

The enemy of the cultural classes

Capitalist apostle, Michael Novak, believes that society is under attack and that welfare harms the poor

An odour of sanctimony clings to those who have seen the light. If the pitiless puritanism of the ultra-right is ugly, there is a sickly smell, too, about the certitude of the righteous right.

No doubt Michael Novak, a Catholic American theologian and political writer, is sincere to the bottom of his boots. He stands for liberty, democracy and morality. Much of what he says in praise of capitalism is probably correct. He is not (at least in US terms) on the extreme right. Nor, I am sure, would he endorse the claim of his professional publicist to be "one of the world's most original thinkers of the late 20th century".

And yet... Novak was this week presented in London with the \$1m Templeton prize for "progress in religion", an obscure award designed by its founder, a retired Wall Street investor, to overshadow the Nobel. Among the judges were Baroness Thatcher and her former adviser Lord ("wealth is no sin") Griffiths.

Novak is said to have been studied by the leaders of Solidarity in Poland, Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, Margaret Thatcher and even - it is rumoured - by the Pope. He is an *habitus* of the right-wing Institute of Economic Affairs in Westminster, so it was there that I met him this week.

I found a plump 60-year-old, smiling faintly and speaking in a high-pitched, somewhat effeminate voice. It was hard to imagine the robust youth he described who, at 14, entered a Catholic seminary in order to protect his priestly vocation from the temptations of football and girls.

Novak will not of course be spending his \$250,000 prize money on fast cars and finest claret. He wants to set up scholarships at his old college in Massachusetts in memory of his parents and brother, a missionary murdered in Dacca 30 years ago. He will replace the old van which his artist wife uses to transport her paintings, educate their first grandchild and use the rest to buy more writing time.

His priestly vocation fell before the final hurdle of ordination. In those days an instinctive socialist - as he says most Catholic clergy are - he was gradually forced to the conclusion not only that socialism had done nothing to end poverty but that welfare was paralysing "the able-bodied poor".

He is not a *laissez-faire* libertarian. That, he said, was too narrowly individualistic, too abstract. He accepts the label neo-conservative even though it was used by his one-time hero, the Catholic socialist writer Michael Harrington, to describe defectors. Novak says that where formerly he was lionised, now he was "excommunicated".

Novak's thesis, advanced with a hint of heretic pride, is that the free society is everywhere under attack. The century had taught us that democracy was better than dictatorship and capitalism better than socialism. But democratic capitalism would not survive without the "habits of liberty", the moral dimension.

When I suggested he was still fighting the cold war, Novak talked about the enemy within.

"The heights of our culture, the journalists, the intellectuals, the universities, the artists, those responsible for the ideals and symbols by which we live are still predominantly to the left and anti-capitalist, with a passion and vigour."

Why are you so concerned, coming from the country least susceptible to socialism?

"Well, we have a president whose ideal society is Germany - its health system and so forth - and we have a large body of elite opinion moving in that direction. So it's not a dead issue. It's really not."

With the churches losing their grip, where is the morality you speak of to come from?

The Christian ethic was still strong in the US, he said. "But it's a real problem for secular Europe. It isn't that when people stop believing in God they believe nothing. They believe anything. It's a gulp of Chesterton's. The most remarkable passions are sweeping through our highly educated classes. It's a sad thing that morality becomes the fashion of what you call in Britain the chattering classes."

Journalists are going to play the critical role because journalists are the media through which everything goes, then academics, professionals and, God willing, the churches.

"It can't be that all the blood that was shed for free institutions was shed for Madonna [he meant the singing one] and Phil Donahue and the rest of popular culture. There's got to be more than that. We've got to give more serious thought, or we will perish in the 21st century."

Apocalyptic stuff. But journalists as saviours of civilisation?

Novak continued: "That's where the greatest moral threat comes from today - our cultural classes." Television and cinema had huge power over the souls of people but no guidelines or responsibilities. They were led by instinct, by what was popular.

I accused him of creating a straw man out of the remnants of socialism in order to make his attack seem more robust.

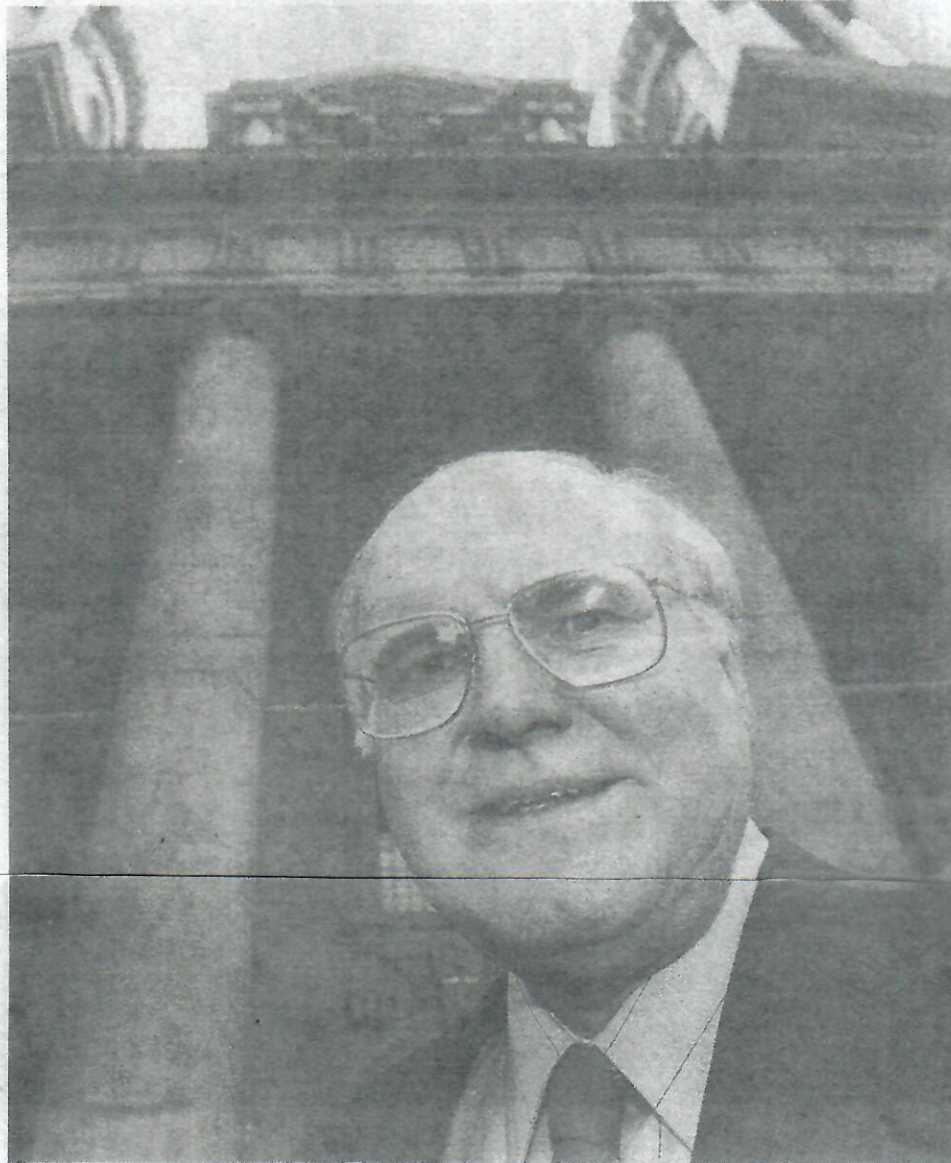
"If you don't think political correctness can go to absurd lengths, come to America for a while and you'll see the logic of uniformity pressed to its utmost."

But they're just a joke, I said. "It isn't a joke."

We discussed the defects of capitalism and I cited the deterioration of upper Manhattan. Novak contrasted the entrepreneurship of the early immigrants with the welfare dependency of today's ghetto-dwellers. The devastation, he argued, was caused by welfare. Government intervention should be minimal, and welfare restricted to the old, young, ill and crippled.

What about the poor of Brazil?

"I have been asked many times: What, sir, would you do if you had the power? Well, after overcoming the feeling of power rushing to my fingertips, I would do three things. The first would be to change the



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law to make it easy for poor people to incorporate their own businesses, cheaply and easily - say \$30, through the mail in two weeks with no bribes and fees."

Entitling them to sell matches on the street?

"No, to do several things, to do what they undertake as a legal matter."

Like prostitution?

"That's a stupid question." Novak was stung. "That's a *suptid* question."

A study in Peru, he continued, had shown that 90 per cent of public transport and 60 per cent of housing was provided by *illegales* or *infor-*

males who could be locked up for it.

"Most poor are entrepreneurs. They are not peasants. They are fleeing the land in tens of millions. They are not proletarians, they are buyers and sellers and also very good little manufacturers."

The other two necessary reforms, he said, were access to credit and education.

In Britain he detected "a larger sense of pride and belonging to a vital nation" as a result of neo-conservative policies.

There's also been a large increase in the number of young people sleeping on the street, I said.

"I am not an expert in the British

situation. But if it is at all parallel to ours that goes along with how hard it still is in Britain to incorporate businesses. The greatest employer of youth is the small business. There's no shortage of work to be done, of housing in need of painting and plastering and so forth."

Capitalism tempered by conscience, and the marketplace as the fusion of individual interests for the common weal. But was he telling us anything new?

"It's the fate of people who work in theology and philosophy, that whatever you uncover, if you uncover it well, should be said by others to have been there all the

time."

Yet your appeal seems to be to the past, I said: the Founding Fathers, minimal government, low taxation, self-reliance, community, a charming, pastoral picture of early America.

"But I think it's a quite combative picture in this part of the 20th century, a battle well worth fighting. Thomas Jefferson said that every generation has to recover the secrets of liberty. Because they are secrets. One reason they are so fragile is that any one generation can freely give them away, by neglect or by a wilful act, can turn off the lights and walk out."