

The New Left: Christians and Agnostics

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by Brian Wicker

The comments by Martin Green in the October *New Blackfriars* editorial, Raymond Williams's article (November) and the appearance of Terry Eagleton's book¹ mark, perhaps, a new stage in the debate about the 'catholic left'. Beyond the mud-slinging and the taking to the ramparts (useful though such antics have been recently in helping to publicise the importance of the catholic left as a distinctive movement); and also beyond the appeal to history (Donald Nicholl in the *Clergy Review*, August 1966) and to received notions of church structure (Michael Dummett in *New Blackfriars*, December 1965) we now come to a fundamental problem. The definition of this problem is difficult, and can be approached from a number of points of view. But I think the basic question the catholic left has to answer is this: is the commitment to a political order, the concern with the restructuring of the human community, part of a homogeneous continuum which will simply inaugurate the kingdom of God as its final term, or is it rather a means by which the essentially gratuitous character of the kingdom can be most clearly revealed by having the obscuring clutter of merely human obstacles removed?

Perhaps I may begin a review of Mr Eagleton's book by registering one note of disagreement with Martin Green. This is that I feel he is trying to evade a problem, when he speaks of the need to 'attune' ourselves to war and peace simultaneously. This attunement, he seems to suggest, is the means by which we can overcome the corrupting spiritual division between a commitment to war upon society as we know it in the name of some ultimately better world, and a contentment with its benefits as we experience them, in the comforts of middle-class British affluence here and now. The possibility of such corruption I accept: but that there can be an 'attunement' which will remove it I do not. 'Attunement' suggests a purely subjective re-adjustment of myself towards the world: but this is neither possible nor adequate. If Green's analysis is correct, then the idea that there can be a kind of inner harmony in my soul between my war on society and my contentment with its provisional benefits is false. Whether the conflict I have to undergo is between my secret rebellion and my public resignation, or between two aspects of my inner life matters little. What does matter is that the conflict cannot be resolved, and that as long as this is so – and perhaps this means, for all of us, a

¹*The New Left Church* by Terence Eagleton, Sheed and Ward, 9s. 6d.

lifetime – the important point of emphasis is the conflict itself. The problem then resolves itself into the question of how to live with, survive and make creative the conflict which I cannot in any case evade. I am destined to be torn between conflicting ideals and objectives. The only release from that conflict, short of death, is through some kind of cowardice, some settling for a shabby compromise, or through some culpable insensitivity to the agony of the situation. It is this ‘sword’ that Christ brings into the world; and it is this which has to be endured and converted somehow into ‘peace’.

One thing that this analysis shows is that ‘peace’ in the Christian sense is not the absence of conflict but rather co-existence between intrinsically warring opposites. The ideal of harmony is a dangerous illusion, and a distraction when thought of as something to be pursued. Peaceful co-existence is not only the most that can be hoped for: it is the one really difficult task. Talk about peace in some more absolute sense than this is dangerous: it shifts the ground of the discussion from the human reality of conflict to some unreal genial dream of a consensus to differ about values and philosophies. (As I noted recently in reviewing H. J. Blackham’s *Religion in a Modern Society*, it is important to see – as, to his credit, Blackham does at the end of his book – that the ‘open society’ in the sense of a society in which there is already established an *agreement to differ* on fundamentals is an illusion. It is just such agreement that is beyond reach. Talk of the open society in that sense is therefore dangerous. We have to live in a world in which there is no agreement even to differ about fundamentals.)

Given that the open society in this sense is a delusion, of a dangerous kind, the pursuit of peaceful co-existence – that is the pursuit of a way of living with conflict – becomes the central political task. It is here that the themes discussed by Eagleton and Green come together. For Green’s concept of a simultaneous ‘attunement’ to war and peace seems to imply a privacy of attitude, a subjective change of stance irrespective of the objective world, that it is one purpose of Mr Eagleton’s book to attack as impossible and irresponsible. Eagleton wants to insist that such ‘attunement’ must always be part of a dialectical engagement with the world as other, a creative way of changing the world as well as an adequate way of responding to it. The inadequacy of Green’s analysis is that it is too passive, takes too little account of the dialogue with the world that *any* perception of things involves. Perception is something I do, and the way I perceive is partly a function of the media I have at my disposal – the concepts and language that I have at my command, the received ideas and my own cultural position. But, while accepting all this as a valid criticism of a too subjective analysis, some questions still remain to worry me as I work through the various topics in which Eagleton’s own thought is presented.

Philosophically Eagleton’s book is based on three central insights,

drawn from three different sources: a Wittgensteinian notion of language, a phenomenological analysis of how we perceive and engage with the external world, and a marxist analysis of contemporary social structures. These themes are woven together in a number of ways, in discussions of the relations of literature and politics, sacramental symbolism and linguistic symbolism, the reification of human relations and of ecclesiological relations, etc. Important and interesting insights are scattered liberally throughout the book, as also are some illuminating literary analyses, especially of modern poetry. These three foundations constitute, it might be said, the distinctive 'catholic left' platform – a platform different in certain respects both from that of the traditional catholic intellectual framework and from that of the 'new left' itself. In particular the relating of Wittgenstein to the other two elements is an important contribution not hitherto made by other leftward thinkers with any special force. The emphasis on sacramental communication, which is the basic *raison d'être* of this insistence on Wittgenstein's concepts of language, is perhaps the source of this special contribution.

Yet I feel – as one who has spent some time pondering this collocation of influences – a need to raise some questions. These take on a special significance in the light of Raymond Williams's article.² One may put them in terms of each of the philosophers in turn. With regard to the Wittgensteinian element, I want to know how the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* – a Wittgenstein by no means wholly obscured or repudiated in the later writings – is to be fitted into the picture. As Cornelius Ernst said, in a very important article in *Blackfriars* (July/August 1963), there is a sense in which there is a place for some notion of a transcendent in the *Tractatus* which is lacking in the *Investigations*. But the price of having this transcendence is the admission of a more or less total solipsism. Solipsism, the *Tractatus* says, is correct though it cannot be stated. This solipsism is obviously incompatible with the notion of the church, a community living in a shared world. Yet if the fact of community is a valid objection to accepting the *Tractatus* doctrine, the radical refusal to admit anything but linguistic 'puzzles' as the legitimate subject for philosophical investigation is equally unsatisfactory. If we are to use Wittgenstein we cannot shirk these difficulties. It seems to me that we have to recognise that there is somehow a limit to what can be articulated, as the *Tractatus* admits, and that this 'mysticism' is important. I am not sure that Eagleton fully recognises this. He sees, truly, that language is our way of belonging together, with all that this implies theologically. But that language can also be a barrier to finally belonging together he does not allow – yet it is, I think, a complementary truth. And this is important, for it might seem to let in a loophole for the liberal individualist and his claim to

²'New Left Catholics,' *New Blackfriars*, November 1966.

contract out of community at some critical point. Wittgenstein is not quite as simple a thinker to use as, perhaps, this book suggests.

Secondly, with regard to phenomenology a similar point can be made. The value of phenomenological insights into the dialogue that is our perceptual experience of the world is central, and very well brought out, both in the literary analysis of the chapter on 'Poetry, Objects and Politics' and in the section dealing with alienation. But the limit that this kind of philosophical analysis is up against is not quite explicitly recognised. Merleau-Ponty's insistence that 'the most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction' is not shared here. The fact, for instance, that in the very act of denying the 'ghost in the machine' view of man one has to use, as if they *were* really separable, the concepts 'ghost' and 'machine', points to the impossibility of a complete reduction of the world to intellectual transparency. However hard we try to insist on the unity of man, we have to do so in dualistic terms if we are to say anything at all. Eagleton sees that 'our seeing is controlled by our language, that language can shape (and confuse) our perception of reality' (p. 82). But that 'can' seems to suggest the existence of some alternative world in which it need not. No doubt it is true that in a capitalist world, the language will predispose us to think in capitalist terms, and this is something that has to be fought. But to establish a socialist society, with a socialist language, is not to eliminate the basic dualism that we have to *use* in order to deny its own final validity, but to pin-point accurately, and without mystification, the exact place at which language cannot but lead us to a barrier that we cannot pass. The political task is to remove as far as possible the unnecessary barriers to the transparency of experience, in order to reveal the opacity that only God's power can disperse.

Thirdly, the marxist emphasis on the community as the setting within which I alone can achieve my own being is duly given, but some limitations – which I suspect Marx himself would not deny – are surely necessary. We are told that what is needed for the ending of the self-alienation of the individual is 'the elimination of the condition in which men can be objects, tools, to each other' (p. 165). But the question is whether, in purely human terms, such a complete elimination is possible. Is it not an intrinsic part of the human situation that we cannot wholly eliminate ourselves as objects in the eyes of others? The 'tension between the way (a person) is used within another's project, as an object, and his own sense of personal value, as subject, is precisely the tension we have already described as the condition of self-alienation' (p. 165). All right: but a certain element of such alienation is necessary for our existence as incarnate beings. The schizophrenic, whose self as subject and self as object have more or less completely fallen apart from each other is, of course, mad: but (as Laing himself insists) madness is a relative thing, and to be wholly 'sane' is no more possible than to be wholly

mad. A certain latent schizophrenia is inevitable, and the tension it involves is the very tension we have to live with as beings who are not, and cannot be, wholly transparent to ourselves. If we were, we would not be recognisable to other people as being like them, members of a shared world, perceptible objects.

Now I have no doubt that, theoretically, Eagleton would admit all this. Indeed he seems at times to do so explicitly. But the important thing is the relation of these limits of articulation to the political thesis. For it seems to me that the limits indicate to us points at which the continuum between human organisation and the kingdom of God is broken. It is not that the breaks are logical contradictions (that is, nothings). They are rather limits which we cannot cross in terms of our present conceptual experience. To say that they cannot be crossed in any possible experience would be simply atheism – the affirmation that human organisation is all there is. To say that they might be crossed by the power of God seems to me to be the most relevant notion of God that we can arrive at for the moment. 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 all the goods we need.

It is here, I suppose, that the difference has to emerge between a christian and an agnostic socialism. To the socialist for whom the political task, taken in its broadest sense, is everything, such insistence on the limit to what human organisation can achieve will appear to be a static philosophical retreat from the ongoing critique of society. To the christian, on the other hand, the agnostic's readiness to sympathise with a christian socialism only as long as this philosophical perspective is kept in abeyance is equally a static retreat – that is to say, a taking up of a *position* from which the theological perspective is already excluded in advance, either by a deliberate and conscious turning away, or by a more or less pervasive absence of interest. If the christian perspective seems ultimately to be a matter of verbalising away a genuine political engagement with real social issues, the agnostic exclusion of the central question of the *truth* of the theological perspective, and the attempt to claim agnostic socialism as an essentially separate, parallel critique, seems to be an evasion of an equally important kind. I don't think that *The New Left Church* quite faces this dilemma. If there is a way round it I should be glad: but until someone shows it to me I must remain on the christian side of the divide. I do not think that to say this is necessarily to 'incapsulate' and 'appropriate' an active critique in other terms, as Raymond Williams fears³, though I understand him

³art. cit. reviewing *Catholics and the Left* and *Culture and Theology*.

when he has doubts about Catholics jumping on the new left bandwagon and filling their books with new left quotations. One had expected such a criticism long ago. But I cannot agree with Williams' assumption that the philosophical bases of the argument ought not to be discussed – as though the conceptual analysis of the terms must undermine the predetermined commitment. I suppose that it might – though I see no reason for thinking so at present. What I cannot accept is that we should not look into these questions, but should merely acknowledge that they are 'profound' and then pass on. The tension of the world we live in is, in one respect, definable as that between the need for commitment and the need for argument. It is not enough to rest with the imprecisions of an 'emphasis' or a 'slant' revealed by some particular kind of sensibility or insensibility. These are important, undeniably. But if christianity is being allowed only as an emphasis, or gloss upon a critique already formulated in 'essentially separate' terms, then Christ is being *used* – in an objectionable way – by being himself appropriated and incapsulated for the purposes of another kind of 'specialised argument'. It seems to me that when Raymond Williams welcomes a christian emphasis for its ability to talk of loving relationships without embarrassment he is doing just this. Furthermore it indicates the fact that, in so far as the agnostic critique tries to remain essentially separate, it finds itself unable to speak about something which it clearly feels to be central to the whole issue. Can it then be so separate? This is why we cannot do without *arguments*: for through arguments, which lead to conclusions rather than mere emphases, it is possible to lay bare, and make vulnerable the static assumptions that otherwise stay concealed.

Thus it is Williams' hostility to argument that I find disquieting. For as long as the christian socialist critique remains only an emphasis, or gloss, or an essentially separate, parallel train of thought it can be comfortably accommodated. But once it becomes an argument, and so begins to compete, and to demand analysis and verification, this accommodation ceases to be possible. This is why prolonged enquiry must be denied. That *Culture and Theology*⁴ is not, essentially a 'Slant' book, but is an argument primarily directed to a different kind of opponent – namely the theologians who, as it seems to me, are liable to sell the pass in the other direction – doesn't really matter. That its argument fails to cohere for so intelligent a reader is, obviously, my failure. But would *any* argument for a critique in fully christian terms be allowed? – anything that went beyond the terms of a mere emphasis?

My point really comes down to what I said at the beginning: that we have to live in a world where there is no agreement, not even an agreement to differ about fundamentals. We are both, it seems

⁴Brian Wicker, Sheed and Ward, 1966.

to me, engaged in our own 'specialised arguments'. I see no reason for thinking Williams's argument any less specialised or personal than my own. That it is an *argument* – of an unquestionably philosophical kind (and, in my opinion, a very helpful one) – is evident from the first part of *The Long Revolution*. One can see the half-remembered teachers lurking on every page. But, in the face of the need to join forces in 'immediate recognitions, commitments, actions' we clearly have to admit that we cannot wait for the conclusions of arguments before we do anything together. It is this tension that arises from the equal and opposite demands for commitment and argument that has to be lived through, without any concessions by way of 'attunement'. To try to lower this tension by smoothing away either demand is, to my mind, an erosion of humanity. I do not see any way of avoiding it, and I don't think I would want to try.

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