

Racing Demon

by David Hare

Directed by Anthony Powell

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Phot by Gary Isaacs

Study Guide

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RACING DEMON

SYNOPSIS

“God. Where are you? I wish you would talk to me...” Lionel Espy, *Racing Demon*

Racing *Demon*, the first play in David Hare’s trilogy dealing with British social institutions in the aftermath of Thatcherism, focuses on four Church of England clergymen who are attempting to minister to an economically and racially mixed parish in South London’s Southwark diocese. At the opening, Reverend Lionel Espy, the parish leader, appeals to God to make his presence known to the faithful who feel they have been abandoned. Lionel’s wavering faith is not shared by his colleagues: Harry Henderson, a quietly uncloseted gay; Donald “Streaky” Bacon, an enthusiastic minister who is delighted with his life and faith; and Tony Ferris, an ambitious young curate with an evangelical bent who feels Lionel is totally ineffective as a priest. Pressured on one side by a small band of wealthy diehard conservative parishioners who want church ritual and sacrament, and burdened on the other by the mass of weary, angry or unemployed people who find church attendance irrelevant, the clergymen are overworked and underpaid. Besides these pressures, the ministers have their own personal crises—doctrinal problems, sexual frustrations, changing social mores and the question of female ordination in the church. Then, too, there is Frances Parnell, the sweetly skeptical woman Tony leaves when evangelical fervor enters his life, and Heather Espy, Lionel’s prematurely aging wife, abandoned not for God but for parish duties that render her unnecessary.

When the parish’s conservative element grumbles its discontent to the higher-ups, Lionel must confront his old friend, now his superior, the Right Reverend Charlie Allen, Bishop of Southwark. Charlie charges that Lionel has lost interest in the administration of the sacrament. Lionel doesn’t deny the charge but admits that ritual does nothing for the poor and despairing in the parish. Nonsense, says the Bishop. Ritual is what holds the church together. “As a priest you have only one duty: that’s to put on a show.”

The play takes its title from a fast card game in which players each shuffle an entire deck, lay out a pile of 13 cards and race simultaneously to get rid of all their cards as quickly as possible. The objective for each player is to get rid of their cards and to achieve the highest amount of points by placing the appropriate cards in the center. This jostling to “get to the center” may be synonymous with each clergyman trying to find his center, his place in the church.

The questions raised by the play, from the relevancy of religion today to the issue of women as priests, reverberate everywhere throughout a society in which spirituality is under assault by everything from “ethnic cleansing” to tabloid TV. The characters in *Racing Demon* are constantly turning to God for answers. But is it God or people who create social change? In Hare’s play, God is keeping His answers pretty much to Himself.

“The play emphasizes the need for and the fear of a new kind of intimacy. The Church has the opportunity to create more ways in which people can share their lives with each other in a setting parallel to that of the family... The institutional Church will continue to be ever more poorly-regarded unless we have the courage, vision, and creativity to act.” —Reverend Stephen Chinlund ¹

THATCHERISM

“England is a family with the wrong members in control.” —George Orwell

A Capitalist Revolution took place in Britain during Margaret Thatcher’s tenure as Prime Minister (1979-1990). Before her election, England was in a state of economic decline under the socialist practices of the Labour Party. Under Thatcher’s direction, the Welfare State was contained, the trade unions were tamed, national industry was privatized, supply-side economics were instituted, the free market was energized and the entrepreneurial spirit was sparked. Riches without embarrassment, self-help without guilt and individual responsibility were the cornerstones of Mrs. Thatcher’s plan to restore Britain’s old glory. In short, her mission was to revive Britain by turning socialized decay into capitalist prosperity.

But not all of the British benefited from the boom of the mid-1980s. London and Southeast England prospered most, but in much of the industrial North and Scotland, old inequalities were aggravated, further polarizing the rich and poor. Most persons in the middle and upper classes were better off. But those on the bottom were worse off. They were forced to take the economic brunt of cuts in social spending, the system which had previously helped those who could not support themselves. The poor also had to endure the emotional burden of being impoverished in an age when most of society ignored them.

Liverpool, a once prosperous port city, was a good example. The slum-ridden parishes in the broken center of the city were susceptible to break-ins and theft. The populace was sharply critical of Mrs. Thatcher’s disregard for the poor, homeless and unfortunate, and for favoring the ethics of the rich and the values of the enterprise system. The decline in social services had not been supplanted by “trickle-down” economics.

The Church of England, having always been opposed to industrial capitalism, attacked Mrs. Thatcher’s policies in a report called “Faith in the City.” Commissioned by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Reverend Robert Runcie, and researched and written when unemployment was at its highest, the document refused to accept the official government line that “nothing could be done to help the jobless.”² “Creation of wealth must go hand in hand with just distribution,” said the document, as it indicted industry for causing pain to those least able to absorb it.³

Mrs. Thatcher replied in a speech with a quotation from St. Paul’s statement to the Thessalonians: “If a man will not work he shall not eat.”⁴ She emphasized that “any set of social and economic arrangements which is not founded on the acceptance of individual responsibility will do nothing but harm.”⁵ Individual action was therefore better than state intervention and charity better than welfare. But what good are words for those in need? “Had Mrs. Thatcher taken the sting out of her economic policies by providing protection for the displaced and unfortunate, she might have won genuine support for her plans.”⁶

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

“You will find the services of the Anglican Church beautiful in their ordered dignity, God-centered, and yet mindful of the nature and needs of human beings.”

—Anglican Church Web Site

The Church of England is the established church in England. It is divided into two provinces, York and Canterbury, with 43 dioceses and approximately 27 million members. The monarch is technically at the head of the ecclesiastical structure and the archbishops of the provinces of Canterbury and York are next in line. The archbishop governs his own diocese (called the archdiocese) and has limited authority over the bishops of the other dioceses. Each diocese is usually divided into parishes and each parish is served by priests, vicars or rectors, as well as a deacon and deaconess.

The Church of England dates back at least to the 2nd century, when merchants and other travelers first brought Christianity to Britain. It is customary to regard St. Augustine of Canterbury's mission in 597 as the formal beginning of the Church under papal authority, as it was to remain throughout the Middle Ages. In its modern form, the Church dates from the English Reformation in 1534, when Henry VIII quarreled with the Pope about annulling his marriage to Catherine of Aragon and secretly married Anne Boleyn. Then he declared that the Pope had no more authority in England because he was a foreign bishop. With the advent of British colonization, the Church of England established churches on every continent and achieved international importance. It is the mother church of the Anglican Communion, which includes the Church of Wales, the Church of Ireland, the Episcopal Church in Scotland, the Anglican Church of Canada and the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States.

The Church of England is identified by adherence to the threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons, and by an order of worship found in the Book of Common Prayer. The church is also characterized by a common attitude of loyalty to Christian tradition, while seeking to accommodate a wide range of people and views. It holds in tension the authorities of tradition, reason

and the Bible, but asserts the primacy of the Bible. It thus seeks to encompass Catholic, humanist and reformed elements.

To add to the beauty and festivity of the services and to signify their special ministries, the clergy and other ministers wear vestments. These include a cassock and a surplice. A cassock is an undergown (usually black) and a surplice is a white, gathered overgown. Another vestment is the alb, a white tunic with sleeves that covers the body from neck to ankles. Over it, ordained ministers wear a stole, a narrow band of colored fabric. Deacons wear the stole over one shoulder, priests and bishops over both shoulders. At the Holy Eucharist, a bishop or priest frequently wears a chasuble (a circular garment that envelops the body) over the alb and stole. Bishops also wear a special headdress called a miter. The vestments are made of rich fabrics and their colors change with the seasons and holy days of the church year.

The established status of the Church of England means that all episcopal appointments are made by the Crown and all revisions of the liturgy must be approved by Parliament. In modern times, however, Parliament has been composed of non-Anglicans as well as Anglicans and this places the church in an awkward position, which has resulted in efforts to maintain the church's integrity by separating it from the state. On the other hand, it has spurred efforts to include other Christians in the national church.

“The Catholic Church was founded on the rock of St. Peter, but the Anglican church was built on the balls of Henry the VIII.”

**—Brendan Behan, via Martin Semple,
translated from Gaelic**

CONTEMPORARY CHURCH PROBLEMS

“The Church of England today... presents no unified, consistent face to an outside but not wholly indifferent secular world.”

—Gavin Stamp, *The Church in Crisis*

The Church of England in the 20th century faces dilemmas which confront other organized religions as well. All religious leaders are faced with the secularization of society, moral permissiveness, the conflict between Christianity's claims and minority cultures' beliefs, the changing concepts of an after-life and the place of religion in a society rife with physical and economic inequities. No specific solutions seem to be forthcoming.

In *Racing Demon*, David Hare depicts some particular problems facing the Church of England as seen through the eyes of the four clergymen. First, within the General Synod (the Church's law-making body), it is possible to isolate three main factions that represent certain views within the Church. There are the Anglo-Catholics, with their emphasis on ritual and tradition; the Evangelicals, with their strong beliefs in good and evil and personal salvation, and the Liberals, who, in the eyes of the other two groups, seem to be the controlling influence over the Church. Another small group, the Radicals, are united mainly by their support for the ordination of women. Of course, individual loyalties and alliances factor in and voting results on Synod issues are extremely difficult to predict.

Though “the Church of England has tried to be comprehensive,” the idea of Synodical government in essential matters is not in accord with the belief that the Church of England is the property of the English people (and thus, looked after them by their elected representatives).⁷ Instead, we see more of a political process: the rise of the activist and the decline of the common man—the growth of groups which use “democratic” procedures, yet are remote from and even unfriendly toward the populace itself.

Traditionally, the parish church has been seen as the center of English religious and social life, but it is the bishop who has the right of institutions and he can close or even demolish churches. As the highest order of minister in the Church, the

bishop “is called to lead in serving and caring for the people of God and to work with them... As a chief pastor he shares with his fellow bishops a special responsibility to maintain and further the unity of the Church, to uphold its discipline and to guard its faith... It is his duty to watch over and pray for all those committed to his charge, and to teach and govern after the examples of the Apostles, speaking in the name of God and interpreting the gospel of Christ. He is to know his people and be known by them.”⁸

This quotation illustrates what sort of superhuman being is necessary to be a diocesan bishop, and how short most bishops fall of these ideals. Most bishops feel obliged to run a large diocesan office and to pursue a lifestyle which is more in keeping with a Chief Executive Officer. Surrounded by secretaries, copy machines, telephones and other accoutrements of technology, the bishop is more involved with secular considerations than with religious ones. Instead of a man of prayer and spiritual authority who has wisdom coming from prayer, reading and scholarship, and who can give counsel to the broken-hearted and perplexed, we have an administrator who takes comfort in computers, dictaphones and duplicators. Would the Bishop of Southwark concur?

“In the United States, the church finds itself more and more immersed in commerce. When churches buy and sell, they follow the usual methods and often drive hard bargains. When they hire and dismiss their employees, they are coming closer to the methods of the labor market. Thus, the teachings of those elements of Jesus' ethics which are antagonistic to commercial life are toned down or unconsciously left out of sermons. So the principles of commerce affect the moral practice of the church when they are counter to business morality.”⁹

The place of the priest, the clergyman, or the minister in society has altered radically over the past 100 years. But his task has always been the same—to seek out Christ in the poor, the lonely, the outcast, to visit the sick and imprisoned, to feed the hungry and

clothe the naked. It is the priest's task to lift up the sinner and to pronounce Christ's absolution of his sins. In the 1970s and 80s, the concept of *team ministry* was adopted. The church leadership believed they could be more responsive to the needs of local areas if several clergymen pooled their efforts and administered pastoral duties as a team with each person specializing in those aspects of the ministry to which he or she was best suited. Although the idea was initially popular, it had one major drawback. It took away from individual priests their most precious right: the gift of freehold. Instead of a job for life, members of the clergy were told they had to settle for five-year contracts, a poor compensation for their low pay and long hours. Unsurprisingly, there have been conflicts, not unlike the one between Lionel and Tony.

"In this country the chief reward of the ministry has always come to it in the affection and respect of the people. But our age is so drunk with the love of money that anything that does not pan out in dollar profit has to take a back seat. Our commercial system has developed a fierce competition for wealth; so all callings which serve intellectual and spiritual life have dropped in relative importance. Thus, the best candidates for ministers and teachers gravitate to other professions."¹⁰

And what of women priests? The Synod approved legislation favoring the ordination of women in 1992 and the measure was passed by Parliament and the House of Lords in 1993. The first women were ordained in March 1994, but it is still a matter of bitter dispute between the Anglo-Catholics and the Radicals within the Synod. The Catholics, under Papal Order, will still not allow women priests.

As for services, the *Book of Common Prayer*, the official prayer book of the Church of England, was to be replaced by a new text entitled *The Alternative Service Book* (1980), which provided an urgently needed revision of the Liturgy. However, it was written by a committee which had no input from priests or parishioners. Many conservative

elements of the Church felt the book was unusable, and returned to the old version. In fact, outsiders to the Church felt most excluded because of their unfamiliarity with the modern form of the service. Even the words to the Lord's Prayer had been changed, leading to less participation and more distress and alienation.

Societal change world wide, such as increased urbanization, rootlessness, lack of discipline and the erosion of family life increases this distress and alienation. Science also has contributed to the confusion by developing a whole array of technologies that demand decisions for which we are ill-prepared. Anti-contraceptive and abortion drugs, artificial insemination, mass media, the internet, cloning and so on, have staggered our ethical standards. Religious leaders say the result is moral irresponsibility. To confront this moral decline, the evangelical movement has flourished, with their insistence on following the Bible as the word of God, redemption through personal salvation and extension of God's purpose of justice and order through government.

And where is "God" in all this upheaval? "Many people will only accept a God who approaches them, or who can be approached, within the context of their own culture. Or they identify provisional social and personal programs and proximate social and personal goals with the 'will of God.'" ¹¹ In his book *Asking Around*, David Hare found that most inner-city priests refused to discuss God with him. "They had ceased to believe that the divine could, in any significant way, be separated from the social. [They saw] themselves as part of a society which had, to all intents and purposes... abandoned responsibility to the poor."¹² They were not interested in ideology, but only in bandaging wounds and giving as much love and practical help as they could. Perhaps this is the answer Lionel is seeking.

"I want nothing to do with any religion concerned with keeping the masses satisfied to live in hunger, filth, and ignorance. I want nothing to do with any order, religious or otherwise, which does not teach people that they are capable of becoming ... true man, master of his fate and captain of his soul."

—Jawaharlal Nehru from *Journey to the Beginning* by Edgar Snow

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Racing Demon: a fast and noisy card game in which players each shuffle an entire deck, lay out a pile of 13 cards and race simultaneously to get rid of all their cards as quickly as possible. Cards discarded to the center pile score higher than those discarded to the right or left.

The Church of England: is the “established” (i.e. state) church in Great Britain and the mother church of the worldwide Anglican Communion. The Church of England is Protestant but essentially Catholic in faith and order. The Queen of England is the official leader of the Church, which is governed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the bishops who serve under him.

The General Synod: is the Church of England’s Parliament, a law-making body made up of elected representatives (both clergy and laity) from all over England. The Synod meets three times a year to debate, consider and make provision for all matters affecting the Church and its ministry. The General Synod has the power to frame Statute Law on any matter concerning the Church of England.

Diocese: the territorial unit of administration in the Church. It is governed by a bishop and his staff and is usually divided into parishes.

Parish: an area under the spiritual care of Church of England clergy, to whose religious ministrations all the inhabitants (the parishioners) are entitled.

Bishop: the highest order of minister in the Church of England, distinguished from other priests chiefly by the power to confer Holy Orders and to administer the rite of Confirmation. Diocesan bishops may be assisted by other bishops known as Suffragans. Twenty-six bishops have seats in the British Parliament’s House of Lords.

Southwark: is London diocese whose boundaries include both extremely wealthy and desperately needy parishes, consisting of 392 churches with 309 parishes, half of which have been designated as “Urban Priority Areas,” a national Church indicator of inner-city deprivation. In the Church of England, the name of a bishop’s diocese is also used to refer to him personally.

The Anglican Communion: is a loosely affiliated fellowship of Anglican churches in and outside of Great Britain, including The Episcopal Church of the United States.

Rector: is a member of clergy who has the charge of a parish.

Vicar: is a member of clergy who has the charge of a parish in which no rector has been assigned, or who works alongside the rector and is responsible for the day-to-day activities of a church.

Curate: An assistant, deputy or junior priest assigned to assist a vicar or rector (or both) in the performance of his or her pastoral duties. Curates will also take charge (“the cure”) of a parish during temporary vacancies or illnesses among the regular staff.

THOUGHTS OF THEOLOGIANS AND WRITERS ON RELIGIOUS ISSUES

On God as a Symbol:

"... God will be the most objective or real element of the believer's world, for, as the source and ground of all else, he provides the order or structure of all that has meaning and can be experienced, and he gives direction and purpose to the historical process." Kaufman, p92.

"The question about God is the question about the ultimately real, that which is the source and basis of all else... To ask the question... 'Who is God? What is God? What is the ultimate reality with which we have to do?...' is to face clearly... as we can the issue of lasting importance." Kaufman, p261.

"The fundamental analogy or imagery that underlies Western thinking is personal... God is grasped through such images as 'lord,' 'father,' 'judge'... He is said to love and forgive, to be faithful and just, to rule the world." Kaufman, p268.

"... A changed concept... necessitates a new conceptualization of the God-humanity relationship from that of a giver-receiver to that of co-workers, partners, and participants. This should not be construed as an effort to claim... equality between God and man... My point is an endeavor to establish an authentic fellowship between God and man, which should be essentially participatory." T. K. Oomen, p163

On Faith or Believing in God:

"... The movement toward faith in God... is genuinely liberating for the self only when it expresses an honest search for integrity and wholeness in experience and life." Kaufman, p249.

"... The center of believing has moved from the focused center of the church to the more generalized area of secular activity in the world... (Man) does not so much believe when the way is open and made easy. It is only in the pinches, when life forces him against the wall, when all odds are against him, when there is no reason at all to believe, that he does believe." Miller, p367.

"... Piety denotes that which unifies the specific acts and attitudes of a Christian life. A person's piety is a pattern of being and doing that arises out of a specific interpretation of the gospel." Farley, p368.

"This breakdown of Protestant piety-----helps explain a great deal about the contemporary church. That is why hymns make little sense to us... That is why no clear pattern of 'religious training' of children is available... [It explains] the skepticism that leaves [us] wondering what Christian doctrine and Christian life are all about..." Farley, p371.

"... Childlike and wakeful enjoyment and alertness to the world is the most fundamental of various attitudes of Christian self-consciousness. For it seems to be the correlate... of justification of faith." Farley, p375.

On Secularization of the Church:

"... If the Church is to have any place whatever in the new society, it must first of all come to a fuller self-realization; as the late Archbishop Temple (of Canterbury) said, 'Let the Church be the Church.' If the Church is contented simply to be a human society and to act as such, it will become... an almost complete acquiescence in every aspect of that society, with no integral and personal nature of its own." Pittenger, p133.

"Today many contemporary priesthoods have turned to secularized value systems in a search for popularity and credibility. The switch to rationalism cannot generate the charisma that accrues only to those whose inner practices give strength to the heart rather than the thinking mind... In the modern West the extensive secularization of religion has largely destroyed the relation between individual spirituality and the systems of belief to which it used to belong." Crook, John H., p359.

"In the Christian view the very root of secularization is God's gift. God promises and grants that human beings may become the subjects of their own destiny." Fritzsche, p158.

"Secularization also stimulates religious innovation. Not only do worldly churches prompt new religious groups, which seek to revive faith, but secularization also prompts the formation of new religious tradition." Stark and Bainbridge, p2.

"... It still must be admitted that American religion seems remarkably weak in its sense of distinction from culture and therefore, in its capacity for criticizing and reforming culture... We too readily identify provisional social and personal programs and proximate social and personal goals with the 'will of God.'" Turnbull, p25.

"[The Church should have] a willingness... to learn from the world, as well as to speak to the world." Brown, p390.

"The Church... must bear a large measure of responsibility for the present plight of the world, and... rather than striving to rule in the affairs of men, the Church must offer herself as a servant to men." Brown, p392.

"... The frequent attempt to describe ethical responsibility in purely individual terms [is untenable] and underscores the need for corporate human action on a large scale to help large groups of people." Brown, p393.

The Mission of the Church:

"[The purpose of the Church] is to lift men and women to the level of life 'in Christ,' to the 'enriched' life, to participation in God-Manhood that explains the real significance of the Church..." Pittenger, p133.

"What is the Church fighting for? Not simply for religion... The Christian is fighting wherever and whenever human welfare is at stake. He fights tyranny, prejudice, poverty, superstition, panic, crime, and just plain silliness." Farley, p377.

"[The Church should have] a willingness... to learn from the world, as well as to speak to the world." Brown, p390.

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"... The frequent attempt to describe ethical responsibility in purely individual terms [is untenable] and underscores the need for corporate human action on a large scale to help large groups of people." Brown, p393.

The Death of God and the Need for God:

"Men may not need God, just as they may not need a single ultimate loyalty. Needs and problems are for the world to meet, and if it cannot meet them, nothing else can. This is one strand in the experience of the death of God for me." Hamilton, p11.

"There are experiences that men have had in the past and which they have as traditionally pointing to God that are simply not available to us in the same way today. Take the experience of dependence, especially in the presence of nature. Listen to a research biologist or a doctor or a physicist or a space scientist talk about his work. He is talking about mastery, control, and power; not about a sense of his smallness before the universe." Hamilton, p12.

"We must learn to forgive each other with the radical unconditional grace men used to ascribe to God... We must learn to comfort each other, and we must learn to judge, check, and rebuke one another in the communities within which we are wounded and in which we are healed. If these things cannot now be done by the human communities in the world, then these communities must be altered until they can perform these tasks once ascribed to God..." Hamilton, p14.

"Man has learned to cope with all questions of importance without recourse to God as a working hypothesis." Bonhoeffer, p218.

"So our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us. The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God." Bonhoeffer, p230.

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Notes:

1. Chinlund, p14.
2. Dellheim, p330.
3. Dellheim, p330.
4. Dellheim, p335.
5. Dellheim, p336.
6. Dellheim. p364.
7. Badham, p1.
8. Wilson, p54.
9. Rauschenbusch, p315.
- 10 Rauschenbusch, p320.
- 11 Turnbull, p25.
- 12 Hare, p5.

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