

# The Function of Criticism and Politics

by Phil Beisly

When I suggested<sup>1</sup> that the Christian tradition is to be identified primarily with its central ‘works’—the Bible and the liturgy—and that it is something analogous to literary criticism which can most easily make available its meanings and values, I denied that Christianity can be identified with politics. That Christianity has implications which are political, in the fullest sense, needn’t be insisted on in these pages. The nature of any identity, however, is something which still needs to be queried, especially in the light of the simplification of human affairs which it invariably threatens to introduce. It isn’t merely a liberal equivocation which prompts this questioning; an active spirit of criticism demands it, if the values which are invoked aren’t, in the end, to be betrayed. Terry Eagleton’s ‘Faith and Revolution’<sup>2</sup> is a case in point, and since it is explicitly offered as a contribution to the debate about ‘the points of theoretical convergence between Christianity and Marxism’ no better example need be looked for.

Eagleton is particularly concerned to examine the ‘point of divergence’ which appears once this convergence has been established, and he wants to locate the distinguishing characteristics of Christianity without opting either for ‘a merely theoretical divergence’ or for ‘some specifically “Christian” revolutionary practice’:

‘How are we to steer between, on the one hand, an intellectualist reductionism which leaves faith hanging in the air above Christian historical practice, and, on the other hand, an insistence that faith must show up in a distinctive form of *praxis* which runs into the traditional Christian mistake of redundantly duplicating social institutions?’

The reproduction of the theory/praxis pattern, which is central to Eagleton’s argument, is evidence of the dominance of Marxist habits of thought. In my view the acceptance of these habits is bound to frustrate the task that Eagleton has set himself, not only because of the limited usefulness of the theory/praxis pattern, but also because of the underlying attitude to theoretical terms and the trust that is placed in their sufficiency. It must be admitted that despite a customary gesture (‘Christian faith isn’t an intellectualist affair’) Eagleton proceeds in a manner that invests heavily in theory and in the adequacy of his own terminology. What these terms start to manifest sooner or later, like any terms embraced in such a spirit, is an isolation in the face of life. The discussion is soon adrift on its own terminology, cut off from other resource, and it seems to me that a subsequent insistence on the complementary nature of

<sup>1</sup>‘The Function of Criticism and Theology’, *New Blackfriars*, July 1971.

<sup>2</sup>*New Blackfriars*, April 1971.

praxis only gives emphasis to what it hopes to remedy. The offered restorative can itself be defined only in theoretical terms, so the isolation of the theory remains. Marxist theory, kept in this isolation by a faith in its own sufficiency, recreates the world in its own image and calls this *praxis*.

Having endorsed ideas of 'permanent revolution' and 'revolution within the revolution', Eagleton presses nearer to his goal:

'... the distinctive practice of revolutionary Christianity lies in its permanently critical, negative, transcending role within a revolutionary society, its function in symbolizing, and so embodying a permanent drive towards, an ultimate social order (the kingdom of God) transcendent of any political *status quo*. I accept this theory wholly, but not as defining the point of divergence between Christian and Marxist, since its implicit version of the Marxist theory of history is simply naïve. . . . Some more crucial divergence, which arises from the Christian's transcendental perspective yet is at the same time cashable in historical practice, seems to be called for, if we are not to drive an anti-Wittgensteinian wedge between description and behaviour.'

Eagleton sees as distinctive of Christianity a certainty that the kingdom *will* come, a certainty which can make an actual difference in men's historical attempts to bring it about (and those attempts, of course, are a necessary condition of its arrival):

'... the Christian's transcendental perspective . . . does the reverse of detaching him from the practical struggle: it actually intensifies his commitment to it.'

However, the Christian certainty

'cannot issue in a merely indiscriminate readiness to risk destruction in each and every confrontation; the certainty of the final liberation of humanity on the far side of history doesn't, naturally, entail the success of any particular revolutionary project on this side of the kingdom. What that certainty does entail, however, is a readiness on the part of the Christian to sacrifice himself in a revolutionary cause whose outcome seems far from assured. . . .'

This readiness is understood quite literally:

'... what would be extremely useful to any revolutionary movement would be the presence of a number of men who believed that what hinged on the degree of intensity with which they fought was not simply historical liberation for themselves and others, but eternal life.'

To this argument there are more objections than Eagleton is able to foresee. Firstly, the examples which are used, in that they become gradually more overtly revolutionary, stand in a less and less productive relationship to the point of the argument. Measured against our experience they are obviously 'extreme'. This is not to say that they might not occur, but, being possessed of very little concrete reality as they figure in the discussion, they do it less good than Eagleton seems to imagine. We are no clearer about what it is

of which these extreme cases *are* extremes. Nobody is going to argue about these instances of revolutionary struggle, sacrifice, and death, precisely because they are inevitably stereotyped and our reactions are inevitably automatic. When an evocation of martyrdom is coupled with the reflex responses of ideological conventionality, there is little chance of any great insight, and the real middle of the question is avoided.

Secondly, what this series of examples masks is the undermining of what Eagleton had granted earlier: Christianity's 'critical, negative, transcending role'. As summed up earlier, this had suggested a complex presence; but failing to find here the point of divergence, Eagleton subsequently locates it in a version of Christianity which undergoes considerable simplification. 'Its role is to *intensify* common revolutionary practice.' The polarities of theory and praxis now seem stronger than ever, since any critical capacity has been lost sight of. To be critical involves passing judgments and, where necessary, issuing rejections. Eagleton sees no occasion for Marxism to listen to such criticism. He begins by allowing for criticism of *praxis*, but, since *praxis* stands in the intimately subservient relationship to theory that I have mentioned, even this comes to enjoy a critical immunity.<sup>1</sup> Christianity can only 'intensify'. In itself it has nothing to do with intelligence or judgment, or with anything on which Marxist theory has established a monopoly.

We have to revert to Eagleton's failing to find his point of divergence in Christianity's 'critical, negative, transcending role'. I do believe the point of divergence to lie here. This has nothing whatever to do with the Marxist theory of history—and, indeed, the reason for my judgment is that far more than theory is involved. 'Christian faith isn't an intellectualist affair'. Theoretical comprehensiveness is not the only test to be looked for.

If we simply try to imagine what this critical, symbolizing and embodying rôle might look like, the true nature of the divergence becomes clearer. This rôle is a plausible one for Christianity because, having as its centre the creative works to which I have referred, and the convincing grasp of specific experience which they entail, it has the resources that such a rôle demands, the resources that Marxism doesn't possess and doesn't appear to find necessary. Without such resources it is difficult to imagine any critical activity getting off the ground.

What the divergence between Christianity and Marxism amounts to is this: they aren't the same sort of thing. They differ over the status of various types of utterance, the relationship of these to a

<sup>1</sup>My criticism of Marxist theory isn't that it is never acted upon, but that it is acted on exclusively so that any limitations of theory still apply. *Praxis* is not fully itself somehow. I know the relationship between them is meant to be reciprocal but the reality is often different.

whole tradition, and the qualities of response they call into play. It's been my suggestion that the Christian tradition's theoretical understanding relates to the rest of life with more realistic complexity precisely because, in the overall matter of priorities, it counts for less. The theoretical mind doesn't have final control and isn't the sole representative of intelligence. Christianity isn't identical with its theology; its internal organization in these matters is more comparable to what we find in life itself. It is because life is differentiated qualitatively, and because, as a consequence, some areas of response claim priority over others, that the claims of the Christian tradition's works can appear credible; they couldn't seem so if they didn't carry a compelling sense of these things.

Marxism, on the contrary, doesn't possess this sense to a similar degree; the divergence lies there. It presents its perceptions in ways that don't appear to take such considerations into account. At the risk of unfairness, and aiming only at rough justice, one can say that it assigns to the theoretical mind an undue priority, tending in consequence towards an impersonal monotone of response that increasingly loses touch with anything that could serve as a standard whereby its utterances might be judged. It fails to cultivate the free and immediate responses of the individual in which such a standard might be found; it makes criticism increasingly difficult; it encourages a search for theoretical ability which militates against the healthy sense in which a normative standard consists. One can't do full justice to experience if the full range of relevant feelings isn't kept open and if the demand for that relevance isn't cultivated by an independent activity of criticism.

The politically committed may reply that they have heard all this before but that we are still under obligations which call for practical endeavour. We *are* under obligations, but they do not mitigate these critical considerations. The only valid commitment is a commitment to life, and this can never be equated with commitment to any particular theory. If commitment is to stand up in the face of life it will generate a logic of insistence that will move, in the end, beyond the provisional allegiance that even the most useful of theories might deserve. In the face of this seeming dichotomy between criticism and practical involvement, our true obligation is creatively to overcome it, and to remind ourselves that our commitment at its best is always to specific realities that theory, as theory, only summarily appreciates. To overcome this dichotomy, by an achievement of creative criticism, is the beginning of true victory.

When we take up this challenge it will be an advantage if we have in our minds the fact that theory cannot take precedence over individual experiences because it depends on them for its own vindication. That is why a subject like 'Marxism' (or, for that matter, 'Christianity') doesn't instigate a discussion that leads to real

achievements of perception. What does provoke fruitful discussion is the work of Karl Marx, or of whichever individual it is who has something to say.

Recent work on Marx does offer a reminder that we are dealing with the work of an individual man.<sup>1</sup> When we consider it as such the tendencies and mental habits I've suggested appear more clearly. Enthusiasm in recent years for 'the early Marx' points to significant differences inside the body of Marx's work. Both he and Engels had the handicap of a background of the high intellectualism of Hegelian philosophy, and they never fully recovered from the devaluation of individual experience which it encouraged. When Engels, in England, came into proximity with a tradition that might have offered some correction to this, an English conservative tradition of what we would call culture criticism, it was in the person of Carlyle, a writer lacking the centre of gravity necessary to carry conviction. Engels took from Carlyle only what suited his pre-conceived purposes: 'the gospel of Mammonism' and the idea of the cash nexus.

Marx's introduction to the British economists, partly effected through Engels' articles from England, is to my mind the crucial episode in Marx's development. At first, in the 1844 Manuscripts, we find perceptions concerned with such material, but coexisting, as it were, with a quality of freshness and immediacy that disappears in later writings. The values, the positive human qualities in the name of which Marx speaks, are more directly present and don't have to be scientifically accounted for; their presence is strong enough for them to be taken on trust. From *The German Ideology* onwards, however, the systematizing side of Marx's mind gains in its influence.

In studying the British economists Marx was studying the appointed representatives of a growing ethos which other writers, as well as Marx, recognized as constituting the most immediate threat. Others as well as Marx saw as the enemy 'the ingenuous, petty-bourgeois, "home-made", ordinary, limited horizon of the philistine'. But what comes to characterize Marx's response—it is as good as stated in *Das Kapital*—is the determination to defeat this enemy in the enemy's own terms, by turning his own arguments and statistics against him. This is the crucial choice that lies behind Marx's work.

The available evidence suggests that any sense Marx might have had of the inherent dangers in this choice was not strong. Undoubtedly he regarded his task as something that could actually be brought to completion.<sup>2</sup> It is easy, of course, to point out that the proposed body of work was never completed, and that even *Das*

<sup>1</sup>E.g. David McLellan, *Marx's Grundrisse* (London 1971).

<sup>2</sup>In 1851 Marx wrote to Engels, 'In five weeks I will be through with a whole economic shift'.

*Kapital*—merely one part of it—is unfinished. One says this, not to score a point, but to suggest that this method of approach was misconceived. To deal with life by meeting every argument and answering every assertion is to attempt to enclose life by a construct of the theoretical mind. What it actually opens up is a process of modification and qualification that never can be concluded.

It is the discounting of more direct kinds of perception, the kinds central to art which might keep open the sense of relevance I've talked about, which involves Marx in the quest for an illusory theoretical finality. Therefore it is not surprising to find that he lays little stress on the value of art. This will be disputed by admirers of Marx, who will produce a selection of quotations from Marx and a couple of Engels' letters. But this very scarcity of evidence goes to prove my point: a venture as ambitious as Marxism can't be said to offer a very substantial affirmation of the value of art if it has to rely on such a few instances of closely argued literal definition.

I don't want to suggest that Marx's work can be seen as an uninterrupted slide into theoretical rigidity, on a kind of geometrical progression. There are continual returns and reconsiderations to be taken into account, but they don't ever seem significantly to have redirected Marx's energies. In his notes for the *Critique of Political Economy* (1857), for example, we find Marx worrying about his inability to account for the creative presence of art, or, as he puts it, the problem of 'the unequal relation of the development of material production . . . to artistic production'. Speaking of the Greeks, he recognizes the inadequacy of any theory of direct determinism, and says

' . . . the difficulty does not lie in the fact . . . that Greek art and the epic are bound to certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still provide us with artistic pleasure and in a certain sense represent for us a norm and an unattainable standard.'

Marx has, at this point, put his finger on the limitation of his own work. And yet, when we see him painstakingly trying to negotiate this 'difficulty', we are suddenly confronted with the side of Marx that remained an unmastered area of immaturity. Difficulty! And who made it a difficulty, we have to ask? And, since these passages don't appear in the version of 1859, what happened to Marx's effort to deal with it?

That great achievements of art can 'in a certain sense represent for us a norm and an unattainable standard'—this expresses exactly what I want to insist on when Eagleton talks about a 'critical, negative, transcending role'. This momentary recognition on Marx's part must stand as a judgment on the rest of his work and on the methodological assumptions behind it. To stress this judgment isn't to write off Marx's work as wholly useless, but it is to point to the workings of a logic, characteristic of the complexities of modern

society, whereby the efforts of those working for change become marked, through insufficient resources, with the very features of what they want to alter. Writers like Dickens and Lawrence saw this happening often. In Marx's case the recognition of this logic and what it entails is the more painful because Marx made a deliberate choice to take this path. In deciding to use the enemy's weapons against the enemy Marx both was and was not aware of what he was doing:

'The critique has plucked the imaginary flowers off the chain not in order that man wear the unimaginative, desolate chain, but in order that he throw off the chain and pluck the living flower.'<sup>1</sup>

This is offered with the quite frightening confidence that only the professional theoretician can possess. The schematism is bound to be simplifying. To equate 'imaginary flowers' with the products of false consciousness, to assume such an easy distinction between what is false and what is real, is to beg a very large question. Such assurance about what are and are not the true mainsprings of our lives is bound to seem threatening, and reminds one of Dickens' verdict on the utilitarian Gradgrind:

'In gauging fathomless deeps with his little mean excise-rod, and in staggering over the universe with his rusty stiff-legged compasses, he had meant to do great things. Within the limits of his short tether he had tumbled about, annihilating the flowers of existence with greater singleness of purpose than many of the blatant personages whose company he kept.'

Marx's decision to use the British economists' own weapons laid him open to this kind of criticism. I know few people of whom it might be said that they have thrown off the chain and plucked the living flower. On the other hand, I know of many who are left with only 'the unimaginative, desolate chain', and for whom 'the flowers of existence' have been annihilated, thanks to the rule of an ideology derived from Marx. I am aware that many socialists, including Eagleton, would condemn the so-called socialism which is responsible, and that it isn't valid to blame Marx for all the faults of his followers. Nevertheless, in ways that aren't very difficult to trace, his theoretical structure does seem to predict abuses of this sort and we can't pretend to be surprised that it lends itself to them so often.<sup>2</sup> In its undue cultivation of the systematizing faculties and its corresponding neglect of individual experience there is already a danger signal.

Therefore when Eagleton talks of the role of an opposition, and of 'revolution within the revolution', I feel like saying: 'Physician, heal

<sup>1</sup>*Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. This seems very reminiscent of Marx's own criticism of other-worldly Christianity, and indeed, in its theoretical self-confidence, helps us to identify what it was in Christianity that laid it open to this reproach.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*.

thysel'. Isn't the one-sidedness of Marxist theory itself an element in what you want to oppose and correct? Of course there are other factors that ought to be mentioned to make the discussion complete. Apart from strategic questions there is what we call tragedy, of more radical importance as an answer that redefines all answers. But before we come to consider answers, the questions need defining a little, and they include the possibility and the nature of anything like a 'critical, negative, transcending role', whether for Christianity or for Marxism. The important divergence is there, and it concerns everything Marx did and did not see in art and the responses art invites. Therefore it concerns criticism, and everything that a free and uninterrupted search for 'a norm and an unattainable standard' entails.