues that the 'language of "climate change", "global warming", "human impacts" and "adaptation" are themselves a form of denial familiar from other forms of human rights abuse' (6).

The charge of denial has become a secular form of blasphemy. Recently, a book written by someone who is sceptical of today's prevailing environmentalist wisdom was dismissed with the following words: 'The text employs the strategy of those who, for example, argue that gay men aren't dying of AIDS, that Jews weren't singled out by the Nazis for extermination, and so on.' (7) This forced association of three highly charged issues – pollution, AIDS and the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews – shows how denial has become an all-purpose form of blasphemy.

Once denial has been stigmatised, there are demands for it to be censored. Consider the current attempts to stifle anyone who questions the predictions of catastrophic climate change. Some advocate a policy of zero tolerance towards climate change deniers. 'I have very limited patience with those who deny human responsibility for upper-atmosphere pollution and ozone depletion', says one moral crusader, then declaring: 'There is no intellectual difference between the Lomborgians [those who adhere to the arguments of the 'skeptical environmentalist', Bjørn Lomborg] who steadfastly refuse to accept the overwhelming evidence of human-caused global warming from scientists of unquestioned reputation, and the neo-Nazi Holocaust deniers.' (8)

Increasingly, the heretic is condemned because he has dared to question an authority that must never be questioned. Here, 'overwhelming evidence' serves as the equivalent of revealed religious truth, and those who question 'scientists of unquestioned reputation' – that is, the new priestly caste – are guilty of blasphemy.

Heresy-hunters who charge their opponents with 'ecological denial' also warn that the 'time for reason and reasonableness is running short' (9). Crusaders against denial don't only wish to silence their opponents. In the true tradition of heresy-hunting they also want to inflict *punishment* on those who deny the true faith. David Roberts, a journalist for the online magazine *Grist*, would like to see global warming deniers prosecuted like Nazi war criminals. In a vitriolic tone characteristic of dogmatic inquisitors, he argued: 'We should have war crimes trials for these bastards... some sort of climate Nuremberg.' (10) At the very least, it seems, these 'criminals' should be castigated as the moral equivalents of Josef Fritzl.

Thankfully, a demonologist like the Bishop of Strafford lacks the power to impose the kind of punishments that were dished out by earlier generations of heresy-hunters. But if it is not challenged, his denunciation of 'deniers' will contribute to the consolidation of a censorious mood and climate of anxiety. History shows that crusades against heretics and demons have a nasty habit of disorienting society, and undermining civilised and humanist behaviour.

Frank Furedi's *Invitation To Terrorism: The Expanding Empire of The Unknown* is published by Continuum Press. (Buy this book from [Amazon\(UK\)](#).) Visit Furedi's website [here](#).

(1) Johannes Dillinger (2004), 'Terrorists and witches: popular ideas of evil in the early modern period', *History of European Ideas* 30, p.180

(2) See James Kincaid (1998), *Erotic Innocence; The Culture of Child Molesting*, Duke University Press : Durham, pp.177-78

(3) Patrick Casement, 'The Wish Not To Know' in V. Sinason (ed) (1994) *Treating Survivors of Satanist Abuse*, Routledge ; London, p.24

(4) Judith Dawson, 'Vortex of Evil', *New Statesman*, 5 October 1990

(5) Heinrich Kramer & James Sprenger (1971), *Malleus Maleficarum*, Arrow Books Ltd : London, pp.46-47

(6) George Marshall, 'The Psychology of denial: our failure to act against climate change', *Ecologist*, 22 September 2001

(7) Stuart Pimm & Jeff Harvey, 'No need to worry about the future', *Nature*, 8 November 2001

(8) See David Pollard, *Global Warming And The Crime Of Denial*, 7 March 2004

(9) David Orr, 'Armageddon Versus Extinction', *Conservation Biology*, vol.19, no.2, p.291

(10) David Roberts, 'The Denial Industry', *Gristmill*, 19 September, 2006

reprinted from: <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php?/site/article/5219/>