

The Roots of Radicalism

by Pascal Lefebure O.P.

Terry Eagleton's article, *The Limits of Liberalism*, in the April number of *New Blackfriars* is as important as it is absorbing. In it he acknowledges that Mrs Rosemary's Haughton's book, *On Trying to be Human*, 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' (p. 353), and he seeks to bring it into contact with another 'important contemporary Christian tradition', the radical one, which has been articulating itself in a series of articles in *New Blackfriars* but which was risking becoming closed in on itself. More significantly still it promises to bring the debate between these two traditions, the liberal and the radical, *to issue* beyond the rhetoric of mere labelling, so enabling and compelling us to choose between them. The importance of the article to all those engaged in the debate and concerned with the exigencies of contemporary Christian commitment is therefore clear.

Terry Eagleton's contention is that Mrs Haughton's affirmation and exploration of 'the meaning of being human for a Christian' is gravely deficient in that it systematically excludes 'wider (and arguably deeper) connections of this immediate focus' (p. 353). He devotes the bulk of his article to criticizing Mrs Haughton for attributing a distorted primacy to the spirit, the inward, the personal, with a consequential devaluation of the flesh, the external, the social and the political, and this on account of a misconception of the relationship between the two. According to Terry Eagleton, because she does not realize that on a true conception the body, the external, the social, institutional and political are the *language* of the spirit, the inward, the individual, interiority made flesh one might say, her analysis of the personal and human does not work even in its own terms. In the second place, Terry Eagleton maintains that the vision of what it is to be human for a Christian has a much wider focus than Mrs Haughton allows: 'Mrs Haughton clearly can't include everything, and yet despite this the bias is symptomatic of the tradition she writes in . . . ; 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' (p. 353). From which there seems to emerge clearly the true

difference and the critical issue between the liberal and the radical theories and traditions: whereas for the liberal change must begin where true reality and authenticity lies, within, for the radical it is the body, the external, the social, the political that are the medium and instrument of the recovery of the spirit: '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' (p. 355).

The argument is forceful, the issue seems clear, and the option now unavoidable. It is, however, in the first place, not quite clear from Terry Eagleton's article whether we are supposed to see his two component arguments as strictly related, so that it is *because* of Mrs Haughton's single misconception as to the relationship of spirit and body that there follows the double conclusion of the deficiency of her analysis in its own terms, and *also* the necessity of a larger focus. Or, put the other way round, is it because of an allegedly truer conception of the relationship between spirit and body, inward and external, that we must both criticize Mrs Haughton's view *and* accept the alternative programme? If the wider radical programme does indeed depend on the exact analysis of the relationship between spirit and body, inward and external, etc., then a serious weakness of this analysis means that the radical perspective and programme is put in question *pro tanto*. And since what I wish to maintain is that there is in Terry Eagleton's argument as important an ambiguity and deficiency as the one he alleges to exist in Mrs Haughton's, there are two principal questions to be discussed immediately; firstly, as to the adequacy of Terry Eagleton's own account of the relationship between spirit and body, inward and external, etc., and, secondly, as to the consequent situation of the radical theory and programme.

The first question, then, is whether the account of the relationship between spirit and body, inward and external, etc. which Terry Eagleton offers us as an alternative to Mrs Haughton's is in its own turn adequate. I myself find three difficulties with it. In the first place, if it is 'through a revolution of the flesh' that 'the glorification of the spirit happens', then how is one to explain the capacity of some people at least—including, presumably, Terry Eagleton himself—to break through the enmeshing alienations and distortions of society sufficiently at any rate to see them for what they are *before* the revolution has yet occurred? In the second place, in maintaining that a true conception of what it is to be human demands the forging of a bodily, institutional, political medium and language and instrument of the liberation of the spirit of man, Terry Eagleton seems to take it for granted that the process of active 'interiorization' and appropriation will follow of itself from the availability of a worthy bodily medium, language and instrument: 'Human beings live by *actively interiorizing* rules, codes, conventions' (p. 356); 'A

culture is such an *active interiorization* of rules, by a whole people . . . (p. 356); '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' (pp. 356-357; italics mine). But what of the possibility of a failure of such activity of interiorization, of the half-dead, mechanical, routine, performance of even the best material, a possibility whose realization is surely attested in experience? In other words, where my first difficulty arises from the experience of the creative and bursting vitality of the spirit, my second one arises from the experience of the equally possible inertness of the spirit. And both point to a break in the continuum of flesh and spirit and to the paramountcy of the spirit in some sense, the determination of the nature of which is of the essence of my third and principal difficulty. For to my mind Terry Eagleton makes a simple logical mistake: Because the external *can* be, and in principle should undoubtedly be, the language or *expression* (to use a key term from Merleau-Ponty, which Terry Eagleton does not actually use in this article but which is surely sub-jacent) of the inward, the flesh of the spirit, law of life, the political of the personal, it does not necessarily follow that it always *is* so related, and still less that it is through a renewal of the external, the political, etc. that the inward, the spirit is liberated. In other words, Terry Eagleton seems to me to confuse the actual with the ideal and consequently the nature of the relationship between flesh and spirit, a confusion that is registered in certain critical ambiguities of language where he blurs the relationship between the prescriptive and the descriptive: 'but what are custom, politics, the body, *properly understood*, if not the language of the spirit, the articulate modes and symbols from which spirit is inseparable' (p. 355); 'a *transforming* of it into the authentic language of humanity' (p. 355); 'Isn't political and social behaviour as inward, *properly understood*, as inward behaviour is public?' (p. 356); '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' (p. 356); 'I know of few more incisive short descriptions of the actual *process* of human culture than this' (p. 356) (italics mine). It is surely this break of continuum, *de facto*, between flesh and spirit that not only is the presupposition and starting-point of Mrs Haughton's analysis but which alone gives point and impetus to Terry Eagleton's revolutionary prescription and programme. In fact we might define and locate original sin and alienation in terms of this gap, discrepancy or break of continuum between flesh and spirit, between potentiality and achievement, intention and language, impulse and expression, subjectivity and object. In such a perspective Marx's 'objective' man, 'man in this entire richness of his being . . . the rich man *profoundly endowed with all the senses*' (*Economic and Philosophic*

Manuscripts of 1844, at pp. 155-158, 109), could then be seen as the man precisely who has achieved the expression of the inward in the external, of his authentic self in body, behaviour, work and social relationships. The distinction between the actual and the ideal, however, is critical, and, with it, the recognition that the determination of the relationship between the two terms of the continuum, the flesh and the spirit, the external and the inward, are less certain and clear than Terry Eagleton maintains. We have to take philosophical cognizance of the fact that in the present human condition of alienation and disintegration there is a tendency for what is analytically distinct to become in fact psychologically or socially split. And because of these distortions, splits, dualisms and ambiguities of expression, the only alternative to phenomenological expressionism (if I may be allowed this shorthand phrase) is *not* the Cartesian dualism with which Terry Eagleton charges Mrs Haughton, but a more thorough-going phenomenology.

I have, therefore, so far suggested that Terry Eagleton's criticism of Mrs Haughton's position is itself marred by an important ambiguity and deficiency; and, if I am at all right, then a failure of his argument on this score thereby puts in question the radical theory and programme insofar as, and to the extent that, his own account of the flesh-spirit relationship *is* indeed the justification of this radical programme. This programme may, however, have another justification, for it does not follow that the radical programme loses its justification merely because (and if!) the ground of justification that is apparently supplied crumbles; just as it does not follow that, because the true issue between the liberal and the radical theories turns out not yet to have been exactly formulated after all, there is no issue at all. What I should, however, like to suggest next is that if we start again from the very failure of the analysis so far offered we can bring the discussion a little further forward and move closer to a truer formulation of any issue there may be between the liberal and the radical theories.

Now it is at least quite clear that the crucial question is as to the nature of the relationship between the spirit, the inward, the personal and the flesh, the external, the law, the institutional, social and political. What I have against Terry Eagleton's account is that it is over-simplified. In truth, I would suggest, that relationship is neither simple nor one-way, but rather a dialectical and expanding one, in which the flesh, the external, etc., is indeed subordinate to the spirit, the inward, etc., as Mrs Haughton maintains, and yet at the same time somehow continuous and reciprocally transforming *vis-à-vis* the spirit in the sort of way in which Terry Eagleton maintains. The critical term here seems to be 'interiorization'. Terry Eagleton states a profound and vital theological truth when he says: 'in Christ the law has been interiorized as the structure of personal, free action, not merely as "an educational tool" (144)' (p. 356).

Whether by way of deliberate reference or by the sheer vitality of a renewed Christian experience and insight, he is here surely echoing Aquinas, who in answering the question whether the new law is a written law, states, in terms of exceptional density and deceptive simplicity: ‘. . . Principally, therefore, the new law is the grace of the Holy Spirit itself, which is given to those who are faithful to Christ. . . . The new law however contains certain things that dispose us for the grace of the Holy Spirit and that belong to the use of this grace; and it is about these that Christ’s faithful need to be instructed both *viva voce* and in writing. In this way we must say that principally the new law is an unwritten law, but that secondarily, it is a written law’ (*Summa*, Ia.IIae. q. 106, article 1). Already Aquinas’s use of the terms ‘dispose’ and ‘use’ and ‘instructed’ suggest a significant mitigation of the harshness of the antithesis Terry Eagleton makes between his own ‘structure of personal, free action’, and Mrs Haughton’s ‘educational tool’. It is, however, to my mind the further precision of *principle*—albeit extrapolated from a rather different context—supplied by another doctor of the Church that is most useful to our present discussion: ‘Those learned in country ways tell us that if one writes a word on a whole almond and then puts it back in its shell, packing it back properly, and then planting it like this, all the fruit of the tree that grows from it will turn out to be engraved with the same word. For my part, I have never been able to approve of the method of those who would start a man’s reformation from the outside—with his expression, his clothes, the way he wears his hair. In my opinion one must on the contrary start from within. “Turn to me”, says God, “with all your heart. My child, give me your heart.” For since the heart is the source of actions, they are as it is. . . . Whoever has Jesus-Christ in his heart will soon have him in all his exterior behaviour. That is why I wanted above all to engrave and inscribe the sacred word JESUS on your heart, in the conviction that after this the life that comes out of your heart like an almond-tree out of its nut will produce all its actions, which are its fruits, engraved with the same saving word; and Jesus will live in all that you do as he lives in your heart, and will appear in your eyes, your mouth, your hands—even in your hair—and you will be able to say after St Paul: “I live, yet not I, but Jesus Christ lives in me”. In brief, he who has won the heart of a man has won the whole man. But this heart with which we want to start itself needs to have its exterior behaviour tutored, so that what emerges is instinct not only with godliness but with a great discernment and wisdom.’

This passage, when analysed, seems to me to exhibit a dialectic of great subtlety, and I here use the term dialectic in a rather strict, Hegelian-type sense: Thesis: it is not with the external but with the inward that one must start; Antithesis: but the inward cannot be schooled except through duly discriminated external behaviour; Synthesis: it is in the totality of the external and of social relation-

ships that the inward irradiates and so wholeness is achieved. The terms 'discernment' and 'discriminated' should perhaps be emphasized, as they are in a sentence of Newman's in which he succinctly refers to the same truth: 'Outward acts, done *on principle*, create inward habits' (italics mine). And this is the crux of the matter, for the movement of life here described is not merely circular—from the external to the inward and back again to the external, from the flesh to the spirit and back again to the flesh—but rather spiral-like, and this in a double sense. To break with one way of life and set of external habits and behaviour and relationships is a matter of principle, of change of heart; this cannot, however, usually be carried through and translated in a day and so the re-translation or re-expression is selective but progressively more comprehensive, extending over more and more of a person's potentialities and through wider and deeper relationships, but from the same centre. Thus what is in question is undoubtedly the recovery of man—Marx's 're-integration or return of man to himself, the transcendence of human self-estrangement' (*op. cit.*, pp. 101-102); and what is involved is a dialectical process not only of progressive disaffection and disengagement from, disenchantment with, the 'futile ways inherited from your fathers' (1 Peter 1, v. 18), but also of recommitment and re-expression in new ways, as a result of the stirring of the spirit, the waking jolt of *metanoia*. But this account—which is, surely, a profound and recognizably true analysis of the state and dynamism of the human condition—also quite alters our view of the relationship between Mrs Haughton's analysis and Terry Eagleton's purported alternative. The fact that it is a dynamic or genetic, ascetical account, seeing the Christian experience of being human in terms of growth and expansion, means that we need not, indeed we must not, reject Mrs Haughton's insistence on the paramountcy of the spirit, the inward, the personal, the authentic, *for the sake of* Terry Eagleton's insistence on the external, social, customary, institutional, political, the assertion of the 'human' 'in collective political action, in the common remaking of history, in a range of social commitments' (p. 353)—or *vice-versa*. The two insistences *can* be seen to be complementary—although not without the modification of each by the other nor without the possibility of differences of emphasis according to circumstances, temperament and opportunity—*unless* Terry Eagleton's case and conclusion is accepted as it is here stated, and this to me at least is not proven, as being simpliste. And perhaps Mrs Haughton will allow me to suggest that she is in her own person as it were a symbol of the process in question: it is from the relative obscurity of all that is involved in bringing up a family that her increasingly public activity is emerging, stirring more and more of us to shake out and re-express our ideas, our categories, our relationships, our institutions, and to re-deploy our energies.

The encompassing view of man in society that is suggested by this

analysis seems to be substantially that of the document of Vatican II, *The Church in the Modern World*, Ch. 11, paragraph 25 (ed. Abbot, S.J., pp. 224-225). It is that of an individual growing through a progressive series of lendings and imitations proffered for his interiorization by his parents, his family, his acquaintances and friends and fellows in the widening circles of his relationships, and through which he may also accordingly catch or contract any deformation, distortion, dislocation of consciousness, motive and aim inherent in that society acting as so many extensions, opportunities and objectifications of the seeds of goodness and weakness or evil in his heart, but upon which latter he may in turn react radiantly as his conscience gradually clears and his heart is cleansed as by fire.