

How far Left can a Catholic go? Fifty years after the demise of *Slant*, the 1960s journal that outraged many with its embrace of Catholicism and Marxism, the question hasn't gone away / By MADOC CAIRNS

# When red was the word

**G**RAHAM GREENE once mourned the fact that British Catholicism produced eccentrics rather than revolutionaries. During the 1960s, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, a group of young Catholics set out to prove Greene wrong.

Their journal, *Slant*, launched in spring 1964, attracted furious criticism – and passionate supporters. Rumours circulated that the bishops were looking for a way to shut it down. Headlines in the secular and religious press alike deplored the rise of the “Catholic Marxists”. And then, 50 years ago, after 30 issues, it was all over.

It's one of the most curious episodes in the recent history of the Church in England and Wales. It began with a priest and a pub. Or – as I came to realise when I spoke to surviving *Slant* contributors – several pubs, and an enormous quantity of bitter. The priest, Laurence Bright – a tall, softly-spoken Dominican friar – had started his spiritual journey as a far-Right agnostic. Now a Catholic priest, the former nuclear physicist had undergone a similar turnaround in his political beliefs. He was firmly on the Left: a socialist, of a distinctly radical hue.

In 1964, the Left was on the rise in institutions across the world: with Vatican II ongoing and the Church in ferment, it seemed to Bright that there was no reason why the same couldn't be true within Catholicism.

Around Bright in Cambridge was a group of young Catholic intellectuals, part of a cohort of university students and graduates, many of them emerging from working-class Irish-Catholic communities all over Britain. One of them – Terry Eagleton, now an internationally renowned cultural theorist – put a question to Bright. “How far”, asked Eagleton, a socialist but not yet a Marxist, “can a Catholic go to the Left?” Smiling, Bright answered: “Oh, about as far as you like.”

That was the theory. *Slant* was the practice.

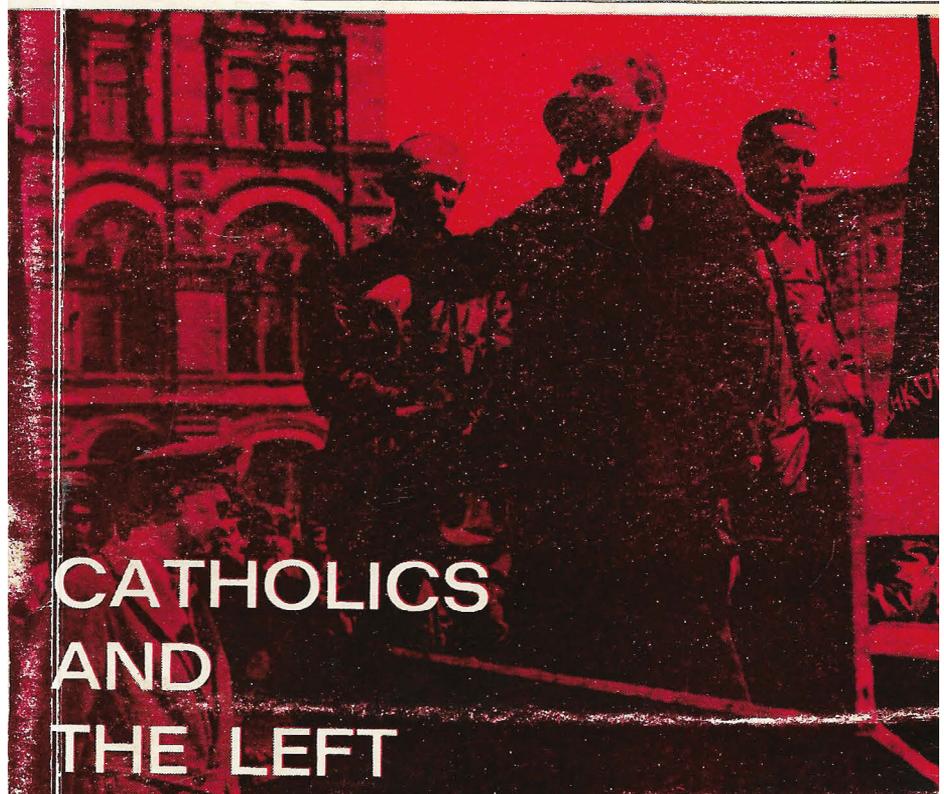
**THERE IS** a long history of British Catholics engaging with Left-wing political movements and ideas, from Cardinal Manning to Chesterton and the distributists. Bright and his co-thinkers, however, were creating something quite new: a composite of the spirit of Vatican II and the movement of anti-Stalinist, humanist Marxism known as the “New Left”. The chimeric creature that resulted was irreverent, intellectually ambitious – and spoiling for a fight.

Target number one was traditional Catholic theology, which required a total refit in light of the Gospel's political imperative to socialist

Sheed & Ward/Stagbooks



'SLANT MANIFESTO'



revolution. Theological conservatives were excoriated for blocking change within the Church; liberals (“eschatological Fabians”) were upbraided for not going far enough. As *Slant* gathered momentum – accumulating reading groups and symposia – it became famous, or notorious, for Marxist critiques of everything from Benedictine to the political degeneration of the Rolling Stones.

Readers of the first issues discovered that something had gone terribly wrong with official Christianity. Beleaguered by “supernaturalism”, hamstrung by “dualism”, Catholics had abandoned Christ's directive to transform the world and retreated into an individualised, moralistic spirituality. But the world was now being reborn, as the working classes and oppressed peoples of the world

were taking up the struggle for liberation from the powers and systems that distorted and exploited them. And the Church could play a role in this transformation – if she could be herself transformed. Enter *Slant*.

*Slant's* subscription numbers peaked at 2,000 in 1966, the year after it started being professionally produced by the Catholic publisher Sheed & Ward. But despite the small size of the core group – never rising above more than a dozen – *Slant* punched well above its weight intellectually.

Another Dominican priest, Herbert McCabe, one of the most influential English theologians of the twentieth century, contributed to the journal – and sank quite a few pints with the editorial board. McCabe and Denys Turner, now professor of theology at Princeton, like others who went on to found *Slant*, had participated in the annual “December Group” retreat and conference centre, Spode House, in Staffordshire, since the early 1960s.

**OTHER FORMER** *Slant* contributors went on to be publishers, journalists, poets or academics. When I spoke to some, 50 years on from its demise, none of them regretted the time and energy they had put into it.

It's surprising that a journal edited and distributed mainly by undergraduates managed to keep going for six years; it's astonishing that it maintained such high intellectual standards throughout. And *Slant* – digital copies of which are now traded surreptitiously between enthusiasts in the internet equivalent of dark alleys – managed to cover theology, literary theory, political theory, reportage, poetry and satire, often in the same issue.

Titles such as “Priesthood and Leninism” – in which an effervescent young Eagleton posited that priests should act as a revolutionary vanguard – give some idea of the tone.

But much of *Slant's* output focused on serious analyses of the big questions – God, language, the sacraments, community, culture – that some of its contributors continued to explore in the decades after the curtain came down. Terry Eagleton, in particular, has returned to the theological questions in the last few decades, writing books and giving lectures that Fergus Kerr OP, a contributor who was a “critical friend” of the group, describes as *Slant's* modern legacy.

Like good Marxists – and like good Catholics – the Slantites tried to marry theory to practice. *Slant* inspired around two dozen discussion groups, its members gave talks around the country, and an Irish sister publication, *Grille*, was set up. The group even tried leafleting parishes with radical interpretations of that week's gospel. At one point, *Slant* entered into dialogue with the Communist Party – although Eagleton thinks at that time the Communists “probably would have been happy to dialogue with the RSPB”.

With the publication of the *Slant Manifesto: Catholics and the Left*, with essays by Eagleton, Adrian Cunningham, Brian Wicker, Martin Redfern, Neil Middleton and Laurence Bright, in 1966 – soon followed by

around a dozen more books written by members of the group – *Slant's* star was ascendant. The manifesto was published in the United States and translated into Spanish and Portuguese, and members of the group were in demand as speakers and writers around the world. Redfern, now retired after more than 30 years as managing director of Sheed & Ward, told me that, in a world before liberation theology, *Slant* had been something genuinely quite new.

In light of the rise of liberation theology in the 1970s – a movement that sparked the kind of revolutionary upheaval *Slant* had zealously promoted – it seems evident to Terry Eagleton that “in some ways *Slant* was a decade too early”. Early or not, the journal played a small but significant role in introducing British Catholics to the radical theologies germinating in Latin America. It was, for example, the first point of contact for the English-speaking world with Dom Hélder Câmara, the “Red Bishop” of Recife in Brazil. *Slant* published Câmara, and its supporters helped organise his visit to the UK.

For several contributors, their involvement in *Slant* began a decades-long commitment to Latin American causes. The late Leo Pyle, who went on to be professor of biotechnology at the University of Reading, even ended up working for the Allende government in Chile, something another member of the group, the writer Francis McDonagh, doubts would have been possible without Pyle's credentials as a “Catholic Marxist”.

**BUT THE NATURE** of the “Catholic Marxism” that characterised *Slant* is – judging by the debates within the journal – harder to pin down. Was Christianity a “depth” within Marxism? Was it an “attitude”? Was it even necessary? Did Christianity need to be “demythologised”, or renewed? The group was unafraid of asking these questions, but struggled to answer them. Beyond a generalised commitment to theological and political radicalism, *Slant* didn't promote an ideology so much as present a bricolage of different political and theological views.

Herbert McCabe, a “semi-detached” contributor to the journal, wasn't enthused by bold proposals from some members for a “revolutionary theology”. McCabe preferred, McDonagh told me, “to take both his Marxism and his Catholicism ‘neat’”. In the decades after the journal folded, McCabe persisted in his belief that radical political commitment could – and indeed, should – flow from theological orthodoxy. But his tragic view of human nature sharply contrasted with the optimism that characterised *Slant*.

For McCabe, who died in 2001, the real meaning of Christianity was: “If you don't love you'll die: and if you do love, they'll kill you.” But, as Eagleton told me, “that wasn't Slantite at all.” Eagleton thinks McCabe's darker, ironic vision of the limits of politics is better suited to the times we are living in now. And, of the

*Slant* group, it's McCabe – and particularly his 1980 essay “The Class Struggle and Christian Love” – that's had the most influence on contemporary Catholic Leftists.

**MOST OF** the former contributors I spoke to agreed that *Slant* was very much “of its time”. Slantites imbibed the hopes of a decade where it was thought, as poet and translator Dinah Livingstone recalls, that “peace and love” could overcome any obstacle. In the years immediately following Vatican II, many felt a radical renewal of Catholicism was possible. And in the realm of politics, it was a time when revolution seemed not only necessary but plausible.

*Slant* barely made it out of the 1960s. It closed down in January 1970, when the high hopes of the previous decade were fading, inside and outside of the Church. Looking back, most of those who wrote for it told me it had been the right time to move on. *Slant's* moment had passed. Some of the editors had wanted to keep the journal going, but were undermined by the amount of money it was costing their publisher. Members of the group were drifting apart geographically. But – as Redfern remembers it – they also felt they didn't have much more to say.

If the climate of the 1960s gave *Slant* a chiliastic tinge, it's worth remembering how different the Church was in its time. Redfern pointed out to me that for most Catholics now, it's not absurd that a Catholic might also be a socialist, but in the pre-conciliar Church, things were very different. The election of John Paul II might, as retired academic and writer Bernard Sharratt thinks, have blocked radical movements

within the Church, but the authoritarian, pietistic Catholicism he and the other contributors to *Slant* grew up in has never returned. Bishops are far more comfortable condemning war and poverty and racism than they once were, and with the election of Pope Francis, forms of liberation theology are now relatively mainstream in the Church.

*Slant's* peculiar blend of Marxism and Christianity has a certain cachet too, among a younger, internet-based circuit of Catholic socialists. Jay Corrin's 2013 book on *Slant* revived interest in academia. And since 2015, with the advent of the ill-starred “Tradinista!” project, certain parts of the Church have again been haunted by visions of glassy-eyed Bolshevik youth wielding *Das Kapital* in one hand and the gospels in the other. The threat has been considered sufficiently serious to prompt a book, the inventively titled *Can a Catholic Be a Socialist?: The Answer Is No – Here's Why*. And one group, the Institute for Christian Socialism, has started a journal, called *Bias*, a name chosen in explicit tribute to *Slant*.

How far to the Left can a Catholic go? Fifty years on, that question is still being asked.

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