

by Terry Eagleton

Rosemary Haughton's latest book¹ is an interesting and original attempt to connect literary, psychological, personal and Christian insight in a way which illuminates the meaning of being human for a Christian and at the same time creates common ground between Christian and non-believer. As such it is a significant achievement: the explorations of love, freedom, maturity, community are done with a sensitivity and intelligence which comes from a blending of common experience, in the psychology of personal relationship, with a sense of Christianity as a depth within this common knowledge. There are excellent individual accounts of the relation of childhood attitudes to the gospel, of the experience of passion and community and communication, and these add up to a book which represents the most deeply creative point in one important contemporary Christian tradition – the tradition of liberal, open, personal concern with the concretely human in actual relationships.

To say this is also to indicate, negatively, the book's weakness. For the liberal tradition is not the only one in modern Christianity and when it stands alone, as it does here, it demonstrates at once its strengths and failures, as an account of 'the human'. It is dangerous to quarrel with a writer's self-imposed limitations, and yet in a book which treats of the 'human' these can be indicative: the focus, very firmly, is on the personal, psychological, the immediately known and experienced, not on history, politics, institution, society, structure. Mrs Haughton clearly can't include everything, and yet despite this the bias is symptomatic of the tradition she writes in: the meaning of the human, the book implicitly suggests, is precisely in this deeper entry into an understanding of felt relationship; the wider contemporary struggles to assert the 'human', in collective political action, in the common re-making of history, in a range of social commitments, which arguably represent for us now, at this point, the shape which the affirmation of humanity is crucially taking in world society, are not integrated into the focus at all. The question isn't whether these commitments, to the personal and the political, can be opposed – we can feel them this way in Wilson's Britain, in a way which doesn't make sense in South Vietnam – but how far this sensitive and honest analysis of the 'personal' can work even on its own terms, when the wider (and arguably deeper) connections of this immediate focus are so strictly excluded. Because of this *a priori* exclusion, Mrs Haughton

¹On *Trying to be Human*; Rosemary Haughton; Geoffrey Chapman, 25s.

can write of the political radicalism of the early Romantics in England – a force which shook English society and established one of the central creative traditions of recent English history – as ‘a mild outlet’ (95); she can also interpret a passage from Erich Fromm as a criticism of ‘industrial’, rather than industrial *capitalist* society (129), blurring over a major distinction.

These are large, and yet also in one sense marginal reservations: the fact remains that the book does not try to talk about political society, and while the significance of this has to be noticed, the argument has also to be taken on its own terms. Yet even in its own terms, such a resolutely ‘liberal’ interpretation of Christianity and ‘the human’ has important defects. The Christian life is characterised in Chapter 1 (‘Seek and You Shall Find’) as a search, an exploration: ‘All that (Christ) ever asked of a man was that he should be honest with himself, willing to see and hear with his heart as well as his eyes . . . all that is required of a man to enter the kingdom of Heaven (is) an open heart and a mind as far as possible detached from prejudice . . .’ (46). These, again, are the liberal imperatives: the echoes of Mill, Arnold, Forster, Leavis, are clear; self-honesty, openness, exploration, take priority over commitment, formulation, affirmed truth, even action (‘Charles de Foucauld, patiently saying Mass in the Sahara, made no attempt at actual achievement but blazed a trail for many’ (49).) Christianity is indeed exploration, but like radical politics it unites this openness with a closedness: it has a *case*, an orientation, a commitment, it excludes, rejects, criticises, dogmatises, maybe kills. The liberal, unending, openness, objectified to a *goal* – a dogma – by an English liberal tradition which could afford the luxury of a ‘free play of the mind’ precisely because of its isolation from the real and crucial struggles, is surely no more satisfying *in itself* than the closed and killing dogmatism of the English Communist Party. Christians explore, they have a history, but also a set of images shaping and orienting that history, a language which like any language is open *and* closed, creative because defined.

The second, major defect of Christian liberalism is an option for the inward against the external, the personal against society, individual passion against grey social ‘routine’, settled and established institution. The ‘external’ world – flesh, law, code, convention, politics, institution – is merely a mechanism, a necessary aid to the full and free development of an ‘authentic’ inward life which can never quite be reconciled to social forms. In Christian terms, this dualism leads to an impoverishing of the idea of sacrament, of spirit held, shaped, contained and articulated by material reality, in inseparable fusion: ‘Exterior expressions of this (spiritual) contact . . . are only ways of making this ‘spiritual’ encounter easier to apprehend.’ (67). We ‘need’ symbols, ‘external’ actions, rules, laws, politics, as scaffolding for the spirit; the fact that these are not scaffolding, but the *structure* of the spirit, the ways in which human life becomes real and formulable,

able to be communicated, is then blurred over. Authentic human relationship 'is not just a matter of custom, or of utility in a political or physical sense, but is of the essence of being human' (92): but what are custom, politics, the body, properly understood, if not the *language* of spirit, the articulate modes and symbols from which spirit is inseparable? The force of passion breaks through 'the protective (and necessary) layers of custom and habitual modes of thought and behaviour' (105): yes, but it breaks them, not into individual realities opposed to these, but into new forms of social communication, new institutions, new habits and modes, and can be real only when this is so. Mrs Haughton's implication is that society is almost by definition inauthentic: the swaddling layers of essential, utilitarian habits within which spirit grows. 'The flesh' comes to be used as an image, not of *evil*, but of these routines themselves, out of which the spirit struggles for freedom: 'The demands of the flesh are legitimate and necessary, by and with it man has managed to exist and develop through the centuries. But when the spirit makes its demands they are paramount' (140). The liberal archetype is then the prophet, the man whose individualist drive opposes all established social modes; the line between opposing a *particular* society, and setting up 'authentic self' and *any* society in a necessary tension, is then easily crossed. 'Flesh' is necessary, as the ordinary routine mechanism in which we have, personally and politically, to live: 'The organisation of community living is the expression of the fact that we do live in the flesh, whether we like it or not, and must take it into account.' (115). What Christianity and radical politics believe, in contrast to liberal or utilitarian theories of society, is that the glorification of the spirit happens through a revolution of the flesh, a transforming of it into the authentic language of humanity. Mrs Haughton believes that 'We accept and use the flesh in life as the only means of liberating the spirit' (162): we are saddled with it, effectively, and must do what we can to prevent routine and institution – 'custom, ethical or moral' (117) – from interfering with the full drive of an authenticity which springs from beyond or below society, from the depths of the eternal self: it is 'prudent' to use the flesh, since we have no alternative (154).

The result is a deep Cartesian dualism. 'Authenticity starts . . . with a recognition of the irrelevance to the search for freedom of all one's external actions, however good or noble' (147) . . . 'The kind of behaviour which makes us feel of a person that he or she is really good is behaviour to which external standards or personal emotional satisfaction are clearly irrelevant.' (146) . . . 'The reality (of love) . . . is . . . our "being", and therefore not identifiable by us from the outside'. (146). This is the situation-ethics of the Bishop of Woolwich: 'external' behaviour, action, rule, interpretation, are merely superficial: the 'real' love, being, identity, freedom, lie inside, beyond the cultural negotiations into which we enter, the actual habits of communication we enact. The result is a political alienation: 'principles which are purely

political or social are concerned solely with the external behaviour of human beings' (140). What, in this context, is a 'purely' political consideration? Politics, the implication runs, deals with the outside aspects of humanity, the personal-authentic-psychological with the real inwardness. Isn't political and social behaviour as inward, properly understood, as inward behaviour is public?

Christian freedom is acknowledged as within the Law (143), yet the Law is, finally, part and parcel of the 'external' arrangements which protect (and possibly stifle) the free spirit. 'The Law means . . . the total public relevance of a "way of life" – the external rules, customs, laws and standards of behaviour that control behaviour from the outside and determine how people think of themselves.' (139). 'From the outside': culture – 'a way of life' – is a set of external restraints and regulations, not the terms within which consciousness moves and knows itself but the social machine which imposes itself from beyond the authentic self. 'Conformity with the law means the abdication of personal responsibility' (141): it is necessary, but not *authentic*, as 'Moral codes, ethical systems, the phenomenon known as civilisation, may not be authentic in the sense that they spring directly from the real self, but they are necessary'. (118). Again, it is essential to affirm the radical imperative, against the liberal dualism: that in Christ the law has been interiorised as the structure of personal, free action, not merely as 'an educational tool' (144).; that human societies are not by definition inauthentic – if they are, we try to change them – but the language, the set of symbols, in which alone discussion of the 'spirit', of free and authentic individuality, can make sense. 'Morality . . . (is) there to act as checks and safeguards to the developing relationships . . .' (120): but morality, as a Christian understands it, is surely not this external system – as politics is not an external system; it *is*, simply, the language of authentic humanity, the content and atmosphere of the human.

The one point in the book where Mrs Haughton really seems to understand this is in the following, excellent passage: ' . . . it is essential for art students to master the rules of perspective. Once these rules are thoroughly understood they become part of the way of seeing and feeling and are no longer necessary in themselves, except for the purpose of handing on knowledge'. (123). I know of few more incisive short descriptions of the actual process of human culture than this, although it seems to me that the emphasis here runs counter to the whole assumption of the book. 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. Christians are virtuous not by rejecting rules and codes, as essential scaffolding for the immature personality, 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. When rules are set against authenticity, a whole set of dualisms follow: law against spontaneity, politics against the individual, flesh against spirit. The actual process of a human culture – what Mrs Haughton calls a 'meaning-pattern' – becomes merely surface-reality, like clothing: '... underneath the clothing is the naked body, and underneath the meaning-pattern is the real person.' (182). The attempt is then to break through the meaning-pattern, to 'come to grips with the fact of (one's) unadorned physical self' (182), as though one could know that self at all outside the structure of meanings which renders it intelligible. In this situation, the close, personal community – the liturgy – can be explored and described with an intelligence which stops short at the facts of complex, institutionalised society, of human culture. Until this link can be creatively made, the liberal tradition will be unable to surpass itself into a genuine radicalism.

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