

New Left Catholics

by Raymond Williams

Some three years ago I was asked to write an introduction to a new journal of radical catholic opinion. I sent along, to what proved to be *Slant*, what seemed to me at the time a slightly rash note of welcome, and was much impressed, when the first number appeared, to find that I had been understood as cautious, suspicious, and even vaguely minatory. Such ambivalences will doubtless recur. The *Slant* position, if we are to believe *Catholics and the Left*,¹ is now well established. It has already been honoured by an attack in the *Spectator*, and I suppose it is just another mark of its success that it must now face the rigour of its friends.

The *Slant* manifesto, which is what *Catholics and the Left* amounts to, is very uneven: not so much in quality as in level. Its first part, *Christians against Capitalism*, by Adrian Cunningham and Terry Eagleton, is a vigorous piece of pamphleteering, of a properly manifest kind. I hope I do not wrong it when I say that it seems to me the best short statement that I have read of the general position of the New Left. Its Christian interpretation of community, which is inevitably its starting point, is unforced and organic, and it gains in specificity by being able to talk frankly (as in other traditions is not always possible) about loving relationships as the heart of community. At the same time it is powerful in negative criticism: the chapter on Liberalism is especially astrigent and wholly convincing.

But then one would need, surely, if one doubted any of the propositions in this forceful essay, to go to longer and more complicated pieces of writing (some of them perhaps exist). In fact, in the second part, we are taken on to two useful historical essays. Terry Eagleton's sketch for a historical account of Christian responses to industrial capitalism over the last century is a convincing introduction to what will eventually, in his or another's hands, have to be a book. Adrian Cunningham's essay is very different in tone: he describes it as 'complex, difficult, even tortuous', and this is right. Towards the end, particularly, it breaks its banks and threatens to become a desolate flood of general complaint. Yet, of all the writing in the two books under review, this essay seems to me to have most possibility of a serious and definitive

¹*Catholics and the Left* by Adrian Cunningham, Terry Eagleton, Brian Wicker, Martin Redfern and Laurence Bright, O.P., with an introduction by Neil Middleton. (Sheed and Ward. Stagbooks, 13s. 6d.).

reevaluation of Christian social attitudes. In its basic conception, it seizes the historicity of ideas, not merely as sequence (in which centuries can be paragraphs) but as *change*. The distinction between a charity of consumption and its relationships, on the one hand, and a charity of total society, on the other, is made not only theoretically, but in terms of the religious and ethical systems possible to societies in different stages of productive development – notably in the case of early Christian consumption charity, and its breakdown in a period when surplus value has other meanings than bounty. Here, I am convinced, is the seed of a radical Christianity which will make its own independent and powerful social critique, as opposed to the attachment of Christian loyalties to a critique established in other and essentially separate terms.

Catholics and the Left, in its final section, has three short essays: on secularists, modernists and radicals, by Brian Wicker; on the church as sacrament of a socialist society, by Martin Redfern, and on the structure of the church by Laurence Bright, O.P.

On the last of these I cannot comment: not only because I would be incompetent but also because at no point does it engage me. On Brian Wicker's ideas, I shall have more to say below. But I want to say a little about Martin Redfern's vigorous and likeable essay, because it has seemed to me, whenever I have looked up from the page, quite radically dangerous. I simply cannot believe (it is an issue of intelligence and not of faith) that anything will be gained, and that much will not be lost, if *Slant* and its friends pursue a mainly structural, highly verbalised and even clear combination of the concepts of Christianity and Marxism. I am prepared, if I am told so by men of good faith, to believe the two systems compatible (though I have seen little evidence that they are really so, in any general way, as distinct from their undoubted capacity to inhabit and inform a single personality). But their dialogue, at any level, cannot usefully be a matter of conceptual parallels (which is surely, in either tradition, a dogmatism). The more vigorously anyone seeks to persuade me that 'the fall' and 'alienation', or 'redemption' and 'emancipation', are parallel and even possibly identical concepts, the more I believe I am dealing with men engaged in a search for rhetorical solutions to tensions of an understandable, perhaps intolerable but certainly idiosyncratic kind, and the less I believe (as I strongly and patiently wish to believe) that I am dealing with fellow-socialists, who are also Catholics, and who are above all confronting the common crisis of our society and our world. If to say this is again cautious, suspicious, or vaguely minatory, I am sorry; but it has, very clearly, to be said. The problems of ultimate conviction are inevitably profound, but I believe (I hope that *Slant* believes) that there are immediate recognitions, commitments, actions, through which, in practice, we discover and relate to each other, now and next month and next year. It is in this spirit, and this only, that I am a friend of *Slant*, and delighted by its existence. If I am asked,

however, to join in a static conceptual analysis, or its verbal equivalent or dilution, just because a radical banner has been pitched, I shall, without even regrets, decline. What is called a dialogue or a dialectic will quite quickly, in such circumstances, become a dilettantism.

To discuss Brian Wicker's new book² adequately we should need, above all, to be quite certain on just this point. I was interested by *Culture and Liturgy*, and hardly hesitated over (though I see, looking back, I had marked) its references to the problems of meeting 'the civilised pagan' (for I am no Muslim either) or to the inability of the 'political' New Left to answer such questions as 'What is it for man to live well, both as an individual moral agent and as a social and political animal?' (which if I understand *Slant* at all, or at any rate the New Left, is not, in that form – 'both . . . and' – a significant question, nor in any case the kind of question men directly committed to – not only involved in – real choices could ask in so static a way). It was then a little surprising to find how cold I was in reading *Culture and Theology*, as if the author and I shared *nothing*. I do not know how to put this, without unreasonable offence, but the book is described as a popularisation, and there is truly, in this sense, nothing whole to popularise; on the page, at least, it is simply not there.

Cunningham and Eagleton, in *Christians against Capitalism*, are genuinely popularising a response to a society. Wicker, however, is finding diverse intellectual support for a central position which is taken rather than given, and is certainly not communicated. I have tried to express it, in reading, as a case of an author popularising *to himself*. I mean by this a finding of positions in this, that and another field which can serve as names and notes, or in certain circumstances can be fully appropriated, when the author is engaged in one kind of specialised argument. By the work itself – on Merleau-Ponty or Wittgenstein or Marx or others – I am unimpressed. I would have these men straight, and not in this mosaic. And it seems to me that there is a point in each account (see pages 68, and especially 97) when there is what I read as an act of crucial bad faith: the convenient teaching of the author in question has been brought to a head, and there is then a slide towards appropriation, for a different purpose: ('this is not to say that this is a conclusion which Merleau-Ponty himself accepts' sounds fair and genial until one realises quite how remorseless is the pressure towards Wicker's meanings of 'religion' and 'sacred'.) On a larger and less forgivable scale, then, the book would seem to me to repeat the error, but, more, the irrelevance, of Martin Redfern's essay. Perhaps in saying this I am rejecting the *Slant* position altogether, but then a *Slant position* is not the best thing about *Slant*: a *Slant* emphasis, a *Slant* activity, a *Slant* slant – these are what one has valued. I must not be understood as meaning that I do not want to see fully argued and analysed cases. I want very much to see them, with the breadth and energy of what elsewhere is continually insisted upon: the finding of

²*Culture and Theology*. (Sheed and Ward. Stagbooks, 13s. 6d.).

Christ in the world, not the finding of modern arguments against authoritarians or bigots or half-remembered teachers or modernisers or secularists or civilised pagans. That distinction seems to me fair, and on it, perhaps, *Slant's* future will turn. Its local signs will be evident in language and sensibility: not the least shock, in reading Wicker's book, was in this area, especially in some of the literary criticism (see the references to T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, William Golding). If I had read this book ten years ago, I would have numbered it among those I was most deeply concerned to oppose. How can it then now be, even under good auspices, what I can count as radicalism? The non-Catholic and non-Christian socialist was bound, however silently, to ask himself whether a radical catholicism, replete like other books with New Left quotations, might not be, in the end, an appropriation and incapsulation of an active radical critique in other terms. He was bound to say 'what in any case I look for is the active continuity of the critique, and what I do not look for, and must reject, is a prolonged enquiry into the appropriation'. I have reached that point, perhaps harshly; there will be other opportunities to expand on it. And yet when I turn back to the first two parts of *Catholics and the Left*, I have no such feelings. On the contrary, there, and I hope in many places elsewhere and to come, I know what is meant by trying to find Christ in the world, and what words and actions might be good enough to acknowledge him.

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