

With this issue we start a new volume of *New Blackfriars* and it seems appropriate to begin with a critical comment on last year's work, contributed by Martin Green.

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Dear Herbert,

I like the kind of catholicism which *New Blackfriars* represents, which it is in a sense discovering or rediscovering, and I would like to count myself a member of the movement. But there are one or two things about it which trouble me; perhaps if we discuss them I can see my way through.

In your editorial for the February issue this year, you said, 'There is a time for doing and a time for saying, a time for bettering the world and a time for martyrdom, for reform and for revolution.' What troubles me is of course your identification of the christian today with the revolutionary. By revolutionary I take it you mean the men and the action involved in the Paris Commune in 1870, in the 1917 Revolution in Russia, and perhaps about to be involved in Rhodesia today. This is troubling for obvious reasons; to think that this is what the church demands of me; the danger, the discomforts, the giving up of what I can do for what I can't do, the readiness for prison, torture, death. I realize that it is the *readiness* for this which the church demands of me, but that is in some ways worse. Once put me into a situation in which such action is clearly an option – the option – and the moral problem is simpler. But how would I ever get into such a situation, living the way I do? At my best, I live the life of a liberal, acknowledging responsibilities to reform, not revolution, to bettering society, not destroying it in order to reconstruct it. I am not ready; and this is troubling; but it is a challenge whose legitimacy I can't challenge. After all, the revolutionaries of the past are men I still admire, whatever other feelings I also have about them. I'm not yet at the stage of saying they were simply wrong. So I must be ready to admire and take *some* responsibility for the equivalent of their action today.

But as you go on it seems clear that you are raising other questions, offering me another challenge. You describe three kinds of christianity, conservative, liberal, revolutionary, and your descriptions leave

the liberal kind much the worst off. Conservative christianity thinks all human institutions equally bad and the only revolution worth the cost is 'the change from this human world to a timeless non-political heaven'. Liberal christianity thinks all institutions equally good, and no revolution worth the human cost; so – since there is no heaven – christianity is only 'being kind to the people you meet'. The revolutionary, *New Blackfriars* christian, of course, sees the *Ecclesia semper reformanda* as the counterpart of the 'permanent revolution'. We must be *permanently* ready for violent change, and today in particular is a time when 'revolution is the enemy of reform, when radical change will exact its cost in human suffering, when doing the will of God does not seem to lead to visible happiness for anybody, when a man is simply a witness to truth and no more.'

Yes, we must be ready for violence, ready to cause suffering, since we want change. And my agitation at what you say is testimony enough to my own unreadiness, and therefore to its usefulness and necessariness. But I think that agitation testifies also to something else, to some more genuinely reasonable resistance. You exalt the revolutionary particularly at the expense of the liberal. You are asking me, I think, to become attuned to war rather than to peace, to violence, to conspiracy, and to rebellion, rather than to their opposites. And I *know* – using my judgment rather than defending myself – that that choice is a bad one. I mean it is a bad one for us, as Western world intellectuals. Because it involves us in a whole scheme of corrupt and corrupting attitudes. Modern intellectual life begins (every day anew) with the announcement that the last outpost of sanity and dignity has fallen. Fifty years ago, we are told, twenty years ago, ten – in politics, one year ago – it was still possible to hope this, to believe that, to discuss the other; now all we can do is fight. And to fight, used this way, means to hate; to generate and maintain in oneself an exasperated revulsion, a cessation of sympathy, a passionate wish to destroy.

For a lurid example of what I mean, take the current New York group containing Susan Sontag, Norman Mailer, James Baldwin, or Sartre, Genet, Beckett, Ionesco, in Paris. But in England, surely the same was true of *Scrutiny*, and is true of the *New Left Review*. It is partly the general prevalence of the phenomenon that makes it corrupt, because its attitudes have become in the relevant sense easy. They 'feel right'; they reassure one that one is thinking and living at full throttle – the way big people do. And it is corrupting because such attitudes shape one's judgment of, one's responses to, things that need disinterestedness. A private world, with private standards, is generated. And within it grows a competition in intensity of the membership feelings – the rejection of the outside world; the intellectual equivalent is the artificial rigour of closed-system logic; and the inevitable result is the heresy hunt.

Nothing is uglier or more destructive than this cosy desperateness.

And it seems to me that it must be dishonest, too. For either the desperate man has other kinds of happier experience which he doesn't admit to, which he suppresses intellectually, or else, over ten or twenty years, he must do himself an injury. In the long run, only figures like Genet and de Sade are pure figures of revolution, saints; in this country it is Dylan Thomas who is called holy in this sense, because he destroyed himself; and your linking of revolutionaries with martyrs gestures in the same direction. Those who are not saints take most of life, though in a capitalist society, pretty much the way other people do. They accept it. This is what I would want them to do, of course. But I would also want them to admit that this is what they are doing, 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. Without that there comes a conflict between the committed and the uncommitted halves of their lives. Their private happiness takes on the character of a personal indulgence; each half corrupts the other half; look at the protagonists of Doris Lessing's novels. For instance, such people want their children to be happy, and to trust in the world around them, even while they themselves are committed to distrusting it, to being unhappy in it.

That is why we must not become attuned to war rather than peace. We must be attuned to both. We must not hope to hate the society we live in as much as it deserves. The attempt corrupts. Imagine the New York people, having been to see 'Blues for Mr Charlie', or an underground movie, coming out again on to the hot pavements of New York, seeing everywhere again the works of what they so long ago committed themselves to destroy, going on to a party; what chance have they that the relationships begun or developed there will be anything but destructive?

To be a liberal, to reserve something of oneself, to be incomplete in one's commitment, is not merely to be passive and ineffective. It is to be an adult in ways in which revolutionists are passionate and destructive children. In the day of discussion revolutionists need liberals just as much as in the day of action they need untheoretical soldiers and organizers. From a certain point of view the revolutionist remains an adolescent in relation to both soldier and liberal. That is not the whole truth, of course; we all need to be revolutionists as well as liberals; but it is the half-truth counterpart to your call for us all to become revolutionist *and not* liberals.

I think this is a real difference between us. You go on to say that, '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.' I don't want to learn anything from James Baldwin. Surely he is a classic case of the revolutionary in the bad sense; the man who lives out his revolution, who thinks with his guts – the reverse of 'sex in the head' – who amalgamates and

objectivates all his problems and then hates and repudiates them all with the one hatred. When that is offered me I recoil to the bourgeois rationalist acceptance world that produced Jane Austen and Mozart, *Middlemarch* and Brahms, Forster and Eliot. If I must abandon them, it must be reasoningly and reluctantly, not in a floating triumph of hatred and destructiveness.

Baldwin wants to see blood in the streets, and I've heard you quote enthusiastically that line from Graham Greene's new novel, 'I'd rather have blood on my hands than water like Pilate'. I must admit that the liberal, the man who refuses to attune himself to war *and not* to peace, runs the risk of ending up with the water of Pilate on his hands. But I need not, it seems to me, accept the terms of the challenge, especially when it is forced on me under such auspices. Of course Graham Greene sees things that way; of course Waugh did, and Bernanos, and Mauriac; but I thought *New Blackfriars* was offering us some escape from that kind of Catholicism? Surely we aren't still trapped in that underground cellar, conspiring against the world of happiness up there?

To be a revolutionary *and not* a liberal is to hate the world – the world as it now is, as we have known it. And to hate the world is surely wrong. That is the first of my difficulties with the programme you propose.

Yours Sincerely

MARTIN GREEN

(The editor will reply to Mr Green's criticisms in the November issue.)

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Those readers who have complained about the proof-reading in *New Blackfriars* must feel especially justified by the sentence that found its way into the editorial last month 'the institution of apartheid, like that of divorce, is plainly compatible with christianity . . .' We apologise.

H.Mc.C.