

Christian Journalism

Laurence Bright OP

In itself this collection* of articles, letters, jokes, editorials and poems from *New Christian* (1965-1970) has nothing particularly to recommend it to readers five years later. Everything here was written for its own time and place rather than for export. But seen as a reminder of what *New Christian* stood for, as evidence to draw on should there be any other serious Christian reviews in being or possibility, it seems to me of very great value.

However we regard *New Christian*, praise or blame for it belongs mostly to Trevor Beeson, its permanent editor. I think he achieved remarkable success. He aimed high, and hit a lot of marks, missing only the crucial one—circulation. His short account in the *Reader* of what he tried for and where he failed is a model for any editor of a Christian journal. I propose to summarise it under eight heads, following each with my own comment, and drawing where necessary on the evidence of the collection.

1. A successful editor of such a review needs no particular journalistic skills.

More than that, they are usually a hindrance. The professional finds it hard to get beyond what conventional wisdom tells him the public wants, as with the speaking of Shakespeare's verse. The gifted amateur either gets beyond it or falls flat on his face, and anyway it is great fun finding out week by week which he is going to do.

2. With marketing, on the other hand, professionalism is essential, and the lack of it proved fatal. Sheer quality may get you up to three or four thousand subscribers; but this is only the first of several thresholds.

Again I thoroughly agree. In my time I've been associated with three Christian journals; one I helped to start, the other two to end, at least in a form I recognised. There never was the money to do the market research or implement any conclusions it might have reached. But thanks to the generosity of Tim Beaumont, for *New Christian* the money was there, and had it been channelled in the way suggested the circulation might well have risen above the 10,000 subscriber mark which was apparently not quite good enough. Nevertheless it is important to remember that market researchers suffer from conservative stereotypes that an editor must be ready to break down; the collaboration will always be a delicate one.

**A New Christian Reader*. Edited by Timothy Beaumont of Whitley. SCM Press. 1974. 182 pp. £1.95.

3. The model for *New Christian* was contemporary secular reviews such as the *New Statesman*, not the religious press.

This without question was the main cause of the journal's success. You opened it without the gloom that overcomes you on opening most other Christian papers; it exuded no smell of ancient kneelers, no high Tory penetrating voice. It spoke of sex and race as well as reform of the parish and theology; not, as I shall go on to say, with entire success, but at least it did it.

This is the moment to say that I reckon those who didn't know the paper can get a fair indication of its contents from this *Reader*. I was on a body called the Council, meeting yearly for criticism and claret (that money wasn't all wasted) so I possess, mouldering away in an old cardboard box, a complete set of issues from alpha to the eschatological pause, but I have no intention of measuring up column-inches as a check to memory. I'm glad a fair reportation of letters is included, even some of the dotty ones, and the satirical quotes from our dreaded rivals. But I miss the reviews. What a journal has to say about books, music, cinema, theatre, TV is as important a part of its self-definition as its other features, and no more ephemeral than most things reproduced here.

4. There was an editorial board with members drawn from the mainstream churches, having the power to suggest and criticise, but not to determine policy.

Obviously no editor can find enough ideas or writers on his own, and in principle such a board is essential. But it must share the general outlook of the editor. If it is conceived as being a kind of check and balance the journal will sound some pretty uncertain notes, and no one will go forth to the newsagent. In my recollection this was a problem with *New Christian*. The board was mainly clerics of the liberal establishment. They were a heavy weight for any editor to carry, and I would reckon were an important factor in preventing the consistency of outlook (whether conservative, liberal, or radical doesn't matter) that is necessary to the success of any publication.

5. Reader's contributions are an important factor too.

Such is our basic narcissism that most readers begin most journals at the correspondence page. It is like a club, full of the endearing foibles of old friends; now this particular club has closed, its wake is well celebrated in the *Reader's* pages. More seriously, this is how an actual body of supporters can be held together. Maybe *New Christian* never found a clear enough cause, like Marxist revolution or real beer from the wood, to build up the support.

6. The paper failed to discover significant new writers. The reason was it came a decade too late. The era of renewal movements in the churches was coming to an end, as was the associated period of creativity in English-language theology (*Honest to God*, 1963).

I can't wholly agree with Trevor Beeson. To the extent that *New Christian* came unstuck here, the failure was as much its own as from

outside causes. Church renewal was certainly the mark of the previous decade, and this was therefore the correct starting point. But there the journal stuck after all hope had faded. Even in its criticism of the Church it remained bound to it. A hate-relation fixes you as firmly as a love-one. The fact is brought out by a significant disproportion in the *Reader*. It gives far too much space to the Roman church. Writing in *New Blackfriars* I can hardly complain about the twenty pages on the McCabe Affair, but surely thirty-three (18 per cent of the total) on the non-event of *Humanae Vitae* is all wrong. But the reason is plain enough. Renewal in the Roman church, characteristically ten years behind the rest, fell squarely in the period. And that weighty editorial board fell for it. There was no real attempt to break free from such matters, and thus from the writers who dealt with them.

The same is true at the more articulate level of theology. It is clear in retrospect that when *New Christian* got going the 'secularists'—Robinson, Cox, van Buren and so on—were played out. Yet the real problem was not lack of new authors in a worn-out tradition, but of failure to create a new one. This, I am sure, was because theologians and journal alike had an inadequate conception of the secularity they drew on. For them it meant the Western bourgeois culture that they never radically questioned. But this is perhaps best discussed in the following section.

7. *New Christian* never bridged the gap between social, political, economic issues and reflective theology.

Again I can agree with this judgement only in a different sense from the one intended. For if it is really the case that the secular city and the city of God are set on opposite sides of a great divide, then very little but messages of goodwill (these days) can pass between them. Once more the failure is not so much of not doing what's impossible (conceived as it is) but of not conceiving things differently.

That this is how the 'gap' was in fact thought of once more becomes fairly clear from the *Reader*. In politics, for instance, the journal rightly took a strong line about choices within the accepted framework; about race relations in Britain, or attitudes to Rhodesia. But its general approach is indicated in the dreary parliamentary gossip of Hugh Macpherson (fortunately under-represented in these pages). No attempt was made to question the approach seriously, or explore alternatives. They existed, more clearly in 1968 than now, and ought to have been looked at.

The same is true of theology, except that there no clear alternatives existed. What *New Christian* accepted was a traditional Western approach with occasional undatings, as with the rather depressing non-church of Ray Billington, merely old church writ hyphenated. A major task for a radical Christian review should have been an attempt to bring into being something new. Admittedly in this case there was no model. Perhaps a theology based on, rather than imposed on, a radical politics is not possible in the European context. In any case, the initiative has now passed to Africa and Latin America.

Is it so absurd to think the thing could have been tried and readers kept? After all the *Roadrunner* tried it, and failed only because its politics were Anarchist rather than Marxist. From time to time readers' letters give a hint that the possibility was there. Real people make theology with their feet, not with their heads, like the theologians do. *New Christian* somehow always seemed to come back to Bishop Barry.

8. Could a radical Christian journal be tried today? Yes, Trevor Beeson says. The major problem is still money, yet what is needed is only a tiny fraction of what the churches spend on other matters.

It could happen, it ought to happen, for sure. I doubt it will. Churches who jib at the mild radicalism of the WCC are not going to underwrite another petard. Nor is it easy to find rich men willing to pass through the eye of a needle. In the meantime the journals that continue to survive on a shoestring can take comfort and good counsel from the brave venture so well brought back to mind in these pages.

I had finished the article when, with that lack of appreciation such functionaries always show, the editor asked me to add a comment on a similar book about the American Catholic journal *Commonweal**

The two books are in fact as dissimilar as are the journals with which they deal. *Commonweal* is a success, fifty years established. This is partly no doubt because it has the denominational badge of the church in which loyalty is most emphasised, even without comprehension; and in the USA, after all, the Catholic population is some fifty million. Again, Professor Van Allen's is a more external account. It has grown out of a thesis: a chastening reminder that someone, somewhere, must be writing a thesis on *New Blackfriars*; how careful one has to be. The style is easy enough in the present version, but the book still suffers from the assumed objectivity, made plausible by minor criticism, which examiners require. Since *Commonweal* is not very familiar to me, I cannot tell where the hidden bias lies.

Still, assuming that the balance of the journal is roughly that indicated by the book, it was certainly more overtly political than *New Christian* was during the comparable period. It gave very full coverage to McCarthyism, Civil Rights, Vietnam, in a fairly consistent liberal sense. But it seems to have had much the same sort of hang-up.

This is indicated most clearly in the interesting policy clash which in 1968 led to the resignation of the executive editor, Daniel Callahan. Van Allen says 'he felt that the appropriate future for the magazine was more secular, that it should . . . concern itself with questions of meaning and value and religion, but religion in a less denominational and ecumenical way'. This is still a bit hazy, but Callahan himself showed his hand more clearly in saying of Rosemary Ruether and Leslie Dewart, two now-forgotten stars of the day, 'their radical stuff was as religion-obsessed as the old'. He lost the battle. *Commonweal* was not thought able to compete with the secular journals of opinion, and distinctively 'spoke out of a religious tradition'.

**The Commonweal and American Catholicism*. Rodger Van Allen. Fortress Press. 1974. 218 pp. \$4.50.

So of course it should, but the particular religious tradition is a false one, as I have already suggested of *New Christian*, if it contrasts the secular and the religious. The theological mistake lies in supposing that religion and God, like sore thumbs, have got to stick out. The two journals, in their own ways, each represent the best that can be made of a mediocre theological tradition. In this they differ from *New Blackfriars*, which theologically remains finely poised between the superb and the intolerable.

Jesus the Martyr

Gerald O'Collins SJ

Men and women martyred for their faith form a coherent and distinctive group—from Socrates and Stephen, through Joan of Arc, Savonarola and Thomas More, down to Dietrich Bonhoeffer in our own day. Violent death came to each in such a way that we can classify them all with Jesus.

Particular circumstances may allow us to match their martyrdoms with his passion and crucifixion. At times betrayal by former friends or similar forms of treachery led to arrest and imprisonment. The trials which preceded the death penalty frequently centred on some fatal question. Did Thomas More wish to deprive Henry VIII of the title which Parliament had granted him? How would Jesus answer when the high priest asked him: 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?' (Mark 14:61). Finally, many martyrs shared the same geography of death with Jesus—public execution. Some were, of course, butchered in their prison cells, or like Bonhoeffer led away to the sinister secrecy of a Nazi hanging. But Joan of Arc died in the Rouen market-place, Savonarola outside the old Palace in Florence, and Thomas More on Tower Hill.