CATHOLIC PROGRESSIVES
IN ENGLAND
AFTER VATICAN II
CATHOLIC PROGRESSIVES IN ENGLAND AFTER VATICAN II

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To my sister and good friend

JANIS HEANEY
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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the evolution of Catholic social thinking from the end of World War II up through the 1960s. Vatican Council II signaled the victory of what can be identified as the Catholic liberal or progressive tradition, the earlier history of which was the subject of my book *Catholic Intellectuals and the Challenge of Democracy* (2002). Thanks to the ground-breaking work of such Catholics as Jacques Maritain, Virgil Michel, Don Luigi Sturzo, George Shuster, Godfrey Diekmann, John Courtney Murray, Hans Küng, and H. A. Reinhold, among others, there was firmly in place by the time of the calling of the Council a platform from which the Church might launch a progressive, reformist approach to the secular challenges of the modern age. These Catholics were champions of liturgical reform, which aimed to reintegrate Christians with the Mystical Body of Christ as a means of extending Christianity into the broader realms of the community.¹ They believed that the ills of excessive capitalism and its opposite, collectivism, could be attenuated by reforming the thought processes and values of modern society. But this was to be a social reconstruction that had to be preceded by a renewal of the Christian spirit, where the doctrine of the Mystical Body uniting Christians with Christ could serve as the link between liturgy

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and sociology. As noted by Virgil Michel, this would “revive and foster
determination to carry Christ-life into the social and economic sphere.” As a means to this end, which required a more active participation in the
liturgy, these reformers advocated the use of the vernacular in the Mass.
This, in conjunction with a number of encyclicals by Pope John XXIII
and his successor, Pope Paul VI, encouraged political pluralism, advances
in ecumenical outreach, greater participation by the lay community in
Church affairs, and religious toleration. The reforms that issued forth
from Vatican II marked the high point of Catholic progressivism in terms
of engaging the modern world.

However, in the views of more traditionalist Catholics, the Council’s promise of renewal and a willingness to embrace the modern world appeared to open the gates to radical changes that would only disrupt and undermine the spiritual dimensions of the faith. The resistance of establishment Catholics, namely, the Roman Curia and affiliated clerical hierarchies along with conservative lay men and women, was challenged by another, younger coterie of Catholics who believed that the Council had not gone far enough in satisfying what they saw to be the essential objective of Christ’s teachings: the creation of a community of humanistic socialism. Such Catholics were convinced that liberal and progressive reforms were insufficient, indeed even counterproductive, since they only served to sustain the status quo and the privileges of those who controlled the levers of political and economic power. These were Catholics of the Left, and they sought the creation of a genuine Christian community culminating in the Kingdom of God, which they thought could never be realized through the liberal model of institutional reform. Even with the best of intentions and absent entrenched elites, liberalism rested philosophically on the fundamental principle of privileging the individual for maximizing self-advancement, the core dynamic of capitalism. In their view, reformist liberalism as a political philosophy produced social energies that worked against the creation of an egalitarian community of shared cultural values. Liberalism, according to such radical Catholics, was always willing to offer “progressive” solutions to social problems but never to go far enough in overturning the institutional structures that caused such problems in the first place.

Whereas conservatives were dedicated to preserving social structures as
they are, liberals were more insidious and thus more dangerous, since they masked the sources of social dysfunction by simply offering the requisite reforms to make prevailing institutions function more efficiently and humanely.

Another significant factor that characterized the English Catholic New Left was its membership. Much of the leadership and energy came from a new generation of Irish immigrant families who, thanks to post–World War II educational reforms, gained access to higher education. These Catholics were intellectually restive and had a far more radical view of how their religion could be used to change the perceived inadequacies of English culture than had either their working-class parents or the aristocratic Catholics who assumed a distinctly paternalistic attitude toward their immigrant co-religionists.

Representative of this more radical Catholic thinking was the English writer Terry Eagleton, who proclaimed that “Christian progressivism” was at root parasitic on the social system that it was intended to oppose. The liberal Catholic critique, Eagleton asserted, was an exploration that avoided engaging with “outside” sociological and philosophical theories and, even when it attempted to do so, was co-opted by the “liberal or ‘social welfare’ styles of developed capitalism.” This meant that liberal or progressive Catholicism could never challenge the prevailing orthodoxies of bourgeois society, since it was readily preempted by the ruling establishment in order to “modernise and consolidate a profoundly conservative system.” This was the process that Eagleton and his associates saw to be currently at work within the Christian Church. Their objective was to move the Church into more revolutionary channels, thereby pushing to the limits how far one could go and still remain of the faith.

I have chosen as a case study of such radical Christianity the experience of the English Catholics, in particular those who associated themselves with the New Left. Unlike their American counterparts, the English radical Catholics succeeded in developing a coherent theological philosophy of revolution based on a synthesis of the “New Theology” that inspired Vatican II and radical economic and social theory, a good deal of which was inspired by the insights of Karl Marx and American and European sociologists and literary theorists.
The driving force behind what came to be called the English Catholic New Left was a periodical called Slant. The young Catholics who were affiliated with this publication and several other associated leftist organizations devoted themselves as Christians to the mission of advancing socialism, which they saw to be the ultimate incarnation of the Kingdom of God. Slant as the avant-garde of this radical agenda intended to liberate the post–World War II generation of English Catholics from what its writers considered to be the stultifying and anti-intellectual world of immigrant Catholicism as well as the pusillanimity of the liberal political and economic thinking that served to assure the continuity of corporate capitalism. In this endeavor the Left Catholics put forth a new set of sociological and religious ideas that provided a framework for the emergence of a more sophisticated theological consciousness that would challenge capitalism and all its assorted evils.

Although the English Catholic New Left did not succeed in meeting their revolutionary objectives, the bold and imaginative efforts made in explicating their positive vision were a source of inspiration to many younger Catholics, who had begun to question the relevance of what they saw as an antiquated religion out of touch with modern times. The Catholic Left offered a perspicacious synthesis of the most seminal socioeconomic and philosophical theories of the modern era and demonstrated how this could be integrated within the framework of Western civilization’s oldest religious tradition. All this certainly underscores the observation of theologian Fergus Kerr, O. P., who wrote that the Catholic Church “is not the monolithic entity that her enemies and most zealous members believe.”

This book is divided into three separate but integrated parts so as to better explicate the transformation from progressive religious reformism to revolution. Part I, “The English Cultural Setting,” provides the historical backdrop for understanding the nature of Catholicism in England. We see here the roots of a small, conservative, and ultramontane Church that ultimately had to accommodate itself to a Protestant and secularized mainstream culture and, by the early nineteenth century, find space for the influx of Irish immigrants. A considerable gulf developed between the old recusant aristocratic Catholics and their working-class brethren. However, both were culturally conformist and showed no pro-
clivity for challenging the prevailing order. Although they preferred to stay beneath the political radar, in the early decades of the new century a different breed of Catholic emerged, consisting of a more politicized coterie, spurred on in large part by a number of influential converts to the creed (G. K. and Cecil Chesterton, Eric Gill, Christopher Hollis, Arnold Lunn, and Douglas Woodruff, among others). It was this group that sowed the seeds of social activism, some elements of which would later culminate in the revolutionary positions of the Catholic New Left. Yet by the end of World War II and well into the 1950s, this more politicized Catholicism had waned, and the English Catholics once again returned to the earlier preference for conformity, conservatism, subcultural separatism, and religious quietude.

Part II, “The Reformers,” expands the historical context for discussing trends in Catholicism from England to Europe, where there were broader and more systematic theological efforts to bring the Catholic Church into the modern age. The ultimate success of the reformers, reflected in the papacy of John XXIII and Vatican Council II, came after a long and difficult struggle to overcome the legacy of what was anathematized as “modernism” and the influential “integralist” forces that demanded that all public and private life be guided by the authority of Rome. Closely bound up with maintaining the monarchical structures of the Church seen to be challenged by modernism was the Vatican’s battle against all facets of liberalism, which in some ways was considered more lethal than communism itself. This model of Church governance reached its maturation in the papacy of Pius XII.

In order to transform the Church and make its existence more relevant to modern life, it was necessary for reformers to overcome two pillars of papal authoritarianism: the theological monopoly of neoscholastic Thomistic orthodoxy, and the Congregation of the Roman Curia, the bureaucratic agents of Vatican business. What opened the doors to progressive voices was the failure of the Church to provide sufficient leadership through the testing of the fascist totalitarianism that had resulted in world war and the social, economic, and political chaos that followed. Now was the time for a new theology that could more realistically address the changes of the postwar world. This burden was undertaken by a group of theologians, many of whom were associated with the University
of Tübingen in Germany, and these were joined by younger Jesuit and Dominican theologians from France and Belgium. Out of their writings emerged the so-called New Theology that initiated a more imaginative and historical understanding of Scripture, an opening up of Church governing structures, and greater lay participation through liturgical renewal. The new theologians and their ideas about reforming Church teachings and institutional structures so as to better serve the needs of the modern era found a sympathetic ear in Pius XII’s successor, Pope John XXIII, who in turn launched the Second Vatican Council.

Finally, Part III, “The Revolutionaries,” describes and analyzes the English Catholic New Left, an increasingly radicalized group of young intellectuals who viewed the liberal reforms of Vatican II as insufficient to achieve what they saw to be the ultimate purpose of the Gospels: a revolutionary transformation of society toward the creation of a humanistic socialism. Their story completes the circle of progressive theological aspirations, which produced a revolutionary reaction, but one that the Left always believed was a turning back to the original intention of scripture.
PART ONE

The English Cultural Setting
British Catholicism after World War II can best be described as authoritarian and paternalistic in structure, leadership, and teaching. The old aristocratic recusant families that had dominated the Church had been obliged to give way to Vatican ultramontane power with the restoration of the hierarchy in 1850, and gentry influence was further compromised by the huge infusion of Irish immigrants seeking employment in England’s industrial cities. \(^1\) Since the time of Cardinal Henry Edward Manning (1808–92), one of the main concerns of the English Catholic leadership was to serve the spiritual and communitarian needs of the Irish laboring class, a group fundamentally alienated from mainstream English culture. Catholicism had been more than a religion for the Irish working people; rather, it defined their cultural identity. In an environment that made immigrants feel strange and different, there had been a natural tendency for them to pull inward, embracing those cultural traditions that gave them the comfort of place. Here is where the familiar religion of Catholicism provided both an anchor of certitude and a regular clerical supply of moral leadership. There were two factors that gave shape to Irish Catholic separatism: the discriminatory and alien English culture itself, and a religion with its unique rituals and institutions that
ness the disgrace in which they stood. . . . There was nothing for them . . . but eternal punishment for their damned souls unless they mended their ways.” By the time the priest had finished, Holland concluded, each scholar was petrified with fear—not of God but of the priest.5

Not surprisingly, in the hearts and minds of young Catholics the combination of fear and clerical authoritarianism could inspire grim visions of the Apocalypse. The literary critic Terry Eagleton recalled the school retreats from his youth in the working-class community of Salford, when one of the priests depicted in vivid detail the three dark days of Satan’s rampage, where only holy candles would burn. “Ashen-faced and subdued,” wrote Eagleton, “I lived in constant fear of the Second Coming, which was somehow merged with the threat of Russian invasion—Christ and Khrushchev rolled into one.” There was at least some solace for the young Eagleton, however, since with “low neo-scholastic cunning” he had worked out that it could not happen before 1960, the year when the pope was to open the letter containing the message from Our Lady of Fatima. How could God “blow the whistle before then”?6

Generally speaking, English bishops and priests had not distinguished themselves as intellectuals. Until recently they had been the products of educational training purposely isolated from the main institutions of higher learning. The clergy who served the Irish community were not trained as administrators, diplomats, or university scholars. Their education took place in Ireland and was geared to parish service. The guiding purpose of the parish priest, as Lodge has observed, was to provide pastoral care to a predominantly working-class and lower-middle-class community who, it was assumed, needed to be shielded from the corrosive influence of modern ideas in the arts and sciences through obedience to clerical authority.7 In the words of England’s highest-ranking prelate before World War II, Cardinal Archbishop Arthur Hinsley of Westminster, it was the existence of separate Catholic schools alone that could save the young people from the “easy descent into the depths of paganism.”8

For years the hierarchy had restricted young Catholics in any effort to expand their intellectual horizons through higher education. Cardinal Manning’s successor at Westminster, Cardinal Herbert Vaughan, regarded English universities as centers of infidelity and worldliness. It
supplied a sense of community independent of the larger society in which it was located.

The immigrant Irish subculture of Catholicism, represented by a close network of primary socialization, allowed participants to locate themselves within a meaningful particularistic tradition from which they might find access to the wider English mainstream culture. But this was a subculture conditioned by deference to authority and undergirded by a heavy dose of spiritual trepidation. Cardinal Archbishop John C. Heenan of Westminster highlighted the efficacy of sin through the confessional box for keeping Catholics in line. Catholics attended Mass, he admitted, rather because of fear than the love of God: “knowing the faithful as a mother knows her children,” the Church tells them what to do for their own good. Catholic adults were like children and had to be told what to do. How all this impacted on the consciousness of the individual Catholic was captured by the novelist David Lodge in his book *How Far Can You Go?:* “Up there was Heaven; down there was Hell. It was like Snakes and Ladders: sin sent you plummeting down towards the Pit; the sacraments, good deeds, acts of self-mortification, enabled you to climb back towards the light. Everything you did or thought was subject to spiritual accounting.” Those who faltered might even be punished by the very means through which they were supposed to communicate with their Savior. One London priest, for example, imposed a collective penance of saying “three Hail Mary’s” when members of his church failed to attend a meeting on Catholic education.

The former Jesuit Peter Hebblethwaite related the story told to him by a Mr. John Holland of Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancashire, who described what it was like to attend the local Catholic school. The parish priest who came into the school on Sunday mornings greeted students with his inquisition: “Hands up, those who were at the 9:30 Mass?” There was no communion at the 11:00 service, meaning that only the lazy and less devout attended. The second and devastating question was, “And which of you missed holy mass?” After a pause, the Clegg children raised their hands. The family had no shoes. The MacDermotts and the Haydens also had missed the service. The MacDermotts had a drunken father, and the Haydens had no dad at all. “These were the scholars who were lashed by the priest’s invective,” explained Holland, “who called upon God to wit-
was not until 1895, nearly twenty-five years after the lifting of religious
tests for Catholics at Oxford, that the Vatican (after a reluctant petition
by Vaughan) gave permission for Catholics to attend the nation’s elite
secular universities. Even as late as the 1960s, Catholic chaplaincies at
British universities were unable to receive sufficient support from the
Church. For the most part, young Catholics were taught to conform.
Yet what they received in return did not linger long on their intellectual
palate. Lodge has written that religious instruction consisted of memo-
rizing the Penny Catechism and monotonously recounting the Ten Com-
mandments and the sacraments. He could not recall being exposed to
any other religious textbook, and seldom was any reference even made
to the Old and New Testaments. Desmond Fisher, editor of the London
Catholic Herald during the years of Vatican Council II, noted that Catho-
lics in the 1950s listened to sermons that had no relevance to their real
lives, failed to understand the Latin rituals, and only attended church out
of habit, fearing the consequences if they did not. Intellectual life itself
was an exotic rarity among the working-class Irish. Eagleton pointed out
that literacy was not the strong point in his childhood community in
industrial Salford, a world “which would no more have understood how
you make a living by writing books than how you could make one by
picking wax from your ears.”

Despite the criticisms of Lodge, Eagleton, and others, it would be a
mistake to assume that all Catholics inhabited an intellectual wasteland.
A number of English bishops up to the 1940s received at least part of
their higher education for the priesthood in Rome. This certainly was a
rigorous intellectual experience, yet it served to mitigate national and
parochial perspectives, strengthening instead ultramontane tendencies
and devotion to the Vatican. As Cardinal Heenan of Westminster put
it, “Romanità,” or the Roman spirit, with its encounters with St. Peter’s
Basilica, audiences with the Vicar of Christ, and the solemn pontifical
ceremonies, “exercise an imperceptible but permanent effect upon the
young clerics.” These experiences above all made the priest especially
conscious of being “one of the Pope’s men.” The effect of such educa-
tional and spiritual conditioning was to bind very strongly the English
bishops to a Catholic subculture of separateness, and the ties that bound
the hierarchy to Rome partly explain why the English church lagged be-