

Priesthood and Paternalism¹

by Terry Eagleton

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A good deal of thinking about the priest and modern society has been about the priest rather than about modern society: by this I mean that we've tended to begin from the theological end, with an enquiry into what difference a renewed theology makes to our conception of the priest, and then to go on from here to the sociological implications: how does this new priest with his new functions fit into modern society, and what kind of society will be created around him? But I think we need to work the other way round as well: we need to try to get some idea of the reality of our society and then see what our theological talk amounts to, in that context. The point I'll try to make in this paper is that there are some cases in which there is a serious tension between what seems theologically sound and desirable, and the results of this in terms of a whole society. This is why theological enquiry which is basically about society – the role of the priest, for instance – can't afford to work on vague or superficial social ideas, on social caricatures. This isn't just an abstract warning, because caricatures of our society are frighteningly easy, and it probably isn't a caricature to say that this is one of the significant things about our society – that it makes stock judgements and category responses easy, and offers these as convincing descriptions of our experience. It's significant, for instance, that the idea of our society as one of disorientating flux, of dull, apathetic 'masses' and spiritual vacancy is one which can be both extremely radical and extremely reactionary: it can be used simultaneously to justify a new society based on radical cooperation and equality, or for the restoration of a feudal aristocracy with kindly lords and monks and colourful, starving peasants. It's obvious that we have to go beyond this kind of surface formula, if what we assert theologically is going to make social and political sense.

*Progressives of
the status quo*

I say this is obvious, but in fact quite a lot of very good, progressive theology hasn't recognised this at all. This points, I think, to a general failure in Christian social thinking, one rife throughout the last century: the paradox that all real, social action is blocked or qualified by a basic commitment to the *status quo*. You can see very obviously how this was so in the whole quality of the appeal of the christian church in the last century for working-class participation: the church was faced with a disastrous lack of popular support, and

¹A paper given to the Clerical Students Conference at Spode House, Sept., 1965.

it had to win this support to justify and confirm its own existence as an evangelising institution. But the paradox lies in the fact that the church needed working-class support to validate ideas and values which were in fact discriminatory against the very classes whose support it so desperately needed: like nineteenth century capitalism in general, the church needed to secure simultaneously the participation and the exclusion of the workers, to use them as a means of self-verification while resisting their ideological demands, to use them as a quantitative but not a qualitative force – a force which could modify the offered values.

So I think it's necessary always to discuss relationships and functions within the church as part of a wider social reality, to see that the possibilities of relationship within the church are *cultural* possibilities, supplied to us by our kind of society. This is where so many neat juxtapositions of Church and World break down under pressure: because what we're dealing with isn't really two separate, self-sufficient realities which can then be linked, but a complex field of experience in which it is often impossible to separate off elements and label them as Church or World. The new theology prohibits this kind of distinction in many ways: it does it by seeing that christianity is about the collapsing of the old tensions between sacred and secular; it does it also by recognising that one major way the layman is part of the church is the way he is part of the world: through his work. What we also need to see is that the power of the liturgy as a social force depends on the values and relationships we bring to it as well as on those we take from it: one could well imagine a society where the available sense of community was so slight that no liturgical community of any depth could be formed; one may also wonder whether such a society is nearer than mere imagining. What we are in the church depends on what we are in the world, as well as vice versa: if we haven't got the language for human communication in society then we will be equally inarticulate when we come to use the language of the Word of God. Equally, of course, we can't have a real society if we don't have a real church: by a *real* society I mean one in touch with the reality of the world since Christ – community – and therefore a godly society: I don't of course mean a society where 51% of the people go to mass or anything like that, since it seems to me obvious that one can quite easily have a godly society which is actively hostile to religion – in fact that at times one of the marks of godliness would be precisely this hostility.

Much theological thinking to date seems to me to have suffered from the same faults in its attitudes to society that literary criticism has traditionally suffered from when it turns its hand, as it must, to social thinking. In both cases there can be a serious breakdown between meanings on a theological or literary level and meanings in society, and in both cases the social thinking tends either to stick at a fairly simple level, working in safe generalisations, or to make

statements about man in general which are really a-social: papal encyclicals on social themes are full of large rhetorical generalisations about human rights and duties which it is often difficult to relate to any lived, complex reality. The new theology has avoided this and has been genuinely concerned with society, but its concern has had the same liberal tinge as the concern of a literary critic like Leavis: it has tended to select those aspects of society which seem directly relevant to theological concern – the relevance of sociology and psychology, industrial problems, etc. – and largely to leave out the basic questions about the kind of society we live in, its fundamental bases, and so on.

Liberal paternalism

All right, what kind of society do we live in, and how does this connect with the role of the priest? I want to argue that our society has for a long time been passing through something which I'll call the liberal paternalist crisis, and that the church is now undergoing the same tensions, within a much shorter period of time and therefore in a greatly intensified way. I want also to try and show that this liberal paternalist crisis is directly relevant to discussion about the role and function of the priest, and that as a result our changing ideas about the priesthood aren't only theological but are part of a general pattern of change in our whole society which for over a century has been redefining relationships, values, functions, attitudes. Finally I want to point out that because church relationships and functions are part of this wider reality, they can only be solved in terms of it; that any attempt to abstract these relationships from the context within which they grow and gain meaning is dangerous. Again, this isn't just an abstract warning, because it seems to me that the archetypes of our progressive catholic thinking – a magazine like *Search*, for instance, or a book like *Objections to Roman Catholicism* – are doing just that: they're trying to deal with matters of christian consciousness and attitudes in isolation from a whole society, and by doing this they're recognisably part of our English liberal middle-class heritage, which has always tried, with devoted and agonised care, to solve questions of human values and attitudes without recourse to the sordid reality of politics and ideology. My own belief is that a discussion of the role of the priest, or the relationship between priest and laity is a political discussion by which I mean one which raises ultimate questions of commitment to a whole version of society and human relations; and this is the basis of my approach to the liberal paternalist crisis, which seems to me to be a crisis precisely because it tries to ignore this fact against overwhelming evidence.

I want to try to describe what this crisis is exactly, and this is difficult in the first place because part of the crisis is the assurance that there isn't one at all, basically; it is, in other words, a crisis of consciousness which refuses to become fully self-conscious because to do so would be itself a kind of self-destruction. A large part of our

energy and attention must therefore be directed simply to naming and identifying the crisis, discerning what is the actual truth about our social condition; the effort simply to name and point has formed a large part of radical thinking and writing in Britain in the last few years, and it's been motivated by the awareness that part of what is wrong with our society is that it tries by elaborate processes which Marx called 'mystification' to conceal its real nature. If we can expose this reality, we can perhaps also expose the real situation of the christian church.

The pattern of change in British society over the last century or so is, I think, a slow change and growth from the idea of authoritarianism as a dominant model of human relationship, to the idea of democracy. Lots of different and very complex movements dovetail into this pattern, and any verbal description must be selective and in a sense falsifying, but I think this can be said without caricature. We ourselves are living through one, particular, and in a way inevitable stage of this growth, the stage of liberal paternalism. I'm not sure whether this could better be described as a deadlock rather than a stage of growth, because although liberal paternalism seems to be an essential stage of consciousness, it is also one which threatens to disrupt and betray the whole process of growth which is moving towards full democracy. The basic fact to grasp about liberal paternalism I think is that it is an attempt to meet and answer dissent and radical claims without essentially changing its own nature: this is in itself a kind of contradiction, or at least a precarious and possibly shifty conjuring trick. The way this is actually effected is by creating a change in consciousness and human attitudes within a situation which, in its basic structure, remains more or less the same as ever. The progress of nineteenth century capitalism, for instance, has been to concede a great deal to growing and organised demands for humane responsibility, but only to a point where it can keep its essential human and economic power-structures untouched. The measures resorted to to do this are themselves, by a very ingenious process, ways of apparently meeting democratic demands which in fact reinforce the old structures and make them less vulnerable. This is what happens in share-spreading, for instance: the capitalist can claim that capitalism has become more democratic because controlling power in the form of shares is spread over a wider social basis, but all this means is that capitalist consciousness is made deeper and more extensive over every level of society, and the capitalist *status quo* ultimately strengthened. It also means that anti-capitalist criticism is less easy and more confused, because the complexity and anonymity of the new capitalism makes it harder to discern what's going on: this again can be called mystification. Another mystification is practised by capitalism when it says that its essential interests are threatened by irresponsible calls for wage-increases, and thus wins sympathy: the reality is that the capitalist machine is now

actually geared to granting periodic wage-increases without any damage to its basic structures or well-being.

The same process, of conceding points while remaining unchanged, is happening everywhere in our society, as the old authoritarianism, with its belief in traditional and class-based rule, is fighting a rear-guard action against the new, democratic forces. Common ownership of industry can be tolerated as long as the private sector remains secure; comprehensive education is warmly welcomed provided public schools from which the public is excluded can carry on the traditions of class-rule; imperialist military power abroad can be willingly relinquished provided control is maintained through more paternalistic, less crudely direct means, through economic and administrative structures, for instance; full enfranchisement of the people is fine as long as the real decisions are still taken by the same few men, educated within the same traditions; culture can be widely disseminated by the BBC provided that the BBC is allowed to choose, with characteristic paternalism, what the people ought to have; democratic protest against inhuman aspects of foreign policy can be generously accommodated until they look like succeeding, in which case the truncheons and the long prison-sentences are brought out.

The dominant image of our society, as Raymond Williams has pointed out in the Conclusion to *Culture and Society*, is the ladder, and this perfectly defines the ethos of liberal paternalism. There is a real liberalism about the ladder of opportunity: it's quite true that, apart from a few important exceptions, most areas of our society are now open to those who during the period of authoritarianism were rigidly excluded, the working class. We can now all climb all the way up, without barriers, and a good many of us do. What is often left out of the image is the crucial fact that the climbing can only be done on the terms of those who offer the ladder: the rungs are already labelled and secure, the way up already signposted, the right moves are in all the manuals. We are back to the nineteenth century church's attitude to the people: the values aren't offered for common re-definition, for re-making: they're offered for verification, and by climbing up this is what we are doing: we're accepting the pre-labelled rungs, the pre-formed values, the ways *they* think we should live. But our own ways of living, our own versions of being human, may in fact be quite different: we may believe, if we come from a background where the dominant feeling is one of solidarity (even if, at times, a very negative solidarity), that this is the way to live, as against the competitive ethic of the world we climb into; in this case we either reject the ladder, or reject the solidarity. (In practice of course we all make our own compromise). Any criticism of the system can be deflected: the guardians of the values have only to point to the ever-open door of the club. And in doing so they miss the point that what we object to isn't the door being open or

closed, but the fact of the club itself: the fact that society should be interpreted as a club at all.

This may all seem very unrelated to questions of theology and the church, but I'll try to show in a minute why I think it's relevant. Before that I want to illustrate the nature of liberal paternalism more fully by describing two different firms I once worked in, and then seeing what this has to say about the nature of the church. (In neither case did I work longer than a couple of months since this was when I was an undergraduate so anything I say here is instantly liable to the charge of liberal paternalism.) One, a soap-factory, was a good example of what could be called the old capitalism: relationships between labour and employers were antagonistic, and all work was mediated through an incredibly complex network of restrictive practices which controlled the way one walked and spoke and ate. Inevitably the workers pinched as much soap as they packed, and any young, dynamic manager would have shaken his head over the whole shabby set-up. M— on the other hand was a shining example of the new, American capitalism: large charts in primary colours on the walls showed the workers how they were doing in comparison with W— and other rivals, everyone was on christian name terms and ate together in the same streamlined canteen with pop-art on the walls. When the workers went on a coach trip to Blackpool the coach on the way back to Manchester was taken past the M— branch in every town en route and the personnel manager gave everyone a brief run-down on the branch while they all craned eagerly out of the windows to see how their comrades' window-dressing compared with their own. The image behind the firm was that of the family: a significant image, of course, because the intimacy of a family operates within a structure of paternalist authority unquestionable in its naturalness. The only hostility I ever saw in all the time I worked there was in fact between two warehousemen, when one objected to the other talking about 'M' instead of 'Lord M'.

One way of putting the question is perhaps to ask which of these two firms is the more godless, and it seems to me the answer is unquestionably M. I think one has to say this because the evident phoniness of the M set-up blocks growth towards full democratic relationship much more deeply than the open hostility of the soap factory, precisely because, like all liberal paternalism, it tries to remove the possibility of actually imagining any more humane relationship than that which exists already: its purpose is to create a context which will satisfy the demand for community and significant fulfilment in work just enough to allow the basic structures of capitalism to continue unchecked and of course more efficiently than the old fashioned firm. The process is self-regulating: the worker-employer relationship, one dependent on actual inequality, is taken and explained in terms of family relationship, fed to the worker

through a variety of techniques; the worker then interiorises the relationship and ratifies it by acting according to it: Lord M's title becomes as dear to him as it is, presumably, to Lord M himself. Within this context, any suggestion of making a move which would make for democratic equality in *fact* and not simply in attitude – giving a large degree of *actual* economic and policy control to the workers, for instance – would be interpreted as an attempt to upset the close family relationship, and all dissent is thus effectively emasculated. The open antagonism of the soap factory, on the other hand, is creative as well as disruptive: it lays bare the real situation, and from this can grow an advance in democratic and communal responsibility which will be a matter of fact, of real power and decision: out of the negative consciousness, as the history of the British working class movement has shown, can grow a positive community. Beside both these inadequate factories we can set a third image, that of a factory built on the idea of co-operative equality, where decisions can be genuinely taken in common by the full democratic process, where men are their own managers, achieving that degree of control over their own lives which for a christian must be absolute. This image isn't just a dream: workers' control factories of this kind actually exist in a few countries, mainly in countries we have been successfully trained to think of as godless: Yugoslavia, for instance.

The liberal church

It seems to me that one of the things that christianity is about is the achievement of full and free selfhood, and that paternalism of any kind is one of the things it condemns most harshly: the old law, with its severe paternalism, has given place to the new, dangerous era of open freedom, where men's lives are significant precisely because suicide is always possible, and the kind parent who hid the knives in case we cut ourselves is no longer around. In theory, anyway: in fact, we all know they are. When any movement for renewal starts up, there are always anxious hands available ready to catch it up and make it harmless under the plea of guidance and control; the plea may be genuine, but the damage can be severe, and we have to guard against it. The hands are there, hovering, every time we are told to play down our differences in the interests of a public image; every time our common heritage as good catholics is made into a blunt instrument to compel submission and compromise which masquerades as prudence and loyalty. This seems to me very much what has been happening recently in the catholic church, and I think we will understand it instantly as soon as we understand the nature of liberal paternalism. What happens is that protest and dissent is accepted but changed in tone and emphasis so that it can blend harmlessly into an only slightly modified status quo: we've all seen this happen in the pastoral letters of English bishops who are now behaving as though they were Kung-disciples from the cradle, and trying to rationalise and *institutionalise* renewal by assim-

lating it into a whole new set of rules and rituals: trying, that is, to build walls around what can only be spontaneous. (You *must* make the responses in English otherwise it's a venial sin.) The church, in other words, is undergoing its own version of the crisis which is common to our whole society and our recent history: the problem of how to meet demands from 'below' without relinquishing real power, without opening the flood-gates to basic structural change. The language used is significant of this: 'consultation' with the laity, laity 'participation' in running the church. 'Consultation' is the familiar paternalist word: it suggests the General-de-Gaulle-technique of bending a kindly ear without ultimate necessity to accept the opinions of those consulted; it suggests, more deeply, that policy-making remains in traditional hands, but they are now willing to listen to constructive proposals from outside. This is also what 'participation' can suggest: sharing in processes which remain ultimately the monopoly of others. And the liberal paternalism, as with M's store, is mystifying and self-justifying: the laity, delighted at having been consulted about how they should conduct their sexual lives or how their money should be spent, forget to question the whole procedure and go away happy, without suspecting in the least that there is something a bit odd in being consulted about things which are one's own business anyway in the first place.

The situation in the church in England at present, then, is one of developing liberal paternalism, and the whole social history of English catholicism has conspired to make this so. A church which for centuries has built and consolidated its idea of itself around the fact of an uneducated laity is suddenly faced with an emerging catholic middle-class demanding its rights. This means that the church is driven to a total re-definition of itself, but at the moment the deadlock of liberal paternalism is holding fast, because the long tradition of conformity which characterises the English middle-class just has the edge over their liberal dissent. The hierarchy, by exploiting the deep psychological pressures towards conformity common to any cultural subgroup like the church, can hold the situation in balance, guiding and shaping protest into channels which leave the basic structural realities reasonably intact. The middle-class protest has all the traditional liberal strengths of free, intelligent and human discussion, but inevitably it tends to stay within the boundaries which constitute the English middle-class ethos, and one of these boundaries is an incapacity for imagining revolution. The situation is further stabilised by the fact that the catholic working-class has been successfully shaped by conservative and chiefly Irish attitudes to a point where its overwhelmingly Labour vote means very little in political terms beyond a traditional and unanalysed allegiance. As a result there is no generally available radical alternative, in the working-class, to middle-class liberal conformism: what genuine radicalism there is in English catholicism

is largely the product of intellectuals who were either born into the working-class or are sympathetic to its political tradition.

So the situation is in a real sense one of deadlock, although radicalism is growing in strength; and the deadlock is one characteristic of liberal paternalism, a deadlock of mystification and self-justifying, circular attitudes. We're all familiar I think with this circularity, which is well exemplified by a recent statement by a priest about why the church hasn't appointed women ministers: if women priests were permissible, he said, the church would not have refrained from appointing them for so long. If Negroes were human beings we wouldn't beat them up as much as we do. The church has traditionally used this device of arguments which really appeal to themselves for justification, and this symbolises the liberal paternalist deadlock: the effect is to make it impossible to conceptualise possibilities outside this enclosed network. Another familiar device of liberal paternalism which the church has used is one which psychologists have called the 'double-bind': this means creating a situation such that any response can be turned to one's own use. The church did this in the nineteenth century by defining salvation primarily in terms of humility, meekness, loyalty, obedience, long-suffering, submission: if the starving protester rejected these terms he was damned, if he accepted them he was muzzled. The whole attitude of the church to the poor in the last century is at points very typical of the contradictions of liberal paternalism: of an attempt to appear progressive while remaining essentially conservative. This can be seen for instance in the nature of the church's evangelising of the poor: the positive energy expended in securing working-class allegiance was to some extent motivated by the negative end of forestalling potentially disruptive criticism. In this sense the church's attitude reflected the 'We must educate our masters' response common to the whole society: to bring the working-class within its doors and offer them its values for acceptance would achieve the double aim of curtailing disruptive dissent and confirming its own position by increased popular support. The impossibility for an observer of discriminating between genuine charity and direct self-interest, became a source of mystification: when accused of acting as the propagandist arm of bourgeois society the church could stress its universal, spiritual, altruistic mission, when attacked on one level it could switch to the other. The inherent ambivalence in the nature of the church – its status as simultaneously a cultural and transcendental force – strengthened the mystification: ideological interests could be given eternal sanctions, specific capitalist directives could be cloaked in an acceptably general and pious language: 'the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate' could compel assent where a reference to manufacturers and operatives might not escape criticism so easily. Again, the fact that the poor could be seen simultaneously as dirty and debauched, *and* as immortal

souls, needing salvation, provided a self-regulating mechanism: the more criminal men are the more they need salvation (and thus the more authoritarian and paternalist interference could be justified), but the less capable they are of being actively brought to share in the formation of values and policies: the more essential it is for men to be included, the less essential it is for them to participate. This confusion between charity and active control over others went very deep in the Victorian sensibility, as the novels of Dickens show: some of Dickens's characters, Pecksniff for instance, have got their genuine motives and their hypocritical rationalisations of these motives so entangled that even *they* don't know whether any given action of theirs is charitable or malicious: they are mystified by their own mystification.

I've laboured this point about liberal paternalism rather a lot, but I do think it's necessary to understand our general situation, in church and society, in some depth before we can start to talk about what kind of functions we want to see the priest fulfilling. All right, what is the relevance of this paternalism to talk of the priesthood? I think it's this: in our changing ideas of the nature of the priest, we have been going through a particular form of the general process I've sketched from authoritarianism, through liberal paternalism, to full democracy. The old images of the priest will clearly no longer do: the roaring old tyrant in the pulpit, working off his personal kinks on a captive audience, is still very much with us, but I think history is now against him. There are still people around who believe that you get a kind of spiritual electric shock if you seize hold of a priest's collar in anger, but our own anger that whole classes of people should ever have been fooled and gulled in this way is tempered by the thought that we have come a long way, in our overall situation, and in a quite incredibly short period of time: the speed of the change can best be seen within the contour of an individual life, and any of our lives will do; those of us who were brought up Roman Catholics have only to contrast our present attitudes with those we learnt in our first years of growth. Those years haven't of course just disappeared: they have left their heritage of instinctive responses and ingrained habits of feeling in us all. But generally we've come a long way, although I want to suggest that some of us haven't come quite far enough. If the old images of the priest as local witch-doctor have to be rejected, so, I think, do some of the new images of priest as local psychiatrist. It might now be obvious why I've spent so long talking generally about liberal paternalism, because some of the new images seem to me to spring precisely from this transient stage of growth, and to be attempts to freeze growth in the way that M's stores freezes the growth towards full democracy. The kind of image commonly offered to replace the outdated authoritarian models is that of the priest as the man co-ordinating and guiding the social and spiritual activity of a dynamic

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parish community, a man genuinely committed to the creation of common responsibility among christians, a focal-point of social and general welfare which he can further with the aid of sociological and psychological training, industrial experience, and so on. I think this image may have to be rejected, and this is really the point of what I want to say.

First of all it's necessary to question the basic structures of the parish, and thus to question this whole conception of the priest. The progressive attitude to the parish doesn't seem to me to go far enough; conservatives want to keep things as they are, progressives want to make them work more humanely and effectively, radicals may well think the only answer is to abolish existing structures. (This also applies to education, incidentally: the progressive wants to make good, liberal catholic schools, the radical thinks that the existence of a separate catholic system of education is itself the root of the trouble and wants to get rid of this.) It seems to me vital that christian reformist energy should *not* be directed towards creating a network of christian welfare states within society, but should work within and alongside the general effort and movement towards a new society and a common culture. The parish is in the world, but in the world in a different sense from the way in which a liturgical community centred on schools and factories and streets and offices is in the world. This kind of argument has already been developed elsewhere, and I don't want to go over it in detail, but I think divisions of the church which rest on historically outdated divisions of our society are less effective than methods of working within existing social structures. This involves a change in our whole conception of the church, as a much more flexible and spontaneous organisation: it means that the foci of the eucharistic community will be the foci of natural community within society. Much talk of keeping the parish system has centred on the need for a sense of local community; but I think it's also important to see how a real local community can be actually an obstacle to the creation of a whole community in society. Local communities depend on a measure of physical, concrete community which is not available in the wider society, and it can therefore seriously distort our idea of what community is: by thinking of community always in physical and immediate terms we can come to ignore the need for a more complex, less immediately tangible community, the community of the whole society, which is more abstract than a local community only in a very naive sense of abstract and concrete. What must be asserted is that the only parish is ultimately the whole society: it is here that our sense of community must be gathered and focussed. The sense of this whole community will of course be mediated to us in different and secondary ways: through our work-groups, the places we live in, and admittedly through our local geographical community. It seems to me vital, for instance, that mass should be celebrated in the

local cultural centres which we expect to be focal points of community in any good society, and this can provide the essential community between different groups without generating the whole superstructure of special christian activities which we associate with the parish. But I think it's important that, at the moment, the process has to be this way, from a general sense of the total community, downwards to lesser groups. It mustn't, that is, accept the fundamentally reactionary principle of subsidiarity beloved of much official catholic social teaching, which is really a pre-industrial concept (as so much of the church's social thinking is really pre-industrial). We need to create a society where any *random* group could celebrate the eucharist meaningfully because their sense of community lay not in particular activities or geographical areas, but simply in the fact of belonging to the same society, and ultimately the same species. I think it would be quite impossible to celebrate that kind of eucharist in Britain at the moment, although I could think of other societies where it would be much more of a real possibility. What we are looking for, in fact, is what has been called a common culture.

What effect does this have on the role of the priest? It seems to me that this inadequate progressive idea of the parish goes with a generally inadequate progressive idea of the priest: the idea of making the priest, as I said before, a genuinely committed social, spiritual and psychological worker among christians and perhaps also non-christians. But it seems to me that, again in the context of a whole society and a whole historical movement, this is possibly a reactionary move. For the meaning of the pattern of emerging democracy in our society is the realisation of a genuinely *common* responsibility in the fullest sense: a community of care, a community of guilt, a community of consolation. These activities, the activities of a whole people, can never be appropriated by an individual man or a class of men, no matter how well meaning, without serious damage to the whole effort towards common responsibility. Of course within this process, at key-points, we need men with specific functions and skills to sustain the growth: we need psychologists, priests, social workers, educators. But to think that the idea of common responsibility can co-exist with the idea of a specific class of men who guide and nourish this activity, acting as fathers or servants or confessors or consolers, seems to me to suggest merely that the full meaning of common responsibility has not been grasped. The confusion at the root of this is the confusion we have all been led to make between function and relationship; certain functions, certain roles and skills within society, have been traditionally associated with a whole superstructure of relationship, which is then institutionalised in terms of authority or paternalism or service. But the movement towards common responsibility is the movement to return to the sense of role and function, without its context of

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social inequality. We have to try to see the doctor and teacher as men with specific functions, and to resist the whole sense of superior position and power which, within the context of a particular society, these roles have come to assume. The breakthrough to seeing the doctor in the same light as the steelworker and clerk and clothes-designer is the breakthrough to democratic equality; and it will involve a resistance to that mystique which generalises a whole status and thus a whole pattern of unequal relationship out of a function.

It doesn't seem to me enough, ultimately, for either priest or doctor to say that they don't feel superior to anyone and don't want to be: this is the liberal mistake of thinking that what is involved is merely a change of consciousness, whereas what is really crucial is a change of structures. As long as priests exist as men set apart for people to bring their problems to, whether spiritual or social or psychological, serious inequality is likely to be created, and the movement towards democracy will constantly be blocked by this paternalism. What we have to learn to do is to look to each other for that kind of active help, not to one man or a class of man: if we look to each other, this is common responsibility, if we are trained to look to one man, this is paternalism. I don't think it's any real objection to say that we must anyway look to particular men, social workers and doctors and psychiatrists, for our welfare. We go to these men primarily because they have specific skills: the relationship then established is always controlled by this motive. But what is the priest's skill and function to be? If merely a duplicate of professional sociology and psychiatry, then this is not only irrelevant but dangerous: it is that duplication in our own terms of the wider society which we must above all resist. If it isn't this, is it that the priest has some special claim to be a general spiritual consoler and adviser? This has of course been so to an extent historically: the priest as the local educated man to be consulted in time of trouble. It doesn't seem to me that this can hold any longer in an educated democratic society, where the whole meaning of democracy and equality is precisely that nobody has a monopoly of humane insight by virtue of his status and training. (The idea of priests as having this kind of insight always reminds me of D. H. Lawrence's idea – in one of his own less humane moments – of an ideal model of human society, in which power and promotion would be secured not by money or social rank but by something called 'life-understanding', by which he meant intuitive insight into the mysteries of life, so that anyone with this could sit a kind of I I-plus and then shoot up the social ladder to become a sort of spiritual prime minister.)

I think we have in fact to make a clear division between what theology tells us about the priesthood, and the whole historical accretion which this has gathered in society, and which can be an

active impediment to progress. The priest is president of the liturgical assembly: this is his chief function, and it involves teaching in the direct sense of actually preaching the Word of God in the assembly. It seems to me that we may have to return to the sense of the priest's role as much less permanent and much more intermittent: the priest is the man who has received authority to celebrate the liturgy for the people. Why this involves wearing a black suit and being celibate and spending his time between liturgical activities in generally fostering christian welfare seems to me much less obvious. I don't think we will ever have a really non-paternalist church until priests (and I think the word 'priest' has to go, as well as the word 'minister' which again suggests a kind of specific relationship) are ordinary workers with families who have this special function to celebrate the liturgy within a church where the activities of teaching, welfare and preaching are genuinely common, and not the monopoly of a caste. The ideal is a self-teaching, self-caring church, as well as a self-teaching, self-caring society: teaching must be a continuous activity involving everyone as teacher and taught, not a one-way relationship from one class to the rest.

This obviously means a great change in our idea of the priest: I think it's essential to say that this change can't really be described as a call for 'worker-priests', which still retains the idea of someone who is mainly a priest being partly a worker: maybe 'priest-worker' is nearer to the reality, although as I say the word priest is pointlessly confusing theologically. What I'm saying in effect is that I don't see a great role for the priest at all within modern society, outside his specific (and obviously vital) function. More specifically, I mean that the role of the priest in modern society will be, in overall social terms, quite a minor one, in spite of its fundamental importance, and that we should perhaps start getting worried as soon as it becomes major: priestly societies are unlikely to be very christian societies. Perhaps it's too much of an exaggeration to say that society is godly in inverse proportion to the number of priests around, but I think this makes a point: that the function of priests is in a sense to eliminate themselves and let the church operate. I like the Bishop of Woolwich's comparison of the role of the church in society to the role of the Communist party in Soviet Russia: the role of the Communist party isn't to make card-carrying communists so much as to create socialist community, and similarly the role of the church is to create community and not just card-carrying christians. I think the simile can be usefully extended by saying that the social role of the priest, like the marxist state, is to wither away so that a real society can come into existence: that the era of paternalism, perhaps a necessary one, must yield to real equal

community, and this will mean a return for the priest to a fairly strictly delimited area of operation.²

This of course is a long-term affair, and meanwhile I think certain immediate measures to democratise the church should be taken: as long as parishes remain in their present form, full democratic control by the people of all parish activities is vital, and the liberal paternalist compromise of a measure of democratic participation supervised by the parish priest must be strongly resisted. The priest must be elected by the laity, be responsible to them, and capable of being dismissed by them: the relationship would in this way resemble the relationship between the manager of a Yugoslavian factory and the workers' committee which controls the factory's policy and decisions.

*Priesthood
and 'service'*

There's one other important concept relevant to the role of the priest which I haven't properly discussed, and that is the idea of *service*. This has been commonly advanced as an ideal image of the relationship between priest and people, and church and society, but I think it needs questioning to some extent because it is another example of a theologically progressive idea which can have damaging social consequences. In other words, it can be another aspect of liberal paternalism, a way of offering an acceptable description of a situation which is basically unacceptable. I'd like to quote what Raymond Williams says about the idea of service, in the Conclusion to his *Culture and Society*:

'A very large part of English middle-class education is devoted to the training of servants. This is much more its characteristic than a training for leadership, as the stress on conformity and on respect for authority shows. In so far as it is, by definition, the training of upper servants, it includes, of course, the instilling of that kind of confidence which will enable the upper servants to supervise and direct the lower servants. Order must be maintained there, by good management, and in this respect the function is not service but government. Yet the upper servant is not to think of his own interests. He must subordinate these to a larger good, which is called the Queen's peace, or national security, or law and order, or the public weal. This has been the charter of many thousands of devoted lives, and it is necessary to respect it even where we cannot agree with it.

'I was not trained to this ethic, and when I encountered it, in late adolescence, I had to spend a lot of time trying to understand it, through men whom I respected and who had been formed by it. The criticism I now make of it is in this kind of good faith. It seems to me inadequate because in practice it serves, at every

²All this obviously raises difficult theological issues about the nature of the role of bishop and priest which must clearly be explored in more detail than I can do here: what I am trying to do is to suggest a social condition and sketch social ideas which seem to indicate that we need to do some re-thinking. But the whole theological issue is clearly too complex for any easy answers to be given.

level, to maintain and confirm the status quo. This was wrong for me because the status quo, in practice, was a denial of equity to the men and women among whom I had grown up, the lower servants, whose lives were governed by the existing distributions of property, remuneration, education and respect. The real personal unselfishness, which ratified the description as service, seemed to me to exist within a larger selfishness, which was only not seen because it was idealised as the necessary form of a civilisation, or rationalised as a natural distribution corresponding to worth, effort, and intelligence. I could not share in these versions, because I thought, and still think, that the sense of injustice which the "lower servants" felt was real and justified. One cannot in conscience then become, when invited, an upper servant in an establishment that one thus radically disapproves.

'... Of course, having worked for improvement in the conditions of working people, in the spirit of service, those who are ruled by the idea of service are genuinely dismayed when the workers do not fully respond: when, as it is put, they don't play the game, are lacking in team-spirit, neglect the national interest. This has been a crisis of conscience for many middle-class democrats and socialists. Yet the fact is that working-class people cannot feel that this *is* their community in anything like the sense in which it is felt above them. Nor will education in their responsibilities to a community thus conceived convince them. The idea of service breaks down because while the upper servants have been able to identify themselves with the establishment, the lower servants have not. What "they" decide is still the practical experience of life and work.'

This seems to me crucially important for our own situation. We have to be careful that any genuine meaning that the idea of service, service as characterising a relationship, can have, isn't confused with this use of the idea of service, by liberal paternalism, as a way of ratifying the *status quo*. Some of the christian uses of the term seem to me to have approached this: we say that the priest is now the servant, not the ruler or guider of the people, but what this means in practice is often the same old relationship with a new name, a name which, by mystifying people about the real, unequal and paternalist nature of the relationship, ensures its perpetuation: I'm not ruling you, I'm helping you, but do it or else. We do this at the moment in politics: the way we are actually governed is of course from the top downwards, but we explain this to ourselves as from the bottom upwards, and by doing so confirm the situation. MPs are the servants of the public, and as long as we have the re-assuring term, the description, we can put up with the reality of our common alienation from actual control of our lives.

Having quoted Raymond Williams, whose work has been a central influence on recent radical thinking in Britain, I'd like to end

by mentioning a theme which has been constant in Williams's own work, and a major emphasis in the thinking of the New Left in Britain: the theme of communication. The act of communication between men establishes a relationship which, within a total society, is political: a relationship which raises ultimate questions of commitment. In tone, stance, language, the act of communication defines a whole human attitude and shapes a human reality: here the converging disciplines of literary criticism, politics, linguistic philosophy, criticism of mass-media, come together to form one of the most significant bodies of thinking in our time. What kind of communication is set up in the average sermon? What are the implications behind it, what version of human relations does it suggest? What is the nature of the language we use in the church, in sermons, prayers, hymns? Is this democratic language, in the real sense of establishing a stance of respect and equality between men, or how far can we make a parallel between the attitudes of the sermon-makers towards their audiences, and the attitudes of the ad-men and the controllers of mass-media? How far, in both cases, is there an easy assumption about the 'masses', who need to be chastised, goaded, bribed, mothered? What we are looking for, in society, is a kind of communication which will establish community, as in the liturgy Christ is established at the focus of a number of converging human communications. The fullest consequence of communication is respect for equality of being: to know a man in his depth is to know that we can have no ultimate power over him, without mutual damage. If the full implications of this are seen, we can perhaps go beyond liberal paternalism to a real community.

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