

Church and World

Mr Dummett Replies

Mr Terry Eagleton made, in his article *The Language of Renewal* in the October issue of *New Blackfriars*, some criticisms of certain things I had said in *How Corrupt is the Church?* in the August issue. I am not replying in any polemical spirit: for I think that much is gravely wrong inside the Church, and that, in seeking to see *what* is wrong, we are all of us peering through a fog; and so I hope that what I wrote will be both criticised and supplemented. All the same, some clarification on my part may promote fruitful discussion.

Mr Eagleton accuses me of 'accepting and reinforcing a whole social *status quo*'; and, in this, he regards me as representative of the defects of progressive thought. I should like to rebut this accusation. I might, indeed, claim the highest conceivable authority for the presumption with which he saddles me, that we shall have the poor always with us; but perhaps this would be a misapplication of our Lord's words. I must, however, repudiate his implication that I regard class division and the inequitable distribution of wealth as desirable. I do not: my views are rather strongly egalitarian. But what I was concerned to suggest was how Christians should behave within a society of which inequality and class division are features. I do not say, what Mr Eagleton attributes to me, that these are the inevitable conditions of human life: but I do say that there is no immediate prospect of their disappearing, at least from Western society. Mr Eagleton is much concerned with party labels, 'conservative', 'progressive' or 'liberal', and 'radical', the use of which I deprecated; and he accuses my suggestions of being progressive in intention, but reactionary in effect. I am inclined to retort with a *tu quoque*. The state of mind of someone who says, 'We can do nothing until we achieve a radical transformation of the whole social order', seems to me extremely dangerous: for he is almost bound to do nothing. The chances for such a radical transformation come very rarely, and then are usually missed. In our own country, we have seen a Labour government, which took a few steps towards social reform, followed by years of Conservative government, and now by a Labour government which pursues Conservative policies: where is there the slightest sign of any chance of transforming society? And in the United States the chances are even dimmer, save in the one all-important field of race relations. The *effect* of radicalism of Mr Eagleton's kind is only too likely to be highly conservative.

Of course, if it were really true what Mr Eagleton says, that my

proposals would actually have an effect adverse to the attainment of social justice, then it would be irrelevant that the foreseeable chances of attaining it are so slight. Mr Eagleton is afraid that the renewal of the community life of the parish might divert the energies of Christians from work to improve the conditions of society generally. Well, it is true that it would, to some extent: but this effect would, I think, be outweighed by two things. First, it would harness the energies of many Christians who are at present doing very little for their neighbours. Secondly, I should think that a parish – still more, a whole Church – which lived the kind of life I tried to sketch would serve as an example and a challenge to the society around it, and would in this way contribute more effectively to the transformation of society Mr Eagleton desires than would the direct participation by individual Christians in secular affairs. I did not in any way mean to exclude such participation. On the contrary, I think it is the duty of the Church to encourage it, and it was a mistake on my part not to have mentioned this, which I am grateful to Mr Eagleton for having pointed out. I know of nothing more hopeful than the present total commitment, in certain parts of the United States, of the Catholic Church and other Churches to the civil rights movement. But I do not believe that the restoration of the kind of Christian community displayed for our imitation in the New Testament would in any way impair the chances for Catholics to give such testimony of their love of Christ.

I should not think it an adequate substitute for the kind of mutual help I had in mind to use the existing social structures for dealing with hardship, as Mr Eagleton suggests. They should, of course, be used: non-professional ‘works of mercy’ should never be allowed to be exploited by existing agencies, which must when necessary be chivied into doing their proper job. But the line which Mr Eagleton makes his own, ‘Now we have a welfare state, there is no longer any need for individual charity’, again has, to me, a reactionary ring, and I cannot accept it. However just a society we create, there will never cease to be a need for help given by individuals to individuals as fellow-members of a community, and, if possible, as friends. Organs of national and local government, and even voluntary organisations, have regulations and budgets: and, however humane the people running such agencies may be, there will always be people whose ‘case’ does not fall within the stipulated conditions, or would not justify the necessary expenditure. Likewise, as I tried to stress, there will always be people who would rightly feel unjustified in burdening any welfare service, even if they were entitled to, but who nevertheless genuinely need help, and would accept it in a context in which, sooner or later, they in turn were going to be expected to give help to others.

I get the impression that Mr Eagleton has a rather more institutional vision of the kind of parish life I had in mind than my own.

There would have to be some kind of loose organisation, of course: but I did not envisage a range of parochial welfare services, to which applications could be made, or which would send out social workers to make formal calls. I imagined, rather, a community whose members knew one another, and therefore, for the most part, knew when help was needed, and in which *every* member, except the bedridden and those below the age of confirmation, would be expected to give what help he could best offer.

Mr Eagleton raises the question whether the organisation of the Church into parishes ought to be retained, or whether it ought not to be replaced by some new structure 'centred on industry, for instance'. We ought, indeed, to be thinking whether the parish system remains the best: but, for my part, I have heard no convincing alternative proposed. I have some experience, since I belong, not only to a parish, but also to one of the few avocational ecclesial units that actually exist – a University chaplaincy; and I think it would be a pity to substitute vertical units for horizontal ones. One of the defects of our form of life is that, wherever the local community cuts across social boundaries, the sense of community has been so weakened: we are isolated inside sub-communities determined, not by neighbourhood, but by social class and type of work. My idea is that we should not surrender to this tendency, but that, within the Church, we should break these barriers down and get to know one another. Now everybody knows that an artificial gathering of people for the purpose of making contact across social boundaries produces only embarrassment, but that the barriers fall at once as soon as people are united in a common endeavour. If the practice of the Christian religion can no longer produce such a bond, such a sense of common purpose, then that religion must be moribund indeed.

All these more detailed disagreements between Mr Eagleton and myself spring from a deeper disagreement on principle, which relates to the whole of his article. If I understand him, Mr Eagleton sees the Church primarily as a divinely ordained instrument for the transformation – even before the conversion – of the whole of human society; a Christian equivalent of the Communist Party (the spearhead of the revolution), or perhaps, if I may so express it, a kind of international pressure group. I do not see it in this way. Of course, the Church must work on the world, as the leaven in the lump: but I think her primary task must be, not to transform secular society, but to create a better one within it. The Church *must* always 'stand over against the world': she ought to be able to achieve, within her own life as a community, the realisation of those ideals of mutual love, of sharing with and helping one another, which are necessarily, I think, unattainable for society as a whole (at least, for unconverted society), and present them to the world as an example, a goal and a reproach. Some will accuse me of being

idealistic in supposing that, after the first three centuries, Christians can any more attain this: but surely our baptism should be capable of making a more visible difference than there is now between our ways and those of the society around us which has still to be redeemed. This fundamental disagreement between us, which is the core of Mr Eagleton's distinction between progressives and radicals, is one which must interest a number of people, and I hope others may have some light to throw upon it.

I should like to take this opportunity to say that one or two turns of phrase in my article, as printed, were neither mine nor sanctioned by me. On p. 620 the sense was destroyed by my being made to say that it was my opinion that the Church is now emerging from a state in which she 'has seemed to be' corrupt. This is the very reverse of my opinion: what I wrote was 'has been'. I began by arguing that the Church may, at a given time, be corrupt even though the existence of this corruption is not readily apparent at that time, and I went on to say that immediately recognisable signs of corruption are *not* present at the moment. I went on to give it as my opinion that, despite what at first sight *seems* to be the case, the Church has in fact been, and still to a great extent *is*, corrupt, and that the process of emergence will not be successful unless we recognise the extent of that corruption. Again on p. 625, line 6 up, I wrote 'the Church is in the grip of corruption', where the text replaces 'is' by 'could be said to be'. I understand that these changes were not the work of the then editor, but of the censor; I am in part to blame for not objecting soon enough. But I should like to say that, in my opinion, a censor has no business correcting anything he does not believe to be actually heretical. If the phrase 'the Church is corrupt' is theologically unacceptable, I withdraw it in favour of whatever expression is held to describe the state of the Church at the undeniable disgraceful phases of her history; but I must protest against alterations, made without an author's consent, which invert the whole meaning of what he has written. I guess that censors have, for many years, been accustomed to step beyond the limits of their authority (in a book of Gilson's, a censor once insisted on inserting a statement of his disagreement with the author concerning the interpretation of a purely philosophical doctrine of St Thomas). I think it must be time that Catholics revolted against this puerile petty tyranny.

(The Editor who, while not of course necessarily accepting the views of contributors, is solely responsible for what is printed in *New Blackfriars*, wishes to apologise to Mr Dummett for significant alterations being made in his article without consulting him.)
