The Radical Gap
by Rosemary Haughton

In the April issue of *New Blackfriars*, Terry Eagleton wrote a fair and interesting review-article on my book *On Trying to be Human*. This article is a comment on certain questions that arise out of the review. They are questions about politics and philosophy and theology, but what it is really about is the irreducible gap in human awareness of life, the edges of which my book was clumsily exploring, and the reality of which gap the reviewer denies. I hope to throw some light on what it is that makes for growth in a society or in an individual.

On Trying to be Human is a mixed book with some extremely turgid passages. Reading it over now, I find much of it unnecessarily complex and lengthy. On the other hand several people, whose scholarship and intelligence is unquestioned, have found it illuminating, and said so. The book was written in an attempt to use Christian ideas as a tool for interpreting the common experience of human life, without calling on support from faith or the idea of revelation. (This was what made some reviewers – Christian and non-Christian – wonder if I were really a Christian at all. As a matter of fact I scarcely was, when I wrote it.) Its starting point was that of many of those who are vaguely called 'humanist', and whose prevailing mood is a pessimism which is the only realism they feel is justified by the facts. It was a response to a view of life which can accept nothing but verifiable fact and refuses even to see connections between facts, except for purely practical purposes. I wanted to see whether Christian ideas about life could make sense at this level, even if they could do no more. I started, therefore, from the position of the realisation of human life as isolated, but apparently irrationally wanting to transcend that isolation. In order to illuminate this condition I made use of the Pauline concepts of 'the flesh' and 'the spirit' and found that they were basic to the understanding of how human beings develop spiritually. Because essentially individual experience was my starting point I laid myself open to the charge of 'liberalism'. At the time that I wrote the book (about two years ago) I had not yet learned that the word 'liberal' could be an insult, but the charge is justified from the reviewer's point of view because my point of view at that time did limit the scope and realism of the book. It limited it, of course, most of all in the area of wider social relationships.

What interests me at this point is the way I found myself thinking

about the book during the period between writing it and seeing it published. In writing it I had been struggling to express certain ideas about the progressive 'opening-out' of human nature, its shedding of the 'layers' of the life of the flesh as the 'real' self discovers itself in the experience of love. In doing this I wanted to express the transformation of human nature without the gnostic dualism implied by the words 'soul' and 'body', but also without blurring the fact that what we refer to as 'natural' and 'supernatural' are distinct, though not separable. I tried to show how, *in fact* they are distinct, as a matter of common experience. I think I would have rejected the idea of such a distinction if it had been proposed to me beforehand. It was the attempt to express the reality of actual experience that forced me to discover this distinction.

At the time when the book was in proof I had begun to explore the writings of the Catholic Left, and was both infuriated and fascinated by much of what I read. But when I read Brian Wicker's 'Culture and Theology' the fury evaporated, and it was by following up some lines of reading and thinking suggested by his book that I made an odd discovery about my own. There were ideas in it that I could have expressed a great deal more completely and forcibly if I had been able to make use of the kind of philosophical tools with which I had since become acquainted. But the point that struck me with most force was that, although I had been at the time totally ignorant of any kind of philosophy but the 'liberal' one that Terry Eagleton dislikes so much, I still *had* managed to give shape, of a kind, to the ideas that I was struggling with. (The proof that I have done so is to be found in letters I have since received, as well as some reviews, and some comments made to me personally.) The ability to give form to these ideas (and therefore realise what they were) had been drastically limited, as I realised, by the lack of a language that could express fittingly the vital relation between flesh, Law and Spirit. But the relationships had *been* expressed, and the turgidness of some passages seemed to be the result of trying to do more than the available language was able to realise.

But if this is true – if the thing I was trying to discover was so cramped by lack of an adequate language, yet was not content with its confinement and immediately recognised a liberating force when one appeared – then there is a gap between what 'wants to be said' and the means to say it. It was the pressure of the need to say something that made the discovery of a real possibility of saying it so illuminating. And of course it was not just a matter of saying the same thing, only better, but rather the discovery of further dimensions of the idea, and the way it spreads precisely into the area of social relationships that Terry Eagleton felt was feeble or lacking in my book. But something *had* been said, and another stage of the discovery became apparent to me when I read the review-article, because the reviewer couldn't *see* that it had been said. His own,

admittedly more flexible and relevant language, can be, in its way, as restricting as the older, liberal one, because he takes it for granted that what is to be said can only be said one way. If it isn't said that way it isn't said at all. So the language of my book was a complete barrier to comprehension for him. He interpreted a distinction as a dualism, and denied its validity, because for him there can be no gap between what needs to be said and the means to say it. But if there were no gap there could be no growth, because it is this gap, and the unease that it causes, that makes people grope for more adequate language. This goes for the individual, and I have described my own experience of it, and it goes for a whole culture, too. It is when the language of a culture clearly will not carry the weight of what people are feeling that a cultural break-through occurs. But before the new language takes clear form the things it 'wants to say' *are already being 'said'* – felt and therefore expressed – but obscurely and symbolically. This is the cultural gap, and it is the growing point of spiritual life. Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* is full of quotations from writers who were struggling with ideas that their culture could not express. There simply wasn't the language for them. He points out, over and over again, exactly where the failure occurs, because of the inadequacy of the cultural attitudes that formed people's minds. But it was because people tried, and failed, to say in the old language the new things that were stirring under the surface that a new langage was finally born. The discontent with the gap between meaning and expression, which drastically curtailed, therefore, what could be seen to be meant, was the stimulus, the growing point, of the genuine radicalism of which Raymond Williams approves.

In my own book, there is a chapter on the Eucharist which is an attempt to show how Christian teaching can 'transform social relationships from within'. What 'wanted to be said' here, was groping for a form that I have since discovered – and I discovered it *because* I knew I hadn't said what needed saying. It was the discomfort, the sheer frustration, of that gap that forced me to go on looking, and it became a growing point. Terry Eagleton doesn't refer to this chapter, perhaps because he found it even more inadequate than the others. But clearly what was said did not reach him, because of the refusal to recognise the cultural gap.

In a recent number of *Slant* Neil Middleton quotes, and demolishes, certain passages from the 'Constitution on the Church in the Modern World'. He shows very clearly that the language about human nature that is used in the Constitution is totally inadequate, and therefore tends to undermine what it is trying to achieve – a new respect for human life and a just social order. His argument is clear and convincing, but the total dismissal of the effort represented by the Constitution, the verdict that 'nothing has changed', could only follow from an inability to recognise the cultural gap.

The language of the Constitution is, indeed, a dualist language which cannot possibly say what needs to be said, but it is evident that the new things are 'trying to be said', and it is the failure to do so that makes the attempt tragic. (Tragedy, also, is born out of the gap, but that is too big a subject to open up here.) But once the cultural gap is taken into account the reaction to this failure need not be a dismissive one, but rather the sort of reaction that modern radicals have to their nineteenth-century prophets, whatever their limitations. We do not sneer at Ruskin because his vision stopped short of realising the meaning of democracy as part of the integrity of work and life. We appreciate him because, in spite of his cultural language that prevented this, hew as saying things that demanded, eventually, the formulation of the socialist idea to express them properly. I don't mean that Ruskin – and others, and even myself – had an idea but couldn't express it adequately, and later someone else did. This really would be the sort of dualism that makes Terry Eagleton wince. What I am saying is rather that the ideas Ruskin did have and express reveal something missing. To him, presumably, it was simply an irritation and a pain, he tried to compensate for an obscure sense of loss by putting something else – that he *could* see and talk about – across the 'gap': the Guild of St George, for instance. Most people do this, because the gap is so damnably painful. It casts doubts on the value of one's work, and there is nothing, *directly*, to be done about it, because the essence of the thing is that you don't know what's wrong. You lack the completeness that seemed to be promised by the original drive to discovery. Terry Eagleton doesn't like this incompleteness. Nor do I, but if it weren't there no progress would be possible, because no *faith* would be possible.

The kind of cultural break-through that happens because people are hurt by this gap is, I think, the same *kind* of event as the break through of faith. This is not to reduce it to the level of purely individual experience any more than the incarnation is an individual experience because it is all about one man. The incarnation is something that happened to the human race, and the break through of faith is that kind of a thing, in fact it *is* that thing, becoming evident in different settings. And it is at once an individual happening, and a social happening, for the same reasons and at the same time. And whenever and wherever it happens, and to whatever people it happens, the set-up is the same: there are clear, consistent and accepted ideas and ways of life, and they are felt to be inadequate. The clearer and better they are, the more sensitively aware of life people become through them, the more apparent is their inadequacy. This is why Catholicism, at its lucid best, is most of all apt to make people restlessly aware of something lacking. 'Something' lies beyond, inside, above (etc., etc.) the rational apprehension of life, and it can't be described, or pinned down. It can be symbolised, consciously or unconsciously. Sometimes this symbolising is so thorough and

concrete that it succeeds in hiding the gap. This is what strictly religious concepts can do, when they are treated as if they referred to realities on the same side of the gap as the rational organisation of living. But if there is to be faith the gap must not be covered over but felt – in that sense of nostalgia, of frustration and inadequacy that is most apparent in artists but which also plagues anyone who will let it. The process by which the mere experience of the existence of a gap becomes the decision to 'enter' it is another matter, and not one that I propose to discuss here, but faith is what happens when people don't just feel the gap but jump into it, and a new life is born. According to the kind of conceptual frame the gap has – religious, moral, political, artistic, personal-emotional or intellectual – the event will be differently expressed, that is it will be a break through stated in those particular terms. But the gap is the same kind of thing in every case.

The existence of this gap in the moral sphere has been brilliantly exposed by Brian Wicker in an article in *Commonweal* called 'Law, Love and Politics' (Nov. 25, 1966). He quotes Conrad's 'Lord Jim' to show examples of totally contrasted attitudes to morality: 'firstly, that men are ineradicably social, that it is only in social relationships that men can exist at all, and come to any maturity. And the structure of any society must rest upon the acceptance of a code which is not just a rule of thumb, but an unimpeachable fiat which addresses itself imperiously to every man'. Terry Eagleton agrees: 'Human beings live by actively interiorising rules, codes, conventions: we eat, sleep, see, love, think, die according to rules, codes which make sense of our experience and which make that experience humanly possible. A culture is such an active interiorisation of rules, by a whole people, in a way which makes communication and identity possible'. Brian Wicker goes on: 'But secondly Conrad insists that society is necessarily *criminal*, in that it cannot help exacting from individuals an obedience they cannot possibly give without destroying themselves. To try to give obedience to that extent is, of course, to abandon the very thing that society exists to promote – a livable human life. There is thus a contradiction at the heart of human existence that cannot be overcome completely'.

Later in the article is this passage: 'Legalism asserts a consistent moral universe ruled by "Law", situation ethics, a consistent moral universe ruled by "love".' The former is what Terry Eagleton wants: 'Christians are not virtuous by rejecting rules and codes . . . but by coming to act spontaneously in accordance with them, by appropriating them as the structure of the self; this is what is meant by life in the spirit, life within the creative and restraining definitions of Christ's body'. Truly, a consistent moral universe. And here is Kenneth Barnes, reviewing the same book, and approving of it for all the wrong reasons. (I infinitely prefer Terry Eagleton's strictures to the eulogy in *Search* in which Mr Barnes imagines that he is paying

me a compliment by implying that I am only superficially a Catholic) :
'We may oscillate between the Law and the Spirit . . . but we
cannot make an honest judgement as if we were in both places at
the same time – in the box and out of it. When we are freed from the
Law we are 'free' from it, at this point its kind of judgement becomes
irrelevant. Otherwise the freedom is a hoax and we are talking
absurdities'. He quotes Werner Pelz as saying that nothing has
wrought more havoc in western history than man's obsession with
moral judgements. They lead to 'ultimate frustration, abdication of
all genuine response and responsibility, misdirection of our best
energies'. Mr Barne's moral universe is consistent, too. He has a
scientific approach (his word – not all scientists feel like this) and
cannot tolerate paradox, especially the moral paradox which can
lead an orthodox Christian ('orthodox' is his word, too, and he
means it to be insulting) to describe a meaningful sexual relation-
ship 'outside the Law' as *good but wrong*. This phrase seems to me a
true way of expressing the felt gap, but Mr Barnes *must* have con-
sistency. So must Terry Eagleton. Brian Wicker on the other hand,
suggests that 'we must assert a paradoxical, or inconsistent moral
universe; that is, a world in which the irreducible gap between
"law" and "love" is explicitly recognised as a part of the moral
landscape. To suggest that, in a pinch, one has to take precedence
over the other is just to eliminate the real tension that lies at the
heart of morality . . . For it is at the point of tension between "law"
and "love" that God's power – the power to reconcile justice and
mercy – comes in'. Precisely. When the passion for tidiness eliminates
the gap there is no God. Not because God is absent from the tidy
world that frames the gap, but because we only become aware of –
'alive to' – the presence of God in all of life when we have had the
courage to jump into the gap where the 'consistent universe' breaks
down into inconsistency – what Kenneth Barnes calls 'absurdities'.
It *is* absurd and the 'theatre of the absurd' is in fact one very clear
delineation of the gap as it is felt nowadays, which is why people are
either excited or disgusted by it, but seldom indifferent. As Brian
Wicker says: 'Real moral dilemmas are not cases to be analysed but
agonies to be lived through. The living of these agonies, and the
survival of them, *is* the moral history of mankind. And since . . .
moral dilemmas have a sociological aspect, because they concern the
gap between "law" and "love" as it is incarnated at a particular
moment and at a particular place, morality has to do with the history
of human social structures, that is with our *political* history'.

This is the point at which what I was trying to discover (however
inadequately) in my book *does* have a relevance to social structures,
because it is about the gap which Terry Eagleton can only recognise
as dualisms – 'law against spontaneity, politics against the individual,
flesh against spirit'. These are not dualisms, they are the delineation
of the gap that makes life possible. It was this gap – 'the living of these

agonies' – that brought radicalism to birth when the enlightenment had failed to fulfil its eschatological promise. It was too consistent – and the reaction to it was *romantic*: that is, inconsistent, absurd.

It is usual for the immediate inheritors of a great cultural break-through to be incapable of conceiving the world in any other terms. They have, commonly, no consciousness of the gap, no feeling of impending frustration, or of hopeless nostalgia. They refuse to consider anything that casts doubt on the consistency of the universe. Why?

Briefly, I think this is because the new life that comes to birth in such a break-through is eschatological in character. It really is. It is an awareness of the life of faith, the life of the Kingdom, and the knowledge of this (which is a valid theological insight) is a knowledge of a universe which *is* consistent. Naturally, then, anything that casts doubt on the consistency of what is known casts doubt on its truth, as a revelation of life. And that is intolerable.

In an article which has relied heavily on quotation, I would like to refer finally to Brian Wicker's article in the January '67 issue of *New Blackfriars*. The whole article seems to me to show up very clearly where the philosophy of the Catholic Left breaks down – which is precisely where it can find its way forward, provided it can be brought to recognise the breakdown, because this gap is the growing point, the point of incarnation. Two sentences sum it up: 'the political task is not to enable us to cross the gaps, but so to clarify and rectify human organisation that we can better locate and identify the exact nature of the gaps which we can only cross by the power of God. To do this is certainly to commit oneself to a progressive, indeed revolutionary kind of political action. But politics still cannot deliver the goods we need'. Theologically, this is probably the most illuminating thing anyone has said about politics for a long time. Radicalism was born out of the gap, that is why it can inspire an eschatological enthusiasm. But eschatology always tends to become religious, because we *need* consistency, the binding and supporting power of a system. Even Laing recognises that, but he has helped people to realise that we live also by the absurd, and the dreadful. But when an eschatology, like the radical one, becomes totally religious, and loses sight of the gap that gave it birth, then it becomes more rigidly intolerant and blind than the tired-out consistencies that gave way to it. It is a cliché that reformers become the worst persecutors. Last generation's radicals become next generation's conservatives – of radical*ism*. This is why. The cure for this is humility, which means recognising that gap, and faith, which means jumping into it, and love, which is born of that dying.