

## Justice, Peace and Dominicans 1216-1999: VIII—*Slant*, Marxism and the English Dominicans

Brian Wicker

Dialogue between European Catholics and Marxists became significant in the 1960s<sup>1</sup> and the English Province of the Dominicans had a major hand in its promotion. My personal memories of that episode focus upon three members of the Province in particular: Conrad Pepler, Laurence Bright and Herbert McCabe. Each had a distinctive contribution to make to the dialogue. But all shared one particular gift. They were *enablers*. In other words, each of them helped to make things happen, by encouraging others more directly involved than themselves to have their say. Conrad Pepler's contribution was as the Warden of Spode House, the Dominican conference centre where much of the dialogue took place. He gave house room to the variegated groups who wanted to take part; and by standing back from the in-fighting he made the dialogue 'fizz'. Laurence Bright was the organiser at the centre of the network, and it was he who brought people into contact with each other at the beginning, and saw to it that what they said got into print, in various books as well as in the pages of *Slant*. In the later phases of the dialogue Herbert McCabe, as editor of *New Blackfriars*, opened the pages of the periodical to the participants in such a way that they were able to conduct their dialogue at leisure and at suitable (sometimes excessive!) length in between the conference gatherings at Spode. He also made lapidary observations of his own in editorial comments.

Conrad Pepler was a child of the Eric Gill 'Ditchling' circle. As such he was familiar with the early Catholic peace movement. The Catholic PAX society had been started on 8th May 1936 by a small group including a recent Catholic convert from Wales, J. Alban Evans, who had experienced difficulties over the concept of 'just war' in Catholic thought until he read a book by the German Dominican, Franziskus Stratmann (a leader of the anti-war movement in Germany) called *The Church and War*. By June of that year, Eric Gill himself had taken an interest in the new group—and he of course was a Dominican Tertiary, as was Conrad's father Hilary. So the Dominican influence on Catholic thinking about peace, and conscientious objection, was profound from the beginning.<sup>2</sup>

The link between PAX and the emerging 'Christian Marxist'

dialogue of the 1960s was the campaign for unilateral nuclear disarmament (CND). Indeed, that dialogue, at least in Catholic circles, was a product of protest against 'the bomb', in at least two ways. Firstly, the campaign of the late 1950s brought British Catholics into working relationship with the political left in a way that was quite different from the older association of Catholics with trade unionism through the Catholic Social Guild and the Catholic Workers' College. That older movement had been a product of papal teaching about the rights and responsibilities of labour. It had full ecclesiastical backing. But this new link with the left meant opposing rather than following ecclesiastical guidelines. Of course, because of its work for conscientious objectors, PAX had long encountered opposition from bishops and priests. But soon the new Catholic anti-nuclear campaign found itself in deeper trouble, for not only did it involve opposition to prevailing ecclesiastical assumptions: it actually involved campaigning alongside atheistic marxists (and of course others, such as Quakers). Secondly, Catholic objections to the bomb were not just emotional or political: they were deeply philosophical. Indeed some of us—certainly myself—found that thinking hard and long about the ethical problems of nuclear deterrence, and what it entailed by way of future actions and conditional intentions, became a key point of entry into real—as distinct from scholastic text-book—moral philosophy. Indeed I think it could be fairly said that the modern contribution to the revival of the classic tradition of Catholic moral reflection owed much to the need to work out *exactly* why nuclear deterrence was the wicked policy which the banner-waving campaigners in their bones knew it to be.

Conrad Pepler became host to the Spode House annual group meetings from which the dialogue with Marxism emerged. (These included not only the PAX group meetings but also the Spode philosophical enquiry group, the Spode literature and history groups etc., several of whose regulars became close observers or even participants in the dialogue with Marxism). Out of this mixture of interests was born in 1960-61 the *December Group*. This had as its object 'to discuss social problems from a Catholic point of view independent of any official organisation'. Laurence Bright and Neil Middleton (managing director of publishers Sheed and Ward) were the moving spirits behind this effort to shift Catholic social thinking in a leftwards direction.<sup>3</sup> Herbert McCabe soon joined in. Various Dominican novices from the adjacent house of studies attended the discussions, and speakers included Dominican luminaries such as Cornelius Ernst, Fergus Kerr, Geoffrey Preston, Charles Boxer. Peter Benenson, the Catholic lawyer who founded *Amnesty*, was an early

contributor.

Following the early meetings of the December Group came the publication in 1964 of the first issue of *Slant*. This was the product of Laurence Bright's energetic 'networking'. He had brought together in Cambridge, where he was living at Blackfriars, a number of Catholic graduates and undergraduates who were not only already involved in various left-leaning causes, but who were profoundly alienated by the atmosphere and practices of the University Catholic chaplaincy under its long-serving but reactionary chaplain, Mgr. Alfred Gilbey. (Gilbey actually forbade women to attend his main Sunday mass!). The Dominicans, of course, were not under the Gilbey thumb and could organise things independently, in the spirit of the December Group. Leo Pyle, Terry Eagleton, Adrian and Angela Cunningham and several others met with Laurence Bright and conceived the idea of a 'new left' Catholic magazine. Neil Middleton was prepared to help finance it so that it could be printed properly. Fergus Kerr prevented it from being called 'Bias' after noticing another publication of that name in Heffer's. Anthony Downing, who had the distinction of simultaneously being secretary of Cambridge CND and of the Cambridge Conservatives, served as editor of the first issues. Raymond Williams wished it well in an 'Introductory Note'.

*Slant* did not begin as a vehicle for Christian-Marxist dialogue. Its context was the hope and excitement engendered in the Christian sphere by the Second Vatican Council, and by the emergence of the secular 'New Left' among British intellectuals. But it was also shaped by the fact that most of those most closely involved in it were specialists in *literary studies*. Hence *Slant's* early insistence on the connection between cultural values and social institutions, and its debt to cultural studies as advocated by early gurus, notably Richard Hoggart (*The Uses of Literacy*) and Raymond Williams (*Culture and Society*)—both best sellers. In *Slant's* first issue I tried to show the theological implications of this new movement, hitherto ignored by Catholic thinkers. But underlying *Slant's* arguments about culture and the idea of community lay two key assumptions: a) the Catholic Church, in its resurrected post-Conciliar body, and b) Marxism as a revolutionary political movement would both remain major actors on the world stage. For some *Slant* contributors, given the struggle between Marxism and Capitalism, the Catholic church would eventually have to decide which side to back. There was no third way. But others saw the Church as constituting precisely the third alternative: a way through an otherwise unavoidable impasse. In the course of this struggle for the soul of the future certain battles within the Church would have to be won: against Church support

for nuclear weapons, against the ban on contraception<sup>4</sup>, against the historical association of Catholicism with the political right. It was *Slant's* job to push Catholics in the direction necessary for winning those battles.

It was not until its sixth number (Winter 1965) that *Slant* began seriously to confront Marxism as such, by discussing several recently published books and periodicals devoted to various aspects of Marxist theory. Then in the February/March 1966 issue Adrian Cunningham began a long study of 'The Continuity of Marx' which was concluded in August/September of that year. In between the two halves of this piece Terry Eagleton published one of the more notorious of *Slant's* essays, on 'Politics and Benediction'. The central thesis of this interesting article is that 'in benediction the bread becomes dislocated from the practical, communal activity within which alone it has intelligibility, and is reified into an isolated commodity'. The argument then explains the implications for the worshipping community of this dislocation: 'the bread in its new condition takes on a mystifying eternal power, an abstract and unhistorical status, which increases its power over the group'.<sup>5</sup> This article was representative of *Slant* in several ways. It pokes fun at a familiar bit of popular Catholicism, and does so in a provocatively outrageous manner. It employs Marxist concepts (reification, commodity-fetishism etc.) to do so, but is also rooted in some recent thinking about the sacraments (eg. Herbert McCabe's *The New Creation*). It makes any reader who understands it, *think* about the subject. It displays impressive learning. It is highly theoretical. And it is unquestionably *clever*. All of these traits continued to feature in *Slant's* subsequent work. Yet the discussion of Marxism was never more than a subordinate part of its concern, and labelling it a 'Marxist' journal was always a mistake. Confronting what it took to be the inadequacies of the Church was always the more important task.

Christian/Marxist dialogue was better developed on the continent of Europe, where Christians had to live cheek-by-jowl with socialists, than in Britain. Various *Slant* participants took part in meetings with Communists in Bonn and elsewhere during the 1960s: among them Giles Hibbert OP, who was more inward with Marxist thinking than most of his confrères. But none of them was involved in the depth of dialogue which became common in France, Italy, Spain and Germany.<sup>6</sup> And it seems startling now to notice that the work of Teilhard de Chardin became a focus of intense common interest to both sides. For most British Dominicans this in itself would have condemned any dialogue based on it to futility.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile *Slant* itself got more serious about Marxism from

October/November 1966 onwards. In that number Neil Middleton asked: are 'we' serious?—because if we are then we have to understand that 'the marxist revolution throughout the world must be repeated here'; i.e. in Britain. But so far, he suggests, *Slant* 'has touched only lightly upon the matter', and many of its articles 'have been, *in effect*, letting off steam'. But in the next issue Adrian and Angela Cunningham begged to differ. '*Slant's* main function is not the formulation of its own political programme, but the shifting of the focus of Catholic thinking.... What needs clarification is not the political but the theological side of our position'.<sup>8</sup> This divergence of view led eventually to a deeper rift, with some of the participants deciding that the Church was a lost cause. But Giles Hibbert tried, in the fourteenth issue, to show why the challenge implicit in this difference was not inevitable, in an article entitled 'Is this Christianity?' which became chapter one of his book *Man, Culture and Christianity*.<sup>9</sup> But for the time being, much of the interest shifted to more immediate (and probably more consensual) questions. Articles began to appear on problems in Ceylon, Algeria, China, Zambia, Palestine, Vietnam, Latin America, South Africa. (Malcolm Magee, a Scottish Dominican working in South Africa, contributed on the last-named). At the same time, *Slant's* criticism of conventional church life became even more pointed in two articles by Charles Boxer OP on the parish and the church as a community in the world, based on his experience as a 'locum' priest serving an army base belonging to the British Army of the Rhine in 1965.<sup>10</sup> In the next issue he contributed an enthusiastic essay on G. Egner's book on contraception (a favourite *Slant* topic).<sup>11</sup>

Original dialogue between Marxism and Christianity in the columns of *Slant* itself began with No. 19 (January/February 1968) with a lengthy exchange between Martin Shaw and Martin Redfern, which was continued in No. 21 (June/July 1968). This exchange was the prelude to another which was published in *New Blackfriars* in the 1970s (see below). Meanwhile, Terry Eagleton had become editor in charge, and in No. 25 he expressed the hope that '*Slant* will carry a good deal more theology... and less on parochial developments in the Philippines': a caustic reference to the Third World emphasis of several previous numbers. In No. 26 (July 1969) he published 'God the Future', by Herbert McCabe, and 'God the Past' by Timothy MacDermott OP, with a further comment by himself on 'The God debate'. No. 27 continued the theological theme by proposing a revolutionary role for the priesthood (Herbert McCabe on 'Priesthood and Revolution' and Terry Eagleton on 'Priesthood and Leninism') while Alban Weston OP discussed the laity in the light of *Lumen Gentium*. In No. 29 I myself

tried to clarify the question of how to spell out the concept of revolution, which I said is 'the problem that *Slant* needs to address itself to now'.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, soon after this the Sheed and Ward money ran out, so *Slant* 30 (March 1970) was the last issue. Furthermore, the core group of contributors was now dispersed to universities far apart from each other. In any case, I think they felt they had done as much as was possible within the *Slant* format. So the magazine came to an end, with articles by Adrian Cunningham and Terry Eagleton looking ahead to '*Slant* strategy' for the future, while on its final page was printed a useful *Slant* chronology, listing notable 'landmarks' on the journey from 1956 to 1969.

As the above summary shows, the Dominican contribution to *Slant*'s experiments with left-wingery was of key importance. But the Order's contribution did not end with the demise of *Slant* itself. For one thing, Laurence Bright had enabled a number of relevant books to see the light of day.<sup>13</sup> And a good deal of further discussion went on in the pages of *New Blackfriars* in the 1970s, under the editorship of Herbert McCabe (who had been restored to the post in October 1970, following a period of banishment after an incautious remark about Charles Davis's departure from the priesthood). He gave generous space to a good many *Slant* writers. I do not have space here to mention them all. But I will mention one example of an extended—perhaps over-extended—debate that took place on the question of Marxism and morality.<sup>14</sup> Some of the contributions (as indeed much else in the *Slant* venture) owed a great deal to Herbert McCabe's own work in the theology of the sacraments and later in moral theology.<sup>15</sup> The debate began with a thesis propounded by Denys Turner (then of University College, Dublin) that 'Morality is Marxism'. The thesis was that while Marx and Marxists tend to suppose that the scientific study of society (i.e. Marxism) supersedes moral theory, this is just a muddle about the concept of morality. The muddle arises from the collapse of the 'classical' concept of morality under the pressure of Enlightenment ideas. The debate thenceforth centred on the claim of Marxists to be the scientists of society. I raised the question how Marxism could accommodate the concept of *absolutely* illicit acts like torturing people, and Terry Eagleton tried to answer it. Francis Barker, an Althusserian Marxist, then entered the fray to defend the thesis that Marxism is the true science of society: i.e. that its findings, unlike those of theologians, yield genuine knowledge. Theology on the other hand is based upon mere tautologies which cannot yield real knowledge of how things are in the world. The debate from that moment onwards focused on the question whether theology could be genuine knowledge.

Re-reading that debate today is a curious experience. The contributions were very scholarly and sophisticated: but also strangely sterile. They had little to do with what human beings ought or ought not to do. The whole enterprise was extraordinarily abstract. Meanwhile, in the real world outside, people in Britain and America were getting ready to usher in the era of Reagan and Thatcher. Undisciplined squads of capitalist avarice were mobilising under nuclear umbrellas. CND was on the verge of its second period of greatness. And on the distant horizon, under the weight of its enormities and its impoverishments, the USSR was getting ready to disintegrate.

*Slant* accepted too easily, albeit understandably, that 'Communism is a fact. It is viable, stable, succeeding. It has come to stay'.<sup>16</sup> Despite the fact that all the *Slant* writers were resolutely anti-Stalinist, they did not realise how deeply the existence of states built allegedly on Marxist principles undergirded their theoretical loyalties to Marx and to the Marxist concept of revolution. In the end, it may be said, the old original PAX inspiration of principled non-violence and opposition to nuclear weapons outlasted the Marxist preoccupation with building a new Jerusalem. For while Marxist theory may have almost vanished, the battles *Slant* was first mobilised to fight have not yet been won. Morality has outlived Marxism. Christianity may be down, but unlike Marxism, it is not yet out.

- 1 A precursor of the 1960s dialogue may be found in the book by J.M. Cameron entitled *Scrutiny of Marxism*, published in 1948 by the SCM Press in their 'Viewpoints' series. Professor Cameron, who later became the first Catholic holder since the middle ages of a chair in philosophy in a British university (Leeds) was a pre-war communist who had become a Catholic. His book was a dialogue in his own head between the two allegiances. It contains an extended discussion of Marxist ethics—a topic which was to become central to the later dialogue.
- 2 Not surprisingly, J. Alban Evans eventually became Fr. Iltyd Evans OP.
- 3 See Adrian Cunningham, 'The December Group: Terry Eagleton and the New Left Church', in *The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*, (Blackwell, Oxford, 1991). Vol. 1, pp. 210–215.
- 4 *Humanae Vitae* did not appear until 1968.
- 5 See *Slant* 9 (June/July 1966) pp. 16–17
- 6 For some details, see Roger Garaudy, *From Anathema to Dialogue* (London, Collins, 1967) pp. 28–30. *Slant* published two substantial articles by George Vass SJ on Christian/Marxist dialogue in Europe in Nos. 18 (December 1967/January 1968) pp. 3–10 and 19 (February/March 1968) pp. 25–30.
- 7 See Laurence Bright OP, 'Teilhard: a suitable case for dialogue?' in *Slant* 24 (March 1969) pp. 13–16. It should also be mentioned that in *Slant* 12 Laurence Bright had contributed an article on 'Priests and the university', following up work done by a sister organisation, the 'Downside Symposium' under the leadership of John Coulson of Bristol university.
- 8 See *Slant* 11 (October/November 1966) p. 25 and *Slant* 12 (December 1966/January 1967) p. 24.

- 9 *Man, Culture and Christianity*, (London, Sheed and Ward, 1967)
- 10 *Slant* 13 (February/March 1967) and *Slant* 14 (April/May 1967).
- 11 *Birth Regulation and Catholic Belief*, (London, Sheed and Ward, 1967).
- 12 *Slant* 29 (January 1970) p. 7. A useful account of *Slant* and its achievement, by Alan Wall, was published in *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 66 No. 666 (November 1975) pp. 506–516 under the title ‘*Slant* and the Language of Revolution’.
- 13 Terry Eagleton’s final editorial in No. 30 mentions five, but there were several others which bore Laurence’s trademark, as the *Slant* chronology indicates.
- 14 This debate in *New Blackfriars* lasted from February 1973 to April 1978. The items included were as follows: Denys Turner, ‘Morality is Marxism’ (February 1973 and March 1973) and ‘Can a Christian be a Marxist?’ (June 1975); Brian Wicker, ‘Marxists and Christians: Questions for Denys Turner’ (October 1975); Terry Eagleton, ‘Marxists and Christians: Answers for Brian Wicker’, also October 1975; Brian Wicker, ‘Sincerity, Authenticity and God’ (May 1976); Francis Barker, ‘The Morality of Knowledge and the Disappearance of God’ (September 1976); Terry Eagleton, ‘Marx, Freud and Morality’ (January 1977); Brian Wicker, ‘Marxist Science and Christian Theology’ (February 1977); Denys Turner, ‘Marxism, Christianity and Morality: Replies to Francis Barker and Brian Wicker’ (April 1977); Francis Barker, ‘Science and Ideology’ (October 1977); Dick Lobel, ‘Giving Away Power’, (January 1978); Denys Turner, ‘The “Subject” and the “Self”: A Note on Barker’s Cartesianism’ (March 1978); Brian Wicker, ‘“God” and Ideology’ (April 1978).
- 15 Especially *Law, Love and Language* (London, Sheed and Ward, 1968).
- 16 See John Lewis, in *Dialogue of Christianity and Marxism* (London, Lawrence and Wishart 1968) p. 5.

## The Magnificat of the Redeemed Woman

Tina Beattie

There has been a tendency in recent years among feminist and liberationist theologians to read the Magnificat primarily as a proclamation of social justice and liberation for the oppressed. A publication called *Mary, Mother of Socialism*, offers a number of essays which evaluate the liberative potential of the Magnificat, including one by Graham Dowell called “The Magnificat — a Christian Manifesto?” which offers a side-by-side comparison of Mary’s Magnificat and Marx’s Manifesto, with some fascinating juxtapositions and resonances between the two.<sup>1</sup>