

Politics and Theology: Retrospect and Agenda

by Fergus Kerr, O.P.

The dossier mounts and the effort to think all the relevant material through has become daunting. Though it is only two years since the *Slant* group brought out *Catholics and the Left* as their 'manifesto', the argument about politics and theology, socialism and the gospel, has opened out in so many significant ways and so much new data has come to hand, that one has the sense (obscure enough, it is true) of being on the verge of some major revaluation of meanings and realignment of forces. But the 'longer and more complicated pieces of writing' which Raymond Williams mentioned in his review (*New Blackfriars*, November 1966) as a desideratum, are for the most part still outstanding. On the other hand, the germane topics are surely emerging. Terry Eagleton has listed some of them (in *Slant* 17), as part of the best outcome of the Birmingham symposium: how to relate cultural to political analysis; the adequacy of Marxism as a perspective for critique and action; the relation of revolution in the Third World to revolution in the western democracies; the relation of Christian eschatology to Marxist theory of history; and how analysis and critique are to issue out into effective social and political action. While there is no urgency to present a complete bibliography, it seems worth calling to mind the more important items in the file on the Catholic New Left debate, before going on to raise some further problems imposed by the recent publication of the *May Day Manifesto 1968*.¹

§1—RETROSPECT

Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* (reviewed in *New Blackfriars*, April 1968), though written out of the German Lutheran experience, offers Catholics too what is for the most part a highly pertinent and exacting criterion with which to undertake the necessary programme of judging the record in politics of historical Christianity over against the requirements of the 'permanent revolution' which the gospel as 'continuous critique of pure reason' is bound to generate. While one cannot pretend that the hope which Christians have in the future (eschatology) has meant that we have often been on the side of those who challenge the present state of things (revolution), it is a common place that, in breaking radically with fatalism, Christianity made possible the continuing transformation of mankind and of Nature which is science. This is argued, for example, by David Jenkins, in

¹*May Day Manifesto 1968*, edited by Raymond Williams, Penguin Books, 3s. 6d.

The Glory of Man. We have understood from the beginning that the gospel means that we cannot put up with ourselves as we are, we must change (repentance, conversion). We have understood, or made it possible for others to understand, that we need not put up with things as they are, we are called to transform Nature (science, technology). What we are in the throes of understanding now, is that we need not settle for our institutions as they are either, we are summoned to transform society. Some of the documents promulgated by the Vatican Council, and especially *Gaudium et Spes*, disclose some awareness of what this will mean; but the preparatory volumes for the World Conference on Church and Society held in Geneva, July 1966, under the auspices of the World Council of Churches, offer a much more comprehensive and penetrating analysis, with the addition of much immensely valuable documentation.¹ The Fourth Assembly of the WCC this summer at Uppsala, with its theme: 'Behold, I make all things new', directly continues this debate and should produce some relevant and even exciting material for reflection.

The precursor on the Catholic side was, of course, Emmanuel Mounier (1905-1950), the founder of *Esprit* and the group associated with it. It is still going strong after thirty-six years, and has played a not insignificant part on the French political scene, where some kind of rapprochement between Catholics and Marxists has long been of considerable importance, because these are far from being the peripheral minorities which they are in British politics. What Mounier was out against was what he called, in a memorable phrase, *le désordre établi*, the established disorder. The simple insight which that formula represents, is what finally broke the grip of the perennial respect for the established order which Christians, and especially Catholics, seem to have been in since the time of Constantine, and for which there is some evidence in the New Testament writings. What if it is not order at all but disorder? For Mounier the established disorder meant capitalism and that in turn meant individualism. His critique was from the outset simultaneously of social-economic structures and of personal-human attitudes. He wanted to free Catholicism from capitalist individualism, and in this respect his whole effort to retrieve the social-fraternal dimension of our experience of God, whether in worship, in theology or in work, complemented the ideas of such theologians as Marie-Dominique Chenu, Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac (whose influential book *Catholicisme: les aspects sociaux du dogme* appeared in 1938). Mounier built up a very damaging case against the whole style of life which is lived under the ideology of 'free enterprise'. But what is most interesting is that as early as 1933 he was discussing

¹*Christian Social Ethics in a Changing World*, edited by John C. Bennett; *Responsible Government in a Revolutionary Age*, edited by Z. K. Matthews; *Economic Growth in a World Perspective*, edited by Denis Munby; and *Man in Community*, edited by Egbert de Vries. SCM Press, 1966.

revolution in the context of Christian doctrine. He explicitly identified capitalist society in terms of institutionalized violence. It is easy enough, he says, to recognize *actes de violence*, the sporadic outbreaks of violence which the authorities feel obliged to put down. What it is far more important to identify are what he calls *états de violence*, whole situations in which people have violence done to them all the time. Mounier saw that our society is a state of permanent violence. He was quite clear that this is a state of things which Christians cannot in conscience settle for, and he did not exclude the possibility of having to use force to expose and change it. For him too, there was a place for violence within the context of non-violence and forgiveness. The back numbers of *Esprit* carry a lot we have yet to think through.

In the nature of the case, however, we have to do our own thinking in our own time and place and take the appropriate action, and the model of what has happened elsewhere can be only of limited use. Brian Wicker, in *First the Political Kingdom*, published last year, has already offered us a personal account of where the debate has reached so far: 'to describe, as I see it, the Catholic left and its debt to its sources in a way that is intelligible to readers who are not familiar with either, and to offer some comments on it of my own'. Mr Wicker seeks the genesis of the movement (if it is even now anything as large and homogeneous as that word suggests) in the *Pax* group, first of all, with its argued refusal to admit that 'just war' theology applies to the politics of nuclear warfare: this case received its final and unrefuted form in *Nuclear Weapons and Christian Conscience*, the symposium edited by Walter Stein, which appeared originally in 1961. Secondly, the December Group has met annually since 1958, and from the start its programme has been to discuss social and political problems facing Catholics within the conceptual framework of the *New Left Review* (though that itself has changed). Mr Wicker says that his own book *Culture and Liturgy*, published in 1963, was probably the first devoted to arguing the case for a Catholic 'New Left'. Thirdly, *Slant* itself began in Cambridge as an undergraduate magazine in the spring of 1964. In addition to this, *The Committed Church*, which Mr Wicker never mentions, appeared in 1966, edited by Laurence Bright and Simon Clements: it represents the work of the seventh Downside Symposium and constitutes an indispensable part of the case (Terry Eagleton reviewed it in *New Blackfriars*, September 1966). *Catholics and the Left* came out in 1966 along with Mr Eagleton's *The New Left Church* (not the programmatic statement the title suggests). Finally, as Mr Wicker says, the Newman Association has provided a forum, if not exactly a platform, for the discussion of Catholic Left ideas. It is surely not indelicate to mention, too, that Spode House and even *New Blackfriars*, as 'institutions', as venue and as voice, have played some part.

Michael Dummett's essay 'How Corrupt is the Church' (*New*

Blackfriars, August 1965) set off two entirely separate debates. In the first place, of course, it provided the context for Herbert McCabe's fated defence of the bishops against Charles Davis (*New Blackfriars*, February 1967). This was followed by contributions of some interest from the Archbishop of Birmingham (March 1967), from Ian Hislop and Cornelius Ernst (April 1967), and then by Mr Dummett's second article, 'What is Corruption?' (June 1967). The other argument was about the difference between 'liberalism' and 'radicalism' in left-wing thinking. Mr Dummett's 'reformist' tendencies were attacked by Terry Eagleton (October 1965); Mr Dummett replied (December 1965); Bernard Bergonzi came in on his side (March 1966); Mr Eagleton replied to Mr Bergonzi, and Brian Wicker offered a third way in his important article 'Liturgy and Politics' (April 1966). If one adds Mr Wicker's equally important article in the following issue (May 1966), there emerges a very useful statement of the whole problem, to which it seems to me that nothing radically new was contributed when the argument started again a year later, with Terry Eagleton's critique of Rosemary Haughton's latest book (April 1967), her reply (June 1967), and Pascal Lefébure's attempted mediation between them (July 1967). The difficulty of working out what really is the radical view in certain areas came up over the debate on the ministerial priesthood. This was opened by Terry Eagleton (December 1965); Nicholas Lash raised important objections (August 1966); Cornelius Ernst offered the most radical view (December 1967); and Herbert McCabe confirms and extends it in his forthcoming paper in *Commonweal*.

The liberal/radical issue, then, has been sufficiently defined to be going on with: it remains to work it out in detail in various areas of common concern. The issue raised, in effect, by Raymond Williams in his comments on Brian Wicker's *Culture and Theology* (*New Blackfriars*, November 1966), and brought out into the open by Mr Wicker ('The New Left: Christians and Agnostics', January 1967), continues to resist definition. Vincent Buckley tried his hand at it, starting from Brian Wicker's book ('The Sacred and the Whole', August 1967); but by far the most important piece so far is Terry Eagleton's 'Politics and the Sacred' (*Slant* 20). This is the argument about the difference one's being a Christian makes to socialist commitment, if any. The Cunninghams have set some questions (*Slant* 12); Terry Eagleton has attempted to show how Christian theology is a depth within a broadly Marxist understanding of history and not a superfluous category (*Slant* 14). The debate between Martin Shaw and Martin Redfern (*Slant* 19) seems far too narrow in scope when one thinks of Walter Stein's superb critique of Raymond Williams's *Modern Tragedy* (*New Blackfriars*, February and March 1967; and *Slant* 15): surely the ground on which to conduct the Christian/humanist debate and perhaps even the starting-point

for the next phase in Catholic New Left thinking. It is at this point that one is finally seeking a 'philosophical anthropology, that is, a total theory of man'; and this is where the New Left definition of the word 'political' connects with the whole series of insights and problems disclosed by the international congress at the Roundhouse last July (well reported by Neil Middleton, *Slant* 17). There is no point in continuing the intimidated apologetics, the agnostic-humanist-rationalist conception of being human has collapsed, and it is only by insisting on Christian eschatology in all its contrariness that we can find our identity in the new form of being human which is breaking through.

Where the longer and more complicated pieces are most lacking is in theological exploration of the revolutionary imperative which interpretation of the gospel in answer to the demands of our time seems to impose. In this connection, it would be worth comparing Cornelius Ernst's piece in *New Blackfriars*, December 1967, with his earlier one in *Slant* 8. In another mode, however, nothing has been more eloquent than some of Herbert McCabe's editorials in *New Blackfriars*. In February 1966, he asked if we want to make it easier for people to live decently within the existing inhuman institutions or to sacrifice our happiness to change the institutions themselves: 'So long as there is tension between doing and saying there will come times when revolution is the enemy of reform, when radical change will exact its cost in human suffering, when doing the will of God does not seem to lead to any visible happiness for anybody, when a man is simply a witness to truth and no more. In the meantime it is only in the sacraments that we have a complete unity of saying and doing: *efficiat quod figurat*, they bring about the new world they proclaim. The sacramental life, which is the Church, is our pledge of the world to come which gives validity to the revolution.' In November 1966, he discussed violence and forgiveness, and declared that our fundamental stance is defined by the eucharist: 'a party, a love-feast, whose whole point is a revolutionary act, the crucifixion of Christ. The sacramental life proposes and realizes a human relationship which is neither destructive nor conformist but redemptive. That is what the Church is for.' And finally, in December 1966, he defined the importance of the Church for this world: 'Firstly to proclaim the future destiny of mankind, to show secular society where it is to go. In her sacramental life the Church provides first of all a picture of the authentic relationship between men for which we are to work and to wait. Secondly to announce the Good News: this destiny is not merely an ideal of the indefinitely remote future, something that may or may not be achieved, but something that already exists as a new world constituted by the resurrection of Christ. Thirdly, and most importantly, in this proclamation to bring to bear upon the present the power of the future. In her sacramental statement of man's destiny, the Church makes Christ himself present

calling us personally to unity in love, inciting us to the revolutionary overturning of our personality that we call faith, making us able to die to our old selves so that the new world can be born amongst us.'

Finally, Donald Nicholl has objected (*Clergy Review*, August 1966) that the *Slant* approach resembles that of *Action Française*: 'to assert the primacy of the political factor means delivering humanity once more to the tyranny of politics from which Christianity had liberated us'. Charles Péguy pointed out how easily *mystique* can turn into *politique*. This is precisely what the Emperor Constantine brought about, and if it is a mistake to reduce Christianity to mere sacralization of the established order, how can it be any better to represent it as sacralization of revolt or of some alternative social order? Mr Wicker thinks that no satisfactory answer has been produced to this kind of challenge: it is no doubt the most fundamental problem for those who believe the gospel and feel obliged to work out their faith in the shape of political action, but this is where we come back to Jürgen Moltmann.

§2—AGENDA

What never becomes clear or even apprehensible in *Theology of Hope*, is exactly what the 'content' of preaching would be when it is allowed to become permanent protest against the established disorder. The same difficulty arises in the new book by J. B. Metz, *Zur Theologie der Welt*. Writing as a Catholic, he too wants to present the Church as an institution dedicated to permanent social criticism. This is very unlike anything the Church has actually been, throughout most of its history, at least in any total and systematic fashion, and the reasons for this need a good deal more examination (we can't just blame Constantine). On the other hand, it is not difficult for a theologian to see that if one takes seriously the in-but-not-of-the-world stance of the *congregatio fidelium*, this must lead to some conception of the 'world' as being constantly under pressure from the 'Church' to *change*. It is easy enough to assert that if the change is regarded as issuing finally from fidelity to an idealized past, then one will have mere conservatism, but that of course one is thinking in terms of change out of fidelity to a promised future. The trouble here is that, while one is not seeking some prefabricated vision of utopia (a commoner temptation than one might think), the alternative to the established disorder does have to be spelled out *somehow*. The *congregatio fidelium*, as some kind of institution, can be presented plausibly as an instrument of social criticism, only when preaching as protest becomes specific and particular, only when the criticism is actually seen to issue from the eschatological stance. And to ask about the 'content' of the preaching is to ask about the *role* of the preaching: to ask that it be specified. The importance of the *Culture and Liturgy* argument is that we do have a metaphor for the alternative,

which evokes without pre-empting the future, and this is the event of the eucharist. The reasons why it has usually not acted as such a metaphor are no doubt connected with the reasons why the *congregatio fidelium* has not been a plausible organ of social-political critique. But the possibilities are clearly *there*.

We can't all do everything. It would seem appropriate, therefore, to put on our own agenda some attempt to think out possibilities of *preaching*, and the kind of social-political training and theological formation which would then emerge as mandatory. What is required most of all, of course, is instances of it at work, but the acquiring of a sense of the point of it is indispensable.

The *May Day Manifesto 1968* raises a number of further issues, four in particular, for the readers of this periodical, which is enough to be going on with.

The first issue that arises is that of *liberation*. This is the perspective in which Richard Shaull is working (*New Blackfriars*, July 1968), and this was also the sign under which the congress at the Roundhouse was held: a deliberately ambiguous sign, to attempt a connection between Marxism and Flower Power, an equivocation in spite of all. But the most intelligent dissent from the first edition of the *Manifesto* which has come my way, is the one by J. C. F. Littlewood, registered in his article 'Humanity in control?' (*The Cambridge Quarterly*, Spring 1968). He is surely right in saying that the disillusionment with the Labour Government on the part of socialists, derives from the failure of hopes which were excessive and unrealistic in the first place. The image of a better Britain which Harold Wilson projected in 1964 was never all that different from Harold Macmillan's. But the serious problem as to how sick our society really is, has been left to Jules Henry, Herbert Marcuse, Ronald Laing, David Cooper and others, to diagnose and publicize. In his own way, writing out of the *Scrutiny* tradition, Mr Littlewood is able to fasten on three or four phrases in the *Manifesto* ('the problems of whole men and women', 'personal liberation', 'a transformed definition of the relationships between man and man', 'human needs', 'a humane education') which seem to take for granted a great deal more than a radical sense of the gap there is 'between vision and power' would surely ever permit. The challenge presented by *The Politics of Experience* can no longer be evaded.

It just isn't so obvious what would count as personal liberation. In *Monopoly Capitalism*, recently published over here by Penguin Books, Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy attempt exactly the kind of backing and extension which the *Manifesto* argument requires. In their concluding chapter, for instance, we are given a convincing account of 'the paradox of partial rationality advancing along with total irrationality'. The style with which the *Manifesto* projects its alternatives, the unsuspecting dependence on words like 'wholeness' and 'liberation' and 'humanity', reveal what Mr Littlewood calls the

'unconsciousness' of its authors. For all their reasoned and honourable dissent, they don't go nearly far enough in their demystification of the conditions of our servitude, and hence stop short of exploring new forms of liberatory action.

What this is saying, secondly, is that the place of *technology* in our society could stand much more critique than it ordinarily gets. The *Manifesto* repeats the charge that it is pragmatism which has done for Mr Wilson's socialism. The cult of efficiency leaves intact the institutionalized irrationalities. But an essential part of the task of spreading consciousness now is surely argued resistance to the pervasive illusions of the technocratic way of thinking as a whole. There is an astonishing article by Zbigniew Brzezinski, a professor of political science at Columbia University, and foreign affairs adviser to Hubert Humphrey, previously in the State Department, in *Encounter*, January 1968: 'America in the Technetronic Age', which is representative, not only in its fatuous self-centredness ('Today, America is *the* creative society; the others, consciously and unconsciously, are emulative'), but also in its grandiose McLuhanesque certitudes about how technological progress must alter our experience, and its trashy and mediocre vision of what would be best for us. Perhaps what is really needed here is some attempt to sort out the differences between technological advances and social-political changes. There is a habit of mystifying elision created by using the word 'revolution' for both. In a sense, this is the crucial instance of the gap between power and vision, and technology *for humanity* reopens the question of the 'nature' of man.

In the third place, then, putting the issue at its broadest, the most urgent task is somehow to reconcile positivism with true humanism. As Roger Barnard writes (*Peace News*, February 3rd, 1967): 'I would say that as a result of the act by which man projects upon the world the light of a knowledge which is increasingly utilitarian and mechanical and abstract, so an increasingly monstrous image of the world and of himself is thrown back at him: an image which is ever more deformed, ever less decipherable, and catastrophically disregarding of certain deep human exigencies, needs, desires, impulses. Overwhelmingly, the end result is a general *pragmatization* of human beings and personal relationships.' We have to 'demonstrate the mutilations which our regimented technological rationality inflicts upon man's apprehension of reality and of himself . . . to throw a light on how our modern civilization increasingly pervades all manifestations of human life and human relationships with its logic of domination, thereby tending to reduce man to a passive instrument of his technical and political apparatus'. It is in terms of a programme of this kind that one might discuss, for instance, the differences between Oxford philosophical styles and the work of men like Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur and others. In another form, this is the 'two cultures' debate

between F. R. Leavis and C. P. Snow. It is the recurrent problem in the work of literary critics: Lionel Trilling, R. P. Blackmur, Leslie Fiedler, to name the first to come to mind. It is the problem of the relationship between *Natur* and *Geist*, the problem of seeing how our unique capacity to make history differentiates us from everything else in the world (*Geschichtlichkeit*). In particular, it would be instructive to see how much a book like Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* would have to say in this context, not to speak of the student-guerillas and the anti-university movement, on the one hand, and everything represented by the 'tribal' subculture of *The International Times*. The dissident versions must converge to expose the dominant version of what human life is like, so that we may finally break out of the restrictions of positivism.

Fourthly and finally, J. M. Cameron has pointed out that we don't have to opt between love-communities and legalistic societies (*New Blackfriars*, November 1967): 'the law is truly a moral education, *disciplina* in the original sense, a teaching . . . changing the moral attitudes of men is thus primarily a social process.' Let us by all means change men's hearts; but let us recognize that the law, as *disciplina*, is a necessary structure, not just to operate where the spontaneity of love is choked and the empire of reason limited (as Professor Cameron puts it), but even precisely where the spontaneity of love is present and there is reason. As Wolfhart Pannenberg points out convincingly, in *Was ist der Mensch?*, the kind of love which is community-creating is also structure-creating. Love becomes fidelity. A community without some legal-juridical structure is a community without fidelity, a community without love, in fact a non-community. Recognizing the rights of others and being faithful to them will normally mean creating structures in which the recognition of others in their rights and duties becomes institutionalized. Pannenberg speaks of *die rechtsgestaltende Macht der Liebe*: the legislative power of love. The love which we identify as *agapé*, charity, seeks expression in structures which are mutual recognitions of right, which are thus 'juridical'. Charity seeks expression in making laws. In our situation (eschatology as politics!), charity seeks expression in *changing* laws. Charity produces law, in this sense charity is legislative, and this brings out a whole dimension of *agapé* which is frequently ignored, and disposes of some important false dilemmas. There is a great deal of work to be done, both practically and theoretically, at the point where theology and law converge. Our whole theology of charity requires to be reworked, and it would be worth trying to do so on the basis of what St Thomas Aquinas suggests. His conception of charity has had no influence on subsequent thinking. It would be particularly interesting to make use of his model: friendship, *amicitia*; and of his lay-out: two-thirds of the *quaestiones* on charity in the *Summa* have to do with the social-political dimension of charity.

Those topics are plainly not the only ones that will occur to anyone

who has read this far. The great achievement of the *Manifesto* is to show how all the problems are interrelated, and then to make clear that one must cultivate a sense of the whole before one can usefully undertake specific critiques and propose particular courses of action. 'The truth is the whole', as Hegel said. The single-issue campaign should take place within the total critique. In the words of the *Manifesto*: 'This is then our own immediate political decision: that the first thing to do, against a discontinuous experience, is to make and insist on connexions: a break and development in consciousness, before we can solve the problems of organization. It is easy to dismiss this effort as merely intellectual work: a substitution of thought for action. Our orthodox culture continually prompts this response: "action not words" are the first obligatory words, from many apparently different men. But we reject this separation of thought and action, or of language and reality. If you are conscious in certain ways, you will act in certain ways, and where you are not conscious you will fail to act. It is not, of course, enough to describe and analyse a particular crisis; but unless socialists do it, other descriptions and analyses take over, and the best life of the society is pushed back to its margins, its gaps, its precarious unwritten areas. When we first asked ourselves the question—what action can we take?—our answer was to try to establish this practical opposition: an alternative view of our world.' That is well put. The dissident groups are very different one from another, and if our stance is to be that of eschatology as politics (*New Blackfriars*, April 1968), then our group is more contrary than most. But we must surely want to take part in the ongoing radical critique of our society, and this has declared itself in the *Manifesto*, whatever its limitations there. It is up to us now to find how we may best participate, in ways that make things clearer for ourselves as well as for others, and these notes are meant to be no more than retrospect and agenda.