



Pointless outrage against Trump

Donald Trump has said.... This week's outrageous tweet was attacking NHS funding, but it is hard to pick a week when he hasn't been offensive to someone or other: Muslims, American footballers, green activists, Africans... the list is endless.

And in return, this week, there was a volley of counter-punching on Twitter including from Jeremy Hunt, the Conservative Health Minister, extolling the virtues of the NHS.

I don't have a problem with Hunt doing this; in many ways, fair enough. My problem, I guess, is that, in our righteous indignation, we can deceive ourselves into believing anything good or genuinely constructive will come of this. For however loud we shout on Twitter, Trump will not change his mind.

I recently did some research into a largely forgotten religious controversy from England in 1860. Some clergy dared to publish a series of essays (catchily titled 'Essays and Reviews') which called into question hitherto sacrosanct beliefs e.g. that the world was 6,000 years old; that Moses really led the Israelites through the Red Sea etc.

Charles Darwin's 'Origin of Species' was also causing quite a stir that year: but whereas 'Origin of Species' sold 15,000 copies, 'Essays and Reviews' was even more of a cause celebre: it sold 24,000 copies. People drank it up, and it resulted in a frenzy of pamphlets, indignantly attacking the heresies being propounded.

Bishops attempted to excommunicate the writers under heresy charges: the public debate was full of it. For pamphlet begot pamphlet, article begot article, book begot book until the literature surrounding 'Essays and Reviews', punching and counterpunching, extended far beyond the content of the original book.

But in the end, the curious thing is that nothing happened. By which I mean, nobody changed their mind. The conservatives who believed in the literal truth of Genesis continued to believe in the literal truth of Genesis; the liberals who believed that the world was actually millions, if not billions of years old, continued to believe it. They just kept quiet, and carried on with their day jobs. And nobody got excommunicated in the end.

In fact, one of the writers, Frederick Temple, kept his head down, and thirty years later had become Archbishop of Canterbury, by which time it was broadly accepted that Genesis was indeed a symbolic rather than literally true account.

Twitter frenzies are parallel to this. They may fulfil a psychological desire to fulminate in public, but that's all they are: they purport to be more, to be making an argument or contributing to a debate, when they really aren't. Rather, they play into the hands of people who just thrive on argument and insult and consider their job done if they have got other people's attention. Real changes of heart happen elsewhere.

February 2018. for the Train is a short column written by the Reverend Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train, or elsewhere. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at