



Woke and other Wars

Editorial:
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The etymology of the adjective 'woke' is interesting, not least as the word seems central to the so-called culture wars currently ranging in the United States and in many other countries, including the United Kingdom.

'Woke' derives from African-American Vernacular Englishⁱ meaning originally to being alert to racial prejudice and discrimination. From about 2010 it came to encompass a broader awareness of inequalities, such as sexism, racial injustice, LGBT rights and others. More recently it has become used pejoratively by the political right descriptively for a variety of leftist and progressive movements and ideologies. In the U.K. this has replaced an earlier turn of phrase expressed with irritation by some as 'political correctness'.

Again in the U.K, following American examples, the emergence of right-wing television and coterminous radio programmes such as GB News and Talk TV have latterly turned 'wokeness' into a sometimes viciously obsessive culture of criticism. The phenomenon is not without its contradictions, which inevitably emerge under the guise of a free speech that will allow no variation and giving populist platforms to serving politicians turned part-time broadcasters. The Church is, of course, not immune (to mischievously paraphrase the great doyen of self-righteousness, the sixteenth century Scottish reformer John Knox) from "a first blast of the trumpet against a monstrous regimen of *bishops*"ⁱⁱⁱ In this respect even the evangelical and on the conservative side, Archbishop Justin Welby is no exception. The British press has reported that the governing Conservative party would like a 'less woke' replacement.ⁱⁱⁱ

Whilst woke wars are more evident in the United States and have pitched Evangelicals against, for example, the perceived to be more liberal Episcopal Church, not least over abortion rights; the divisions are more nuanced on the European side of the Atlantic. They can however be detected within the Anglican camp over the almost innocuous same sex prayers of blessing for partnerships to be made available in churches, albeit with strong caveats.^{iv}

In the meantime, apart from the twelve half-forgotten wars currently in progress alphabetically from Afghanistan to Mali, the two capturing most attention rage on. With a bloody stalemate in Ukraine and ongoing atrocities in Gaza, the end does not seem to be in sight. Rather events have a distinctly dystopian feel about them as the potential for a dramatic and geographically wider escalation of hostilities is becoming more and more likely.

All of this in a year when apparently at least 2 billion people will be eligible to vote in elections in 2024^v. By 2025 we may well be in a world of populist leadership, victorious through electoral systems that may have no more than a veneer of democratic validity. Even the so-called 'first past the post', system employed in the U.K. can easily produce a government with a large majority on a minority vote. In 2019 for example the Conservative party under Boris Johnson won a 'landslide' 80 seat majority on merely 43.6% of the popular vote. Clarion calls for a change in the electoral system to a Single Transferable Vote (ironically as used by the Church of England in its synodical elections) are getting louder, but are not as yet being heeded.

Christmas festivities were cancelled in Bethlehem this last Christmas and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church moved its celebration of the birth of the Prince of Peace from the Russian Julian calendar to the Gregorian Western one. Two outward and visible signs of the times?

Woke Wars pale by comparison but sadly are unlikely to go away.

Nicholas Henderson
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ⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-American_Vernacular_English

ⁱⁱ Published 1558, attacking the idea of female monarchs, arguing a view familiar in conservative evangelical circles today that rule by women is contrary to the Bible.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11767577/Tories-draw-list-woke-candidates-replace-Justin-Welby.html>

^{iv} <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/prayers-love-and-faith-be-made-available-use-sunday>

^v <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/12/2024-elections-around-world/>