

THE CATHOLIC LEFT IN BRITAIN

Brian Wicker

A number of recent books and articles have drawn attention to the emergence in Britain of a Catholic group of left-wing thinkers and writers who have a noticeable influence on Catholic life and thought today. In this article I propose to sketch the origins of this movement, and then to consider the kind of argument that is now going on—and which will go on more intensely in the future—concerning the significance of a Catholic Left.

Origins. A glance at the very varied intellectual and social origins of the Catholic Left will show at once how misleading it is to call more than a handful of them "Catholic Marxists." For, at any rate, within the current intellectual climate of Catholicism, with its inability to distinguish between Marxism as an intellectual influence and Marxism as a party-political commitment, to speak of a Catholic Marxist is almost a contradiction in terms. To use such a term is, ipso facto, to impugn a person's faith, and even his intelligence. It is to suggest that he must somehow be a wolf in sheep's clothing, who is trying to wean the faithful from their allegiance by some underhand, conspiratorial machinations. Whereas in fact the most significant contribution that the Catholic Left has made has not been to the political Left as such—which on the whole has little interest in the religious aspects of socialism—but rather to the development of theology itself. Indeed, it is one of the weaknesses of the Catholic Left that it is still so "catholic," so much an in-group of people with an eccentric interest in the one subject that most other left-wingers feel is finished with—theology.

The Catholic Left in Britain has its roots in several types of soil. To enumerate these may give some indication of the diversity of positions from which people have come to be associated, more or less closely, with the Catholic Left. The first is the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (C.N.D.), and the Catholic pacifist body *Pax*. The moral debate that *Pax* had been waging for many years, from a more or less pacifist position, was reinvigorated some years ago by Catholics who were deeply concerned with the problem of the nuclear deterrent. These

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people were not strictly pacifist in the old sense. They stood rather with C.N.D. than with pacifism of a religious kind. But C.N.D. itself was never a purely moral protest: it incarnated its rejection of modern nuclear strategy in a distinctively *political* interpretation of international affairs, and hence of the British role in the world. This very nearly led in 1960 to the adoption by the Labor Party of unilateralism as an official policy. All this meant that the plausibility of remaining politically neutral, while accepting unilateralism as a moral imperative, became steadily more remote; and those who admitted the unilateralist case were often forced, in practice, by the logic of the argument, to a leftward stance in domestic and international politics. Catholic unilateralists (always a small minority) were no exception.

Simultaneously, the association of C.N.D. with the intellectual socialist movement known as the New Left, and associated with the *New Left Review*, tended to encourage the emergence of a homogeneous socialist opposition to the right-wing pragmatism of the prevailing Labor Party orthodoxy under Gaitskell. This opposition was based on a complex and subtle reinterpretation of the whole English radical and socialist tradition—summed up in the key book of the New Left, *Culture and Society* by Raymond Williams. The appeal of this highly thoughtful and sensitive work to Catholics of the Left was great. Catholics were drawn into sympathy with this kind of thinking from the New Left because they felt that its respect for intelligence, and its mode of handling complex issues, offered an opportunity for a deeper understanding of the place of the Church as an historical community in the modern world. The meetings of a very loosely organized body called the December Group, which met at a Dominican conference center to discuss New Left thinking in relation to theology, had an important part in bringing together the disparate groups sympathetic to such ideas. Since it was organized by Neil Middleton—a director of the publisher Sheed and Ward in England—it was soon able to find an outlet in print for its views.

About this time, a group of undergraduates in Cambridge who had become disillusioned by the nullity and stuffiness of official Catholicism, founded the magazine *Slant*, which has since become the

semi-official organ of the Catholic Left. *Slant* began purely as a student magazine, and sometimes its tone offended a good many people. Though understandable, this was a pity, for beneath the surface there lay hidden sources of genuine power and originality. The magazine was heavily influenced by the New Left ideas, especially since Raymond Williams was in Cambridge, and his teaching was beginning to affect the English school—to which the founder-editors (Adrian Cunningham and Terry Eagleton) both belong.

Finally, in an indirect way, two other bodies must be mentioned as having a place in the formation of the Catholic Left. The first is the official Catholic graduate body, the Newman Association. Its principal importance lies in the fact that it has sponsored many of the conferences and lectures at which, in recent years, Catholics of the Left have had a chance to air their views, meet their opponents and submit their ideas to intelligent criticism. Also, since the Newman Association is an official body, with a direct relationship to the hierarchy, it has enabled some progress to be made towards the creation of a channel of communication between a highly suspect dissident group and the ecclesiastical establishment. Secondly, the Downside Symposium Group—founded in association with Downside Abbey and Downside School—must be mentioned for its role in stimulating, quite independently, though under the genial eye of the progressive Abbot of Downside, highly intelligent theological explorations of themes very relevant to the preoccupations of the Catholic Left. A good deal of cross fertilization between these groups is now going on.

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The most obvious achievements of the Catholic Left have been in publications. The following notes give a brief indication of what has been achieved so far:

1. The first book that I would regard as distinctively a book of the Catholic Left was *Nuclear Weapons and Christian Conscience* edited by Walter Stein—now generally regarded as the leading Catholic spokesman for nuclear pacifism in Britain. It was so effective a demolition of the prevailing just-war casuistry that it had to be published by a non-Catholic house, and has only recently been reprinted by a Catholic firm. Stein has now produced a follow-up book, *Peace on Earth: The Way Ahead*. Stanley Windass' impressive *Christianity Versus Violence* is also a significant contribution, complementary to the above.

2. In 1963 Neil Middleton published my *Culture*

and *Liturgy*, in which I tried to display, at some length, the natural connections between a contemporary theology and the cultural critique of modern capitalism developed by the New Left itself. This book was a product of the discussions of the December Group. Earlier this year a companion volume—*Culture and Theology*—appeared, in which I have tried to develop further the philosophical basis of a Catholic Left position.

3. Two symposium volumes from the Downside Group have been influenced by Catholic Left ideas: *Theology and the University* (1964) and *The Committed Church* (1966), and a third is planned to emerge from a conference to be held in 1967.

4. Two very recent books have now appeared which present ideas derived from the *Slant* group and its activities: *The New Left Church*, a set of essays by Terence Eagleton; and the "Slant Manifesto" *Catholics and the Left*, with essays by five members of the movement. It is too soon to say what effect the appearance of these works will have on the course of the development of the Catholic Left.

5. Finally it should be said that, apart from *Slant* itself, several other periodicals are generally interested, and editorially sympathetic. The most notable is *New Blackfriars*, the magazine of the English Dominicans, edited from Cambridge by Herbert McCabe, O.P. This periodical has, indeed, encouraged the most interesting debate between supporters and critics that has yet developed.

Aims, Achievements and Criticisms. So much for the background to the Catholic Left. What are its aims? And what is the reaction to them? It is impossible for me to deal comprehensively with these questions in the space available. I shall therefore try to suggest something of the atmosphere generated by the rise of the Catholic Left by considering one or two specific debates that have begun—and are continuing. The most hostile attack on the entire project so far has been an article by Mr. Colm Brogan which appeared in the *Spectator*, June 24 (see *worldview*, July-August). More intelligent and penetrating criticisms, however, have been made by Michael Dummett, Bernard Bergonzi and Martin Green in recent issues of *New Blackfriars*. Of these, the most recent and eloquent is Green's and it is this response that I propose to consider.

Green's article is an expression of sympathetic resistance to the revolutionary character of the Left's stance towards modern liberal society. The plea for a revolutionary stance was made by Herbert McCabe, in an editorial which suggested that, while the liberal's concern with social reform may be the most effective way of making practical changes in society,

there are times when a revolution, rather than a reform is needed. The revolutionary, or martyr, is one who is less concerned with the immediate alleviation of evident evils than with witnessing to a basic Christian truth. His reply to the invitation "Couldn't you do more good if you joined the establishment?" (the constant temptation to the liberal who wants to get things done) is that "it is not the man who does good, but the martyr who is, for the Christian tradition, the paradigm case of sanctity. We are redeemed not by the cures that Christ effected but by the statement which was his crucifixion." Now the force of this case is great. One can see—for example, in the case of Franz Jägerstätter—that it is sometimes verified triumphantly in practice. But the point that needs to be fastened upon is that, while there no doubt are times when the martyr's stand is right—indeed the only right stand that is available—it is impossible to specify, in advance, and for other people, when that moment has come. McCabe senses this, when he says later that "so long as there is tension between doing and saying there will come times when revolution is the enemy of reform." What is significant about this statement is that he finds that he cannot say any more than this—except to *raise the question* whether the time has not come already. "Christian ethics has by now learnt a lot from the liberals and moderates; perhaps the next move in the dialectic is to learn a little from, say, James Baldwin." The tentativeness of this remark, the absence of anything like a clarion call to arms, is very noticeable. It seems to mark a recognition that it is impossible to legislate for others as to when the call has come. At the point of decision, the whole focus of responsibility has to fall on the individual conscience.

This is one point at which Green's critique tells. For, as he argues, with a good deal of force, an appeal to revolution which rests, not on an urgent clarion call but merely on a demand that we should be *ready* to answer when such a call does come (if ever), can easily become a corrupting influence. It seeks to make us feel desperate about the present state of society, and seek to revolutionize it sometime in the future, while inviting us in the meantime to live happily in this society and even to participate in it. Within a group dedicated to this kind of stance there grows "a competition in intensity of membership feelings—the rejection of the outside world; the intellectual equivalent is the artificial rigor of closed-system logic; and the inevitable result is the heresy hunt."

In opposition to this "cosy desperateness" Green invites revolutionary Christians to admit openly that they *are* involved in accepting much of what the

prevalent society offers, and therefore to "admit the partiality of their rebellion, to admit that they are liberals as well as revolutionaries; detached as well as involved; individuals as well as members." In other words, in place of the dilemma, posed by the revolutionary, of *either* attuning yourself to peace and harmony with a corrupt world, *or* rejecting both the corruption and the peace in some violent gesture of witness, Green seeks to commend a double stance: a dedication to both peace *and* rebellion. "We must not become attuned to war rather than peace. We must be attuned to both." In other words we have to see that Christ's cures *were* an essential part of the one complete life and death that has redeemed us—it was not the crucifixion alone.

• All this is finely said. But if we are to accept it, we have to follow out its implications. We have to show—against the arguments of both Burkeian conservatives and revolutionary Marxists—that such a double stance is possible. And this means we have to prove not only that it is privately and psychologically possible to be at peace with one's fellow citizens while rejecting much of the society they live in, but also—and this is where the rub comes—that it is *intellectually and historically possible*. This is no easy task, and Green himself does not furnish us with any help in tackling it. Indeed, he seems to hold that in order to take up this double stance, all I have to do, simply as an individual, is consciously to choose to view my world thus. But the question is whether the double stance here being recommended actually corresponds to any real world that exists outside myself. The Marxist case, at any rate in its cruder mechanistic versions, says that it does not. Marxism tells us that you cannot be simultaneously on both sides of a divide which history has already made for us, whether we like it or not. And there is a strong Christian tradition which seems to amount to much the same thing: "He that is not with me is against me."

In order to show the viability of a simultaneous attunement to peace *and* war, it is first of all necessary to show that the determinism that Marxism, and in another sense Burkeian toryism, involve are false analyses of the human situation. It is certainly not enough to speak as though we are quite obviously in a position to choose such a stance, individually, simply by taking thought. Green's use of the word "attunement" is perhaps deceptive here: for while it suggests (correctly, in my view) that this stance has to consist in achieving a harmony with an objective external state of affairs, it also seems to hint

that I can achieve this harmony simply by altering my own personal instrumentality. It's just a matter of my having a good enough ear, and a sufficiently adaptable instrument, to be able to get myself into tune with the rest of the orchestra.

There seem to me to be two conditions necessary to showing the viability of the "double stance." The first condition—and this is something rightly insisted upon by the Left, and too little noticed by the liberals—is that the theory, that we are in fact finally determined by external, historical forces, must first of all be decisively refuted. It is not enough, for the Christian at any rate, to say that Christianity *affirms* man's freedom, and that therefore it *must* be possible to establish it in the face of all opposition: for the nub of the entire argument is whether Christianity, if this is what it claims, is itself viable or not. What is needed, therefore, is a prolonged, detailed engagement with all the intellectual and historical elements that go to make up this deterministic framework. For example, it is necessary to come to grips with contemporary Marxism in detail, and to understand its case. It has to be shown what is clearly and obviously valid in it—which, for many of the Catholic Left is at least the main philosophical framework set up in the early works of Marx himself—does not entail that mechanistic determinism which has commonly been attributed to Marxism as its most characteristic historical feature. Some help is offered for this task by modern Marxists themselves; and their work has to be studied and evaluated for this reason. (Consider, for instance, Lukacs' criticisms of Bukharin's *Theory of Historical Materialism* printed in *New Left Review*, September-October 1966.)

The second condition—which comes from the liberal side—is that, since the ultimate decision as to when the call to revolution has come is one that only the individual can make, according to his own conscience, it is essential for any *genuine* revolution that the individual should himself be free to determine this moment for himself. And this means that the person who tries to show the viability of the

"double stance" has to prove, against a good deal of historical evidence, that revolution does not necessarily entail the suppression of just that liberty that a personal decision requires. He has, that is to say, to refute (for example) both Orwell and Camus. And this is a task that closed groups are not well equipped to do. For, having proved it to their own satisfaction perhaps, or even (worse still) having put the issue aside for the sake of some ulterior common effort, such groups tend to think the issue is now settled for everyone else. Instead of giving that unremitting, close and sensitive attention to it that it actually requires, if the revolution is to get beyond remaining a minority cult within a majority indifference, they tend to bypass or underestimate it.

McCabe admits, significantly, that Christianity affirms that these two conditions can be fulfilled. That is to say, it affirms that the coming Kingdom will truly be a society in which peace and war, liberal *and* revolutionary values, have come together in a new coalescence, and also that in some sense—perhaps undiscernible, but real—history is moving towards that consummation. But this affirmation is rather like the belief that it is possible to arrive at the concept of God with certainty by the use of reason alone. We acknowledge, notionally, that the trick can be done; but we don't, for the life of us, see how. And perhaps the chief value of the current debate is that it is forcing people to see that it is dishonest to rest here. We have to give it the unremitting attention and effort that it continually requires. The significance of the Catholic Left is that, by drawing attention to the revolutionary aspect of the double stance—an aspect scandalously neglected, not only in the immediate past but also in the most up-to-date reforming circles of the Church—it has helped to make this effort possible. Whether it will succeed, or even whether it *can* succeed, I do not pretend to know. All I do know is that it is the most important task facing Western Christianity at the present time, and that the Left is to be thanked for having understood this and tried to do something about it.

COUNTERINSURGENCY: SOME PROBLEMS AND IMPLICATATIONS

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