

Building Jerusalem?

Christianity and the Labour Party

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Series foreword

The Bible speaks to politics because God is interested in government – the right public ordering of our relational priorities. But what about party politics? Political parties are often tribal. Commanding our loyalty, they can often be places that both express and suppress religious identity. Whether we like it or not, political parties dominate politics in the UK and are set to do so for the foreseeable future. As collegiate enterprises, they have traditionally provided a political focus for joining broad sets of ideas around a unifying theme or common vision for society. In recent years, as the inspiration of great political ideals has waned, they have become more complex and even contradictory vehicles for representation. This offers new challenges and opportunities for Christian engagement in politics.

This is one of three publications – extended essays – representing the first phase of the *Partisan* project – a developing resource on Christianity and British political parties initiated and funded by the Bible Society, and produced and delivered in partnership with the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics (KLICE). The aim of the project is to stimulate new and robust Christian political reflection within British political parties. It has been launched at a paradoxical time.

Presently, the public role of religion in the UK is both expanding and deepening. At the same time, it is attracting fierce criticism from increasingly assertive secularists. This makes the need for fresh insight on how Christianity relates to British parties an urgent priority.

The first phase of the project concentrates on the three largest parties – Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat – but our hope is that a later phase will engage other parties as well, and from all four nations of the UK. This phase has developed with the invaluable help of the three Christian party political groups within the parties concerned – the Conservative Christian Fellowship (CCF), the Christian Socialist Movement (CSM) and the Liberal Democrat Christian Forum (LDCF). Special thanks are due to Elizabeth Berridge (CCF), Andy Flannagan (CSM), and Zoe Dixon (LDCF). We are immensely grateful for their enthusiasm for the project, for their advice as it took shape, and for their assistance in disseminating these first fruits. We should make it clear, however, that while these three organisations generously offered their moral and practical support for the preparation of these essays, the opinions expressed in them are the authors' alone and do not represent the official stances

of the organisations concerned nor of the parties to which they are affiliated (nor of the project's two institutional sponsors).

These essays are offered as a part of a conversation that has been going on for many years among party political Christians. As 'critical friends' of the parties, the authors were each asked to address the role of Christianity within them. We commissioned Joshua Hordern, Paul Bickley and Stephen Backhouse to engage – appreciatively but frankly – with the history, theology and broad policy orientations of the party traditions to which they were assigned. We invited them to identify the characteristic historical and contemporary 'gifts' given by the Christian faith to the party tradition in question, but also to employ insights from Christian political theology to confront the party's vulnerabilities or Achilles' heels where they found them. Within those broad parameters the authors were given freedom to develop their arguments as they saw fit, with their own preferred emphases, and in their own distinctive idioms. Importantly, the books seek to be discursive, not definitive. Each offers a particular (theological) reading of the history and contemporary condition of the political party concerned, in recognition that there are, of course, other equally legitimate and necessary readings. We are very grateful to the authors for the intelligence and dedication with which they rose to the demanding challenges of our commission.

Our hope is that the *Partisan* project will bring fresh theological depth, self-awareness, and critical potential to conversations already under way about the contribution of Christian faith to British party politics. The essays leave no doubt that Christianity has made notable – at times perhaps even decisive – contributions to the thinking and practice of the parties. At the same time, they proceed from the recognition that today these contributions are not only ignored by many, but also often resisted or derided by some voices within the parties. Among the latter are those who still subscribe to the discredited – yet surprisingly tenacious – social-scientific myth that modernisation necessarily (and rightly) brings with it the privatisation of religion and the secularisation of the public square. The *Partisan* project sets itself squarely against that myth and seeks to underline the legitimacy of a wide variety of faith-based contributions to political debate, within an open democratic forum in which robust political parties will continue to play an indispensable role.

No one involved in the project – least of all the authors themselves – pretends that these essays are anything more than one modest contribution to a debate that needs to take place at many levels and to involve a wide range of participants – and not only Christians. Yet, given the widespread popular disillusionment with and disengagement from party politics – indeed from the whole political process – in recent

years, the 'convictional health' of parties is of vital concern for our entire parliamentary democracy.

Everyone involved in this project would share the conviction that, as an ancient prophet warned another nation in crisis, 'where there is no vision, the people perish' (Proverbs 29.18, AV). We hope that these essays stimulate new thinking about the urgent need for, and the desirable contents of, new political visions shaped by a primary Christian identity and biblical worldview. We hope too that they will offer food for the journey for those already working within British political parties, and inspire others to consider entering the party political fray themselves as a constructive, honourable and missional arena of authentic Christian citizenship – for the common good of the whole nation.

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Introduction

In the 1906 General Election, the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) fielded over fifty candidates for election. Owing to a pact with the powerful Liberal Party of the day, around thirty of these had a straight run at their seats. Twenty-nine were elected, with a further Liberal member joining the group early in the Parliament. As a result of the Lib/Lab pact and – in the light of the Taff Vale judgement – the slow awakening of the trade unions' political consciousness, the labour movement now had independent political representation.¹ They sat on the opposition benches, elected their own whips and officers, and gave themselves a new name: the Labour Party.

This looks like a moment when British politics changed irrevocably. In spite of a Liberal landslide in 1906, that party would suffer a 'strange death' within a generation and for the rest of the twentieth century political life would be dominated by two parties and two ideologies. In reality, it was just one of a series of small steps that saw the development of a coherent social movement to secure a national public life reordered and rebalanced in the economic and political interests of the urban working class.

Many – and not simply the religious – have observed that Christianity has had a profound influence on this labour tradition.² In British political history 'radical' positions have frequently been nourished by Christian thought, their imagination shaped by a biblical imagination. 'When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then a

gentleman?' asked John Ball, Lollard priest and ringleader of the Peasants' Revolt.³ The Christian tradition and the witness of its Scriptures are shot through with the demand for justice and righteousness. The New Testament announcement of the Kingdom of God looks like a profound reversal of the social order, where the first shall be last and the last shall be first, where those who care for the 'least of these brothers of mine' will be recognised by God. This is not an idle eschatological vision – pie in the sky when we die – but one which its proponents have often sought to realise within the present political order. Gerard Winstanley, sixteenth century radical and founder of the egalitarian Digger communities, spoke of the imperative for action: 'my mind was not at rest, because nothing was acted, and thoughts ran in me, that words and writings were all nothing, and must die, for action is the life of all, and

if thou dost not act, thou dost nothing'. In the honourable tradition of Christian social reflection, it has long been understood that without corresponding action theology is disempowered.⁴

Whatever the chequered history of Christianity, it would be hard to deny that the Christian gospel is the primary intellectual progenitor of the modern commitment to human dignity and equality that undergirds all democratic political projects. In one sense, then, it was eminently predictable that from its birth to the present day, many of Labour's leaders would have espoused some form of Christian faith – Hardie and Henderson, Brown and Blair. It is not surprising that mid-Victorian Christian Socialism flourished into life as a response to the legitimate claims of Chartism, nor that elements of Chartism itself were, in aspects, strongly religious. We should not be shocked that a straight line is often drawn between Nonconformity and Labour politics, or that R.H. Tawney looms large in the mythology, if not the thinking, of the modern Labour Party.

What is more surprising is the comparative level of hostility that now exists between churches, Christians and the Labour Party and its broader movement. Rhetorically – and in some cases in actuality – the relationship has remained warm (though that warmth is now more often directed towards a homogenised category of 'faith groups', and only when their behaviour is

sufficiently agreeable). The Jubilee Debt Campaign is just one example of where religiously inspired social movements and the Labour Party have continued, enthusiastically, to find common cause. There is some evidence to suggest that the Labour Party continues to enjoy higher levels of support amongst some elements of the Christian community (and significantly higher Muslim support), though less so than in the past.⁵ Yet there clearly is something in the culture of the Party that now tends to alienate Christians: Labour may or may not 'owe more to Methodism than Marx', but it has nevertheless become the very party that doesn't 'do God'.⁶

The ideological context

The Labour Party, unlike its European counterparts, has never called itself socialist. At the founding of the Independent Labour Party in 1893 in Bradford, this was a conscious and deliberate choice. Hardie and others recognised the wisdom in incorporating a broad coalition of individuals and ideas into a movement defending the interests of the working man and woman. It needed, above all, to be capable of attracting the unionised working class, which Ben Tillet described as 'a body of men well organised, who paid their money, and were Socialists at their work every day and not merely on the platform, who did not shout for blood-red revolution, and when it came to revolution, sneaked [*sic*] under the nearest bed'.⁷

Nevertheless, to the extent that the Party locates itself within that ideological tradition, it is tempting to launch headlong into a theological critique of socialism in its various guises.⁸ If we were to do so, we would have to recognize that 'socialism' is not a unitary or coherent body of thought, easily described. In fact, socialism assumes such a variety of shapes and emphases that R.H. Tawney was led to speak of 'the radiant ambiguity of the word' and suggest that its meaning varies substantially with the political realities and the specific environment in which it develops. It is always 'unprofitable to discuss the doctrine in general terms without defining the particular type of it under consideration'.⁹

Which socialism does the Labour party express? Perhaps the most influential post-war Labour thinker, Anthony Crosland, identified no less than twelve separate and distinct intellectual traditions which shaped the Party, leading to the awkwardly complicated conclusion that historically it has drawn from them all. These include John Locke's philosophy of natural law, the experimental socialism of Robert Owen, the Ricardian labour theory of value, William Morris' anti-commercialism, Fabianism, the paternalist welfare state tradition, along with Marxism and Christian Socialism. For Crosland, Christian Socialism is aligned most closely with Owenite perspectives on the cooperative organisation of industry, since for both 'the essential evil was the competitive pursuit of private gain ...'. As

we survey the ideological landscape, we see that there are a variety of socialisms, and some doctrines prevail at some times. But in a further complication, it is not simply that there are different emphases or priorities. Some of these doctrines might be simultaneously held yet mutually contradictory. In other words, the problem is not simply the plurality of positions, but also their inconsistency.¹⁰

'How then to decide which is the correct scripture?' asks Crosland, in an interesting turn of phrase. Concluding that it is impossible, he suggests a selection of broader themes coalescing around a welfare objective associated with the eradication of primary poverty and the guarantee of universal material subsistence. For him, this was a primary motivating force for the majority of socialists who never subscribed to a particular theoretic creed.¹¹

Crosland suggests that these themes had become disjointed from economic and political reality by the 1950s. As both a thinker and an elected politician he represented a final and crucial element of the Labour tradition: revisionism. This describes the capacity of the Labour Party to reframe its aims, objectives and methods according to foundational values. Characteristically, the revisionist tendency has followed Tawney and Crosland in distinguishing between means and ends. The 'end' – the kind of society we want

to see – is non-negotiable; the means can change according to time and circumstance.

The worst source of confusion is the tendency to use the word [socialism] to describe not a certain kind of society, or certain values which might be attributes of a society, but particular policies which are, or are thought to be, means of attaining this kind of society or realising these attributes.¹²

Although Crosland and others were championing this position in the early 1950s, and R.H. Tawney and Hugh Dalton even earlier, it was not until the last decade of the twentieth century that revisionism achieved its full potency in the Party. The symbolic removal of Clause IV – which committed Labour to ‘common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange’ – from the Party’s constitution was the defining revisionist moment. So Blair, for instance, having asserted the principle of ‘social justice’, rejected Labour’s traditional means of achieving it (state ownership and control of the commanding heights of the economy and progressive taxation). ‘... Labour has returned to its values and is now seeking the clearest and most effective ways of putting them into practice ... liberating us from the terrible tyranny of confusing means and ends.’¹³ We will return to this argument later, but suffice it to say for the moment that the separation between means and ends is hardly sustainable.

What are we looking for?

Unfortunately for our project, the Labour tradition is therefore in all sorts of ways a moving target – we must speak not of socialism, but of socialisms, and perhaps not of the Labour Party, but of Labour Parties.¹⁴ As Robert Leach has pointed out, it is equally difficult to see with what principle the precise and authentic Christian socialist tradition, within the Party, might be identified.¹⁵ The different flowerings of Christian engagement with the Party seem, *prima facie*, to have no strong relationship with each other. F.D. Maurice’s nuanced theological critique of the operation of the competitive free market and Kier Hardie’s uncompromising Christian polemics against inequality seem separated not just in time, but also by tone and content. Is an attempt at comparison or connection even legitimate, since the two men saw themselves as being engaged in such fundamentally different tasks?

The first and major part of this essay, therefore, will be to provide a historical taxonomy of the key connections between Christianity and the labour movement. It will consider the religious backgrounds of the ‘founding fathers’, the place of Nonconformity, the influence of early Christian Socialism, the work of R.H. Tawney, and the Catholic tradition in the party.¹⁶ For convenience, these are split chronologically into nineteenth and twentieth century engagements.

We will suggest that these Christian traditions – sometimes collectively called Christian Socialism, though this should not be identified solely with those who have called themselves Christian Socialists – are characterised by an emphasis on two separate but closely interrelated foundations. First and foremost, they are marked by a critique of 'the market', by which we mean the abstract system of economic relations that casts all participants as self interested, contract-making individuals maximising pecuniary interests. This critique has been unashamedly ethical before being functional, which is to say that it relies primarily on how the market fails to recognise human dignity rather than on how it can be proved evidentially to be inefficient or irrational.¹⁷

Christian Socialism, which has lent its imaginative, linguistic and intellectual resources to the wider movement, has therefore been rightly bracketed with other 'ethical' socialisms. But although it has fed from and into them, it rests on unique foundations. In its engagement of theology and practice with the whole gamut of political, cultural and anthropological questions, Christian social witness draws on the eschatological story of a redeemed social and political reality, which honours both the created dignity of human beings and the ultimate realisation of peace and justice. Metaphorically speaking, this is captured in the image of the New Jerusalem

in Revelation 21, the very Jerusalem which Blake envisioned labouring to build in England's green and pleasant land.

This story has provided a powerful grounding for thinking about equality as a proper feature of human relationships, anticipating the future hope. Sociologist Michael Mann has observed how the congregations of the early Church provided a kind of rival organisation to the empire, offering a better sense of meaning and belonging than did the political and social institutions of the empire. In the Church, those from excluded communities were 'made at home in the universe' as members of an egalitarian fellowship which 'had universal significance in relation to ultimate meaning ... fused the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and material to provide a transcendent *society*'.¹⁸

Second, therefore, the Christian Socialist tradition has tended towards a strong view of the diffusion of power and the redemption of social relationships through non-statist means. Theologically speaking, the Church itself is in its essence a vision of social order which emphasises equality, justice relationships and fraternity: by faithfully being what it should be it can claim to offer an embodied and actual change in conditions (and the fact that the Church has not always lived up to these aspirations partly explains the visceral reaction and protest against the churches from early Labour leaders). Having

generated from within itself powerful resources for social change, the Church has rarely seen the state as the only agency capable of mobilising against injustice through, for example, taxation and welfare spending. The problem is not just the particular system of market capitalism, such that it can be replaced by a better and modified version or managed by the state, but the wider degradation of human values and the way this disfigures any market, or indeed, any state. This view is most explicit in Roman Catholic Social Teaching, but present too in the early Christian Socialists and R.H. Tawney. The Christian tradition, like other ethical socialisms, is therefore disposed towards non-statist responses to the problem of economic and political disadvantage.

Practically, this has meant the organisation of working people in communities both within and beyond the Church, education (and this again not necessarily through the agency of the state), and the reorganisation of capital through the encouragement of cooperatives. In other words, a problem which is in its nature cultural, moral and theological demands cultural, moral and theological solutions, which will create 'spaces in which fellowship can become a lived reality'.¹⁹

Of course, it is unnecessary and indeed unhelpful to offer a defence or justification for any and every religious intervention on the political left; we can learn as much from

its wrong turns as its achievements. On the occasions where it has sacrificed specifically Christian symbols and practices, it has failed to offer anything substantial or distinctive to that labour tradition and allowed itself to become or to be made into an anaemic proxy of other types of ethical socialism.

The third section of this essay, under the title 'Twenty-first century engagements', will provide a more systematic reflection on the current ideological position of the Party and a consideration of the implications of the theological themes that have arisen in the historical survey. Here, this document will be most useful to those who want to reflect on the opportunities, obligations and difficulties for Christians who want to vote for, support, or become a member of the Labour Party. It will offer a critique, from the best resources of Christian Socialism, of the Party as it is. The key argument will be that for quite understandable electoral and theoretical reasons, Labour has (now self-consciously) adopted an essentially liberal philosophical position, vis-à-vis both the economy and society. Marxism and Fabianism, whose arguments against capitalism were mounted respectively against its self-destructive tendencies and its inefficiencies, have both been proved wrong. This rendered most of the traditional intellectual commitments of the left obsolete or irrelevant, and meant that the only remaining tools are a modified welfarism (itself heavily dependent on economic growth via the market economy)

and light touch economic management, chiefly in the form of regulating to ameliorate the worst effects of the market it has sought to liberalise. This is the 'Third Way'.

New Labour's unique contribution to political practice is a combination of ... state collectivism with a robust market economics. This is the idea that capitalism in the form it takes in financial markets is the most efficient means of distributing resources, pursuing prosperity and protecting liberty. The withdrawal of Labour as a force within the economy – confining itself to spending the money generated by financial deregulation on welfare – has proved to be decisive in determining its fate.²⁰

While for the Fabians the state was the 'eudemonic machine', the agency through which happiness is delivered, now choice and autonomy within the market are both the substance and the driver of the good life. Labour has therefore departed from the intellectual spaces in which it was birthed.²¹

What Labour now lacks, therefore, is a sustainable critique of the market and its worst effects. One consequence is its increasing distance from the classes amongst which its political support has traditionally been built. In a way frighteningly reminiscent of Tawney's warnings, the Labour Party risks offering

nothing except 'stuff', without any substantial enhancement of freedom or improvement in social relations. This malady is veiled (though ever more thinly) by the Labour Party's contemporary linguistic 'eirenicons', such as 'social justice', 'progressivism', and 'collective action', all of which are strikingly non-specific in meaning.²² What can not be hidden is the massive loss of confidence in the Labour Party amongst the working poor and indebted.

The essay will conclude by suggesting that the Labour Party should open up again a conversation about what Labour aspires to achieve, a matter that has long been assumed to be settled while the 'means' to achieving ends have been endlessly deliberated upon. Can Labour become a movement which is not simply an aspirant to government, but a social movement which values solidarity, religious life, local communities and economies, the importance of the place of work and employee involvement?

In pressing this question, it presumes no more than to add another voice to an existing chorus on the centre left which emphasises locality, mutuality, a rejection of bureaucratic statism and of a welfarism addicted to the tax-take from a rampant consumer economy and freewheeling financial service sector. But the Christian tradition cannot simply be homogenised into the range of existing opinion that is

dissatisfied with the place of the labour movement. Christians in the Labour Party must practice and understand their own distinctive symbols, investigate their own narrative. In doing so, the Party will make itself the best possible fellow traveller for other ethical socialists. Christians on the left must now emphasise the 'Christian' elements of their thinking much more strongly.

Religious belief has posed a problem to labour historians. Most of the publications produced to mark the Labour Party's centenaries were perfunctory in their treatment of religion:

The discipline [of labour history], after all, was in its infancy in the 1960s, the decade when the thesis that modernity equals secularisation was at its height. Contemplating organizations they saw as being on the advanced wing of that modernity no doubt made it easy for labour historians to conclude that 'modern working-class movements have developed an overwhelming secular, indeed often militantly anti-religious ideology'.²³

On such an understanding, religion is simply the chrysalis in which socialism incubated, discarded as 'modern' class identity took hold. Under such historiographical assumptions, this essay could be nothing

other than a study in the diminishing historical influence of Christianity on the Labour Party. It would leave the contemporary Labour Party, and the contemporary Church, untouched by any expectation that they should be addressed by the Christian Labour tradition.

There are a number of problems with this historiography, and this study consciously departs from it. It would be impossible to deny that many early Labour MPs left their congregations through sheer frustration at the latter's persisting commitment to Liberalism, or that in Labour's second half century there was a series of senior labour leaders who completely disassociated themselves from Christian backgrounds (Gaitskell, Foot, Crosland and Callaghan). But this secularising narrative fails to account for instances of the Christian tradition occasioning continued social and political engagement, the recrudescence of the Christian Socialist Movement in the 1960s or 1990s, Blair's implicit re-appropriation of the idealist tradition, or Brown's persistent use of Biblical language and metaphor to capture and express Labour aspirations.

Yet some would still wish to argue (particularly in view of increasing secularisation and multiculturalism) that the Christian contribution is among the least influential streams of thought in the Party's history. Two observations must be made in response, which also

serve to justify this short study. Firstly, all allegedly secular institutions and processes are ways of imagining space and time, organising human beings around stories of human nature and human destiny which have deep theological analogues. Secular political theory is really another theology in disguise.²⁴ The question is not necessarily whether a political party is religious or secular, but what kind of theology sits beneath the ideology and practices of a political party. Secondly, as David Marquand has observed, ideology is more than just a policy programme. Rather, ideologies are 'thought practices', compounds of genuinely conscious beliefs and unconscious assumptions, encoded in and transmitted through ritual and myth. Ideology shapes preconceptions and influences behaviour, not only or even mainly at the level of the head, but also at the level of the heart.²⁵ In an era when all political parties are sitting light to ideology, we must not imagine that they can escape the ideological challenge of creating and sustaining a political consensus. A party can not, in the end, be a supporter of only 'what works', divorced from an ethical conception of what it is proper to seek to achieve, a vision of the good.

Notes

¹ In the *Taff Vale Railway Co v Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants* [1901] AC 426, judges ruled that unions could be held liable for loss of profits during strike action, effectively making striking impossible. The judgement was reversed by the Trades Disputes

Act (1906), but by that time it had already had the effect of galvanising previously cautious trade unions to seek Parliamentary representation.

² Gould, P. *The Unfinished Revolution*, Abacus, 1999, 25. He emphasises religious language and metaphor and, quoting Ben Pimlott, the analogy between the Socialist Commonwealth and the second coming. Unwittingly, he is picking up on the important theme of the 'eschatology' of political movements.

³ He was appealing, in Christopher Hill's phrase, to a 'myth of lost rights', and to do so was to mount the most powerful possible argument for human equality. See Hill, C. *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the 17th Century*, Pimlico, 2001, 46–48. The same argument was used by Thomas Paine and Kier Hardie.

⁴ Rowland, C. 'Practical Theology and Equality', in Storrar, W.F. and Morton, A.R. (eds.), *Public Theology for the 21st Century*, T&T Clark, 2004, 332.

⁵ See Theos/ComRes polling on faith and voting intention: campaigndirector.moodia.com/Client/Theos/Files/TheosPoliticalPollFinalFeb10.pdf, with useful commentary by Nick Spencer, 'There is no Christian vote', *The Guardian (online)*, guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/apr/26/religion-election-voting-blocs, 26 April 2010, accessed 29 July 2010

⁶ The Methodism and Marx phrase is often attributed to Harold Wilson. Labour Party politician Michael Cocks (Chief Whip from 1979–87) claimed his father, a congregational minister and Professor of Systematic Theology, coined the phrase. It was, of course, Alistair Campbell who interrupted a Tony Blair interview with David Margolick of *Vanity Fair* when the conversation turned to Blair's religious beliefs. He is reported to have said, 'I'm sorry. We don't do God'. The phrase has become a sobriquet for the debate around the place of faith in public life.

⁷ Pelling, H. *Origins of the Labour Party*, Oxford University Press, 1965, 118. This was probably a backhanded reference to the Hyndmanite Social Democratic Federation.

⁸ For an example of just such an analysis, see Koyzis, D.T. *Political Visions & Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, IVP, 2003.

⁹ Tawney, R.H. *The Radical Tradition*, Penguin, 1964, 146, quoted in Greenleaf, W.H. *The British Political Tradition Volume Two: The Ideological Heritage*, Routledge, 1983, 357. David Koyzis identifies five specific bifurcations: the phenomenon of common ownership v. ideological socialism, socialism as an external system v. socialism as an existing conscience, state socialism v. non-statist socialist anarchism, gradualist v. revolutionary socialism and utopian v. scientific socialism. Koyzis, 28

¹⁰ Crosland, A. *The Future of Socialism*, Constable, 2006, 53–59.

¹¹ Other themes included firstly, the desire to appropriate the rewards of capital by abolition of private property or through state ownership or control; the restructuring of economic life away from unrestricted competition and the motivation of personal profit; the desire for worker control of industry; finally, the Labour tradition held closely to the objective of full employment.

¹² *Ibid.*, 75.

¹³ Blair, T. *New Britain: My Vision for a Young Country*, Fourth Estate, 1996, xii.

¹⁴ This is not a novel argument; see, for instance, Wright, T. *Socialisms: Old and New*, Routledge, 1996.

¹⁵ Leach, R. 'Christian Socialism: The Historical and Contemporary Significance of Christian Socialism within the Labour Party', Political Studies Association Annual Conference, 2002. Accessed at psa.ac.uk/journals/pdf/5/2002/leach.pdf

¹⁶ This is by no means an exhaustive list of Christian engagements with the political left: it is specifically British and there is therefore no engagement, for

instance, with South American liberation theology. It is historically limited, and so ignores the radical elements of the Puritan tradition. In fact, all this essay can succeed in doing is giving a thumbnail sketch of a series of nineteenth and twentieth century engagements.

¹⁷ According to some commentators, the Christian tradition has afforded the wider movement a more sustainable critique of capitalism than alternatives, such as Marxism or Fabian Socialism. See, for instance, Milbank, J. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed., Wiley-Blackwell, 2006, 197–199.

¹⁸ Mann, M. *Sources of Social Power*, quoted in Forrester, D.B. *On Human Worth*, SCM, 2001, 195.

¹⁹ White, S. 'Which philosophy, Whose tradition', in Grayson, R.S. and Rutherford, J. (eds.), *After the Crash*, Soundings, Social Liberal Forum and Compass, 2010, 112.

²⁰ Glasman, M. 'The Common Good', in Harrington, P. and Burks, B.K. (eds.), *What Next for Labour? Ideas for the Progressive Left*, Demos, 2009, 39–40.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

²² A proposition that attempts to harmonize conflicting viewpoints (from the Greek, *eirēnikos* – of or concerning peace, or *eirēnē* – peace).

²³ Hobsbawm, E. *Worlds of Labour*, quote in Catterall, P. 'The Distinctiveness of British Socialism? Religion and the Labour Party c1900–1939' in Worley, M. (ed.), *The Foundations of the Labour Party: Identities, Cultures and Perspectives 1900–39*, Ashgate, 2009, 144–145.

²⁴ Cavanaugh, W. *Theopolitical Imagination*, Continuum, 2002, 2.

²⁵ Marquand, D. *The New Reckoning: Capitalism, States, and Citizens*, Polity, 1997, 74.

Nineteenth century engagements

The Labour Party emerged at the end of a century of social and economic tumult: a doubling of the population between 1840 and 1901, massive urbanisation and technological development at an incredible pace. The outcome over a century was an improved standard of living for the population as a whole and over time, but with many individuals and communities losing out on the way. The working class – urban and rural – were forced into various attempts at negotiating the new social reality. These were both economic (Corn Law agitation, strikes, machine breaking, food price riots) and political (Chartism). In hindsight, historians have tended to combine these disparate phenomena into the slow but great awakening of working class consciousness which finally and inevitably found political expression in the Labour Party.

In reality, the history of the Industrial Revolution is much more complex and contested.¹ But increased industrialisation, developing worker organisation, the slow growth of the franchise, and the ongoing disregard for human life in the industrial and residential environment (evidenced by Engels in Manchester in 1844, Booth in London in 1889 and 1891, and Benjamin Seeboham Rowntree in York in 1899) prepared the soil for the growth of working class political power. As we will see, this power was often, if not usually, at an arms length from the theoretical socialism of Marx, Engels or Henry Hyndman.

Age of Atonement

The ambiguous position of the churches – both established and Nonconformist – vis-à-vis the industrial revolution is reasonably well known. It was Rev W.R. Hay who read the Riot Act at Peterloo in 1819 before sabres were drawn. The role of the clergy as magistrates, defending the social order against commoners' appeals for recognition and justice, exemplified for many how the Church could collude with the interests of the rich and was a source of significant anti-clericalism amongst the working class.

One result of the antagonism between radicals and religious authorities was the Chartist church demonstrations

throughout the summer of 1839. In order to demonstrate the equality of all men before God, Chartists would take the lead in town processions ahead of the wealth and powerful. To expose the Church's hostility to the poor, they would attend in working aprons and clogs. To protest against the establishment of private property in a church, they would take rented pews. To remind the clergy of true religion, they would request that they expound biblical texts which would deal with the claims of the poor. The clergy responded by preaching on submission to authorities, contentment, and proper attention to the afterlife. On 15th August the Chartists of Sheffield, after arrests, protests and more arrests, eventually found the church barred against their entry.²

Rev R. Carus Wilson, preaching on Job 34.29, told Preston Chartists that they should ascribe 'the evils of their condition to their own misconduct', and assured them that they would find repose 'on the bosom of God' if they would but live a godly and quiet life. This message, among the more sympathetic delivered by clergy in response to the church protests, exemplifies the social thinking of the Anglican establishment of the time, and throughout much of the rest of the nineteenth century. During what Boyd Hilton has called the 'Age of Atonement', 'evangelical' thought both shaped and justified the economic and social assumptions which underlay the policies of competitive capitalism.³

The evangelicals shared with political economists an atomistic view of society in which each individual was responsible for his actions and made decisions independently of others. Since the economic system of such a society would regulate itself by predictable laws (which many, like the evangelicals, saw as divinely ordained), tampering with the system was considered neither necessary nor desirable.⁴

Ironically, one of the key texts for the Age of Atonement was William Wilberforce's *A Practical View*, arguing as it did that the existing social order combined 'the greatest measure of temporal comforts and spiritual privileges'. The poor should be humble, 'since their situation, with all its evils, is better than they have deserved at the hands of God'. The human condition was of secondary concern to the state of the soul. 'I should consider the salvation of a single soul of more value than the deliverance of a whole empire from pauperism', said Thomas Chalmers.⁵ Much of what we now think of as ground breaking social action on the part of the evangelicals – church schools for instance – improved the material lot of their beneficiaries as a by-product of their efforts to improve their moral lives.

It is a matter of debate whether evangelicals were simply baptising commonly held economic principles, or whether they genuinely derived economic principles from theological convictions. More likely, this 'evangelicalism' was a

distinctive blend of stern Victorian moralism, Malthusian economics and a strong aversion to the agency of the state, particularly in the relief of poverty. There were certainly also evangelicals who dissented from *laissez faire* economic principles, notably Lord Shaftesbury and Richard Oastler, Tory paternalists and advocates for the Ten Hours' Bill. It remained the case, however, that the main body of opinion in the established Church put its weight behind the dominant economic ideas of the age, which both symbolised and entrenched its failure to identify and sympathise with the plight of the working poor.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the *laissez faire* economic paradigm, and its supposed theological justification, were on the wane. Hilton suggests that the horror of the Irish potato famine served as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* against the arguments for Providence – what kind of God would deal so harshly and arbitrarily with an entire nation? Increased journalistic interest in the working conditions of the poor, moreover, raised public awareness of the worst cases of sheer destitution, making it harder to maintain the belief that the poor obviously or necessarily deserved their condition. Others have argued that the Church simply began to acknowledge that it no longer commanded the attention of the working man, and that simple prudence demanded a theological reassessment: 'some amelioration of ... living conditions

might be useful in bringing the poor into the Christian fold'.⁶

Whether such a functional consideration was in the mind of the Christian Socialists, to whom we now turn, is debatable. From genuine theological reflection driven by the desire for a fuller understanding, albeit one which served for a more sympathetic reading of the position of working classes, different theological themes, which lent themselves to different theological conclusions, began to emerge.

Victorian Christian Socialism

In 1848, an eclectic group of Christians – a theologian, an author and a lawyer – gathered in London to discuss the Church's role in responding to the Chartist cause. Internationally, it was a year of violent working class uprisings (in France, Germany, Italy and Hungary) and of the publication of Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*. When the Chartists gathered for a mass meeting on Kennington Common on 10th April, there was a whiff of a revolution in the air.

Charles Kingsley, a 28-year-old author and clergyman, had travelled to London in the hope of dissuading workmen from too precipitous a demonstration. He was introduced by F.D. Maurice (a Professor of Theology at King's College London and chaplain at Lincoln's Inn) to J.M. Ludlow (a French-educated lawyer). Kingsley and Ludlow went together to observe the Chartist demonstration but found, before

crossing Waterloo Bridge, that it had already reached its anticlimactic conclusion. That evening Kingsley composed placards which would be addressed to the 'Workmen of England'. They were supportive of workers, but not the Charter itself, for it would not 'of itself make them free'.⁷ Mere constitutional, political, or economic reform – the substance of Chartist demands – was not enough; all these could only be predicated on a more fundamental reconsideration of human relationships. The Victorian Christian Socialists, for instance, generally opposed any extension of the franchise, unless accompanied by appropriate education and an increment in the working man's virtue. In a notorious phrase, which can too easily be dismissed as Victorian ignorance but is probably a much more revealing reflection on the nature of citizenship, Kingsley's placard asked that 'Workers of England be wise, and then you *must* be free, for you will be *fit* to be free'.

What brought these three together – along with the others who came to be part of their informal network of what have become known as Victorian Christian Socialists – was on the one hand a fear of the onrush of political change bringing with it the possibility of social upheaval, combined with a conviction that the grievances of the working classes – in this case, the Chartists – were legitimate and should be redressed. Their movement embodied a tension between conservatism and radicalism, both drawing on theological first principles, and

so predictably survived for only six years. Its public effect was limited, its political importance slight, but it nonetheless represents the increasing legitimacy of Christian social witness and an important first fruit of a tradition that began to achieve practical political traction in the twentieth century.

The group was socialist by self-ascription, rather than by a shared systematic ideology – testament again to the flexibility and diversity of usages of the word. Ludlow was both most familiar and most comfortable with systematic treatments of social problems and, having been brought up in France, described himself as a 'Fourierist' and introduced the concept of cooperative industry to the wider group.⁸ Maurice, on the other hand, was often at pains to establish a lack of familiarity with French socialist theorists⁹, and his definition of the problem and the nature of the socialist rejoinder was so broad that it would have covered many radical Tories of his day. 'Anyone who recognises the principle of co-operation as a stronger and truer principle than that of competition, has the right to the honour or the disgrace of being called a socialist'¹⁰ – Charles Kingsley, author of *The Water-Babies* and *Alton Locke*, was indeed more in the mould of a Tory paternalist.

Maurice was the centrifugal force of the movement and, as John Atherton has argued, his social teaching was a direct consequence of his theological

beliefs.¹¹ There were several important strands to his thinking. First, Maurice assailed the mechanical 'sin and salvation' evangelicalism that had allowed the theological legitimizing of Malthusian economics for over a century. Writing to his future wife, he spoke of the ground of his difference with evangelicals:

[They] make sin the ground of all theology, whereas to me it seems that the living and holy God is ground of it, and sin the departure of the state of union with Him, into which he has brought us.¹²

For Maurice, sin is a secondary consideration – not, as the evangelicals of his day would have it – the starting point of theology. Such a theology served to distance Christianity from the concerns of material and public life, construing both sin and salvation as an inward spiritual matter and the concern of individuals. 'Men feel', he wrote, 'that they are not merely lost creatures; they look up to the heaven above them, and ask whether this is the whole account of their condition ... If religion, they say, will give us no explanation of these feelings, if it can only tell us about a fall for the whole race, and an escape for a few individuals of it, then our wants must be satisfied without religion. Then begin Chartism and Socialism, and whatever schemes make rich men tremble'.¹³

Sin, then, is not a problem of stains on the conscience of the individual but is man's rejection of God's ordering of creation, the divine and universal constitution. When an individual seeks to 'set up a separate individual life' which makes no account of his obligations or duties to others, he 'does divest himself of his glory as a man' and fails to fulfil his given duties. In the same way, Christ's atoning death spoke not just of the cleansing of individual consciences but of 'the revelation of an order which sustains all the intercourse and society of men ... the revelation of that perfect harmony to which we look forward when God shall gather up all things in Christ.'

Second, Maurice strongly emphasised that the 'Kingdom of God', the state of reformed social relations advocated by Jesus in the New Testament, was a present reality, a condition of earthly society should we but realise it – 'And what do such words [epiphany, revealing, etc.] imply, but the full evidence and demonstration of that which *is now*; the dispersion of all the shadows and appearances which have counterfeited it or have hidden it from view?' God, his will and his character form the basis of all proper theological, moral and ethical reflection. This was not just the proper grounding for theology, but for society as a whole:

... my business ... is to show that economy and politics ... must have ground beneath themselves, that society is not made anew by arrangements of ours, but is

to be regenerated by finding the law and ground of its order and harmony, the only secret of its existence, in God. This must seem to you an unpractical and unchristian method; to me it is the only one which makes action possible, and Christianity anything more than an artificial religion for the use of believers ... The Kingdom of Heaven is to me the great practical existing reality which is to renew the earth and make it a habitation for blessed spirits instead of demons.¹⁴

Maurice was insistent on the ontological reality of – as opposed to the aspiration towards – human brotherhood under the fatherhood of God.¹⁵ The Church was tasked (and one of his main prescriptions for social change was dialogue between different classes, mediated by the Church) to witness to and reflect this reformation of conscience and relationships – not as post-mortem reality for some, but as an existing state for all now. Thus, the Church could remain ‘the supporter of the existing orders’, but equally become ‘a teacher and example to those orders respecting their duties and responsibilities; by removing the hatred which their forgetfulness of those duties [causes]’.¹⁶

It was in this sense that the movement was socialist, tapping the use of the term which ‘applied loosely to all forms of radical thought involving the cooperation of the working class for their own benefit’.¹⁷ *Politics for the People*, the movement’s short-lived

journal which ran to seventeen editions in the summer of 1848, did address key radical questions but again, while sympathising with what it saw as legitimate economic and political grievances, tended to contest the usual radical answers. It opposed the prospect of the extension of the franchise without further moral and educational reform and criticised Chartist tactics. This was not simply a matter of Maurice’s and Kingsley’s innate conservatism; rather, they feared the prescription of solutions that would exacerbate the problem of a divided and antagonistic society. Reformers, Maurice argued, could hardly restore society to health by operating from the ‘same vicious premises’, assuming ‘land, goods, money, labour, some subjects of possession, to be the basis for society ... true radical reform and radical conservation must go much deeper and say: “Human relations not only should lie, but do lie beneath all these ...”’.¹⁸

It was in this idiom that the Christian Socialists would justify the small number of worker cooperatives that they established around London. In the 1820s Robert Owen had argued that faulty production and distribution were the root of poverty and want, and cooperative organisations were thus an economic and social necessity. Christian Socialist cooperatives, however, tended to be addressed in different terms – ‘The direct object of Christian cooperation was to bring Christ into every part of common life,’ wrote Thomas Arnold, a key

influence on Maurice, 'to make human society one living body'.¹⁹ Ludlow had seen such initiatives in operation in France, but the key to Maurice's enthusiastic involvement in and support of them between 1850 and 1854 was the fact that they chimed with his theology. Drawing on the critique of competition as 'the selfish principle', a 'monstrous and anarchical condition' and a 'struggle to get for oneself and prevent anyone else from getting', cooperatives would eliminate class attrition, not by social or political transformation but by goodwill and by fellowship between classes. The preamble to the constitution of the Association for Promoting Industrial and Provident Societies put the case in expressly theological terms, according to Charles Raven, drawing on the Pauline teaching of membership:

The Promoters of Working Men's Associations, having united together for the purpose of applying the principles of Christianity to trade and industry, and desiring to state more definitely what those principles are, as they find them set forth in Christ's gospel, that they may serve as the basis of a society to be formed for the objects after mentioned, declare:

1. That human society is a body consisting of many members, not a collection of warring atoms.

2. That true workmen must be fellow-workmen, not rivals.

3. That a principle of justice, not of selfishness, must regulate exchanges²⁰

The associations came to grief on a variety of causes, though the legislation for which the Christian Socialists had campaigned (The Industrial and Provident Societies' Act, 1852) remained of benefit to the wider cooperative movement. Interestingly, these associations were directly criticised by Beatrice Webb. She distinguished between co-operative production and co-operative distribution and argued that the former remained individualist, that they would tend to create further competition between associations or monopolies, and that in any case their material failure was sufficient to prove that any attempt at self government in industry was futile, not least because of the increasing technological and organisational complexity of industry. We cannot resolve the issue here, but suffice it to say her criticisms are witness to the ideological and methodological tensions which existed within the emerging labour movement around the turn of the century.

As the associations faltered, the attention of the movement, and of Maurice in particular, turned towards educational endeavour (this culminating in the foundation of the still surviving Working Men's College).²¹ This was also the point at which the inherent theological and

ideological tensions amongst the Christian Socialists began to make themselves felt. Excepting the work on associations, little agreement was reached between individuals other than a rejection of existing social evils.²² Maurice in particular was unwilling to countenance any form of political action (understood as inviting or promoting the involvement of the machinery of the state). The Kingdom of God was a present reality – it did not need legislation, but recognition as the rightful paradigm of relationships between classes and individuals. This led him to what seemed to his colleagues then, as they seem now, to be peculiar and unhelpful positions (opposing, for instance the formation of a Health League which would call for Government action on public health issues). Maurice simply stopped talking about Christian Socialism.

Ludlow, no less insistently Christian in his analysis, was nevertheless more open to practical political reform. He was, for instance, in support of the extension of the franchise (if in the cautious terms of his day) and called the property qualification for gaining the vote and for becoming an MP a 'Godless contrivance'. In its place, he supported a 'tax and education' franchise. Nevertheless, like the others he prioritised a holistic vision of the good society, not one in which working class interests were pursued at the expense of all else (he wanted 'the completion of the national fabric, and not the usurpation of dominion by a class'²³). Nor was he, by any means, an advocate

of the state as such as being the agent of achieving such an end:

There is, therefore, one great error to be avoided when determining the functions of government. Government cannot create movement and life where there is none ... the efficiency of government grows in inverse proportion to its cumbrousness ...²⁴

The difference between Maurice and Ludlow was that, for the latter, social conditions as they were degraded men and set them against each other. Thus a dialectic relationship was established in Ludlow's mind between the witness of theology and the practice of politics – men could not fully participate in the Kingdom until their brotherhood was recognised in the practical business of politics. For him the state was clearly still limited and conditional (the error of the French socialists, he argued, was to suppose that a change in the social machinery alone could 'work out all the purposes for humanity') but this was held in tension with the fact that it was a legitimate tool ('but a means, not a principle'). In other words, he made an early distinction, significant in later socialist traditions right through to New Labour, between ends and means, between society and culture and government.

Christian Socialism of a kind more sympathetic to the activity of the state flowered later in the century. The Guild of

St Matthew (1877), the Christian Socialist League (1894) and the Christian Social Union (1889) owed something of their theology to Maurice, but his mid-century work was an important first fruit of a theological engagement with the needs of the working classes and the problems of the market. Maurice's theology had an enduring impact, as did the network's work on education and associations, but the membership and leadership of later organisations was largely distinct from it.

Victorian Christian Socialism sits in a peculiar place in the genealogy of the labour movement. As we have already observed it was – with the notable exception of its work in associations and education – a marginal influence in the tradition. Its intellectual genesis is with the likes of Coleridge and Ruskin, and thus it is clearly a socialism of society, not one of economic or class analysis. Although the network gathered supporters from a range of profiles, including those with an uncertain Christian faith (Edward Neale, for instance), it was founded on a strongly theological critique and response to industrial problems.

Victorian Christian Socialism, therefore, left two intellectual legacies – one to the Church (which has been much celebrated) and one to the labour movement (which, if anything, has been latterly and mainly

ignored). First, Maurice renewed theology, drawing the attention of the Church towards social and political issues of which it had been negligent in the preceding years. If this did not have an immediate reforming effect on the wider Church, it paved the way, along with the Oxford movement, for later developments under the likes of Temple and Tawney. In the oft quoted phrase, Maurice was as much about 'socialising Christianity' as he was about 'Christianising socialism'. To refer to 'Christian Socialism', then, is not to point to a shared ideological heritage, but express a status as a fellow traveller.

Second, the Christian Socialists always insisted on the importance of properly resolved human relationships and on this count felt instinctively that the state could never 'work out all the purposes of humanity'. Yet this is not to accede to philosophical or practical liberalism; to speak of the 'purposes of humanity' was to invoke community and brotherhood. Victorian Christian Socialism held in tension (as did many subsequent Christian engagements on the left) the essential need for cooperation and commonality and a critique of individualism with a resistance to the idea that the activity of the state in itself could embody that cooperation.

Founding fathers and Nonconformity

Of course, Victorian Christian Socialism predates the formation of the Labour Party,

and indeed many of the earlier institutions of the labour movement. The only prominent member of the network to become an elected politician was Thomas Hughes, a Liberal MP for Lambeth and later Frome.

One inheritor of the Christian Socialist mantle, Stuart Headlam (a flamboyant Anglican priest and founder of the Guild of St Matthew), served on the Executive Committee of the Fabian Society on three separate occasions between 1886 and 1911. Typically maverick, he offered some support to Hyndman's Marxist and secularist Social Democratic Federation, and spoke at the 'Bloody Sunday' protest in Trafalgar Square in February 1887. His feelings toward the Independent Labour Party were less supportive. For him, it espoused a debased form of socialism and Kier Hardie was an unworthy leader. Whether it was his simple untheorised Christianity (this was certainly one ground on which Hyndman disliked Hardie), or his simple untheorised socialism that Headlam objected to, is not immediately clear.

The Christianity of the 'founding fathers' of the Labour Party – Kier Hardie, Phillip Snowden, Arthur Henderson, Tom Mann, George Lansbury, etc. – is part of the mythology of the party, and the part of that mythology which is usually being rehearsed when the phrase 'more to Methodism than Marx' is deployed.

As part of a wider movement they laboured, of course, alongside many who did not share their faith as such, but would share something of their vision of a more just society. Equally, there were those with whom there were some cultural and philosophical tensions, not least Hyndman (an avowed – and wealthy – atheist) and the Social Democratic Federation. Hardie demurred from joining in spite of a shared socialism, finding the atmosphere of the Federation beery (Hardie was a lifelong teetotaler), irreverent and cocksure.²⁵ The Fabians were something else again. Beatrice Webb was not without particular mystical beliefs, though she could not be described in any sense as Christian. Politically speaking, the Fabians thought the ILP to be a 'wrecking party, checkmating the more reasonable policy of permeation'. So the drivers of the development of the ILP were provincial men, looking pragmatically to advance their peoples' interests, drawing from theoretical socialism but not as dogmatic purists. Their outlook stamped its imprint on the ILP which, in Snowden's words, derived its inspiration more from the Sermon on the Mount than from the teachings of economists.²⁶

What was the nature and significance of the religious beliefs of early Labour leaders? Did such beliefs shape and influence their political thinking or practice and, if so, how?

First, it is worth noting a discontinuity between the kind of Christian Socialism

we have discussed so far, and the faith of early Labour leaders. Though these men and women were Christians and socialists, they were not Christian Socialists in the same sense as Maurice, Ludlow, Headlam, Wescott or Gore. This is more than a simply chronological point: the leaders of Labour were generally provincial working men, while the Christian Socialists were by and large professionals; Hardie and his colleagues were political and union activists long before a single one of them became a Member of Parliament, while Maurice and his colleagues mostly avoided activism; early Labour leaders were generally (though not exclusively – Lansbury being the most important exception) Nonconformist, but the theology and construction of Christian Socialism was profoundly Anglican, sometimes inclusively so (as in the case of Maurice), and sometimes militantly hostile to Nonconformity (as in the case of Stuart Headlam). Victorian Christian Socialism was founded in a cerebral theology, forcing the Church to acknowledge its responsibilities in industrial and economic questions, whereas the theology of the early Labour leaders was a fusion of the experience of the material poverty of the working classes and a 'primitive' biblical radicalism, not unlike that of the Chartists active in the church protests. For many – including Kier Hardie – this worked itself out not just in support for the cause of Labour, but in pointed aggression against churches, established and otherwise, if they were not giving mind to their duty to the poor.

Second, this is also the appropriate point to address the aphorism that the Labour Party 'owes more to Methodism than to Marx'. The phrase is, perhaps, somewhat overused and, more to the point, invoked to imply a range of arguments about the nature of the Labour Party: the relative lack of importance of theoretical socialism as compared to 'ethical' socialism of all kinds; the place of Nonconformity and Dissent in the development of radical political positions; the sheer number of Members of Parliament, and members of the Party, that have come from a Nonconformist background;²⁷ and so on. This maxim is evocative of what, historically at least, has been the experience of many a Labour Party member, but it is a more complicated and interesting claim than has often been allowed.

As E.P. Thompson observed, 'so much has been said about the relationship between Methodism and working class politics that we might suppose that it was no more than a nursing ground for Radical and trade union organisers'.²⁸ Briefly, the proposal faces a number of problems. First, in an argument put most strongly by Thompson, Wesleyan Methodism was politically reactionary, if not 'odiously subservient'. This was first and foremost a feature of Wesley's own political conservatism coming through his autocratic style of leadership, but it was mirrored by successive Methodist Conferences as they reaffirmed their unfeigned loyalty to the King and sincere attachment to the

constitution. The statutes drawn up in the year after Wesley's death were explicit: 'None of us shall either in writing or conversation speak lightly or irreverently of the Government'.²⁹ Methodism, said Jabez Bunting (who supported the transportation of the Methodist Tolpuddle Martyrs) 'hates democracy and hates sin'.³⁰ This was not the same brand of suspicion of democracy as one held by Victorian Christian Socialists, but one intimately bound up with Methodism's reputation for sedition, which occasionally erupted in anti-Methodists riots. The leadership of Methodism, like those of the older Dissenting traditions, were liable to overcompensate by emphasising their unstinting loyalty to the state and its institutions.

None of this is to say that Methodism did not have egalitarian tendencies. Thus, the Duchess of Buckingham wrote to the Methodist Countess of Huntingdon:

I Thank Your Ladyship for the information concerning the Methodist lay preachers; their doctrines are most repulsive and strongly tinctured with impertinence and disrespect towards their Superiors, in perpetually endeavouring to level all ranks and do away with all distinctions. It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth.³¹

Political egalitarianism, observed Thompson, is the consequence of spiritual

egalitarianism, even if it was one that Wesley and his immediate followers would have preferred to ignore. Commentators have thus distinguished between the ways in which Methodism was a form of faith *for*, or *of*, the poor. While autocratic and conservative in its leadership, it remained egalitarian and appealing to the poor in its theology. This tension between the authoritarian and egalitarian strands resulted in the succession of the New Connexion under Alexander Kilham in 1797 and the Primitive Methodists in 1806, with consequences in the political sphere. These types of congregation offered some support to the Chartists, while more orthodox Methodists hounded radicals out of their congregations as enthusiastically as did Anglicans. In 1834, one Rev Joseph Rayner Stephens, the son of a former president, had to resign from the Connexion rather than obey Conference orders to cease his radical activity and campaigning against the new Poor Law. Five years later, his activities saw him sent to prison.

Mainstream Methodism becomes, if anything, a movement *for* the poor, and with the construction of expensive buildings, and the subsequent introduction of pew rents, even less than that. Attracting the skilled working classes, it became the religion of the respectable, thrifty and properly patriotic. The more radically inclined members were removed or removed themselves from the mainstream movement, and then themselves suffered from disunity

and schism, thus failing to exercise radical influence in the social and political arena.

Labour historian Henry Pelling observes that by the end of the nineteenth century, Nonconformity as a whole had been enlisted by the Liberal Party.³² A variety of factors have been cited in explanation: ministers' dependence on generous laymen, the wealthiest of whom were likely to be those enriched during the Industrial Revolution, and therefore most likely to be Liberals; shared political interests such as the repeal of the Test and Corporation Act; and the exclusion of working congregants by pew rents, again because of the financial dominance of wealthy congregants. Although Wesley himself was insistent on the social nature of the Christian faith, and resistant to any move which would make it 'solitary', individualism had become at least as much of a feature of the Nonconformist mindset as democracy. Hugh Price Hughes, a Welsh Methodist theologian and Christian Socialist in the latter half of the nineteenth century, wrote of

Middle Class, well dressed and well-fed Dissenters ... in great danger of assuming an attitude of more or less conscious antagonism to the New Democracy ... Very rarely indeed are the arrangements of Methodist churches adapted to the tastes and preferences of the working classes. Office and authority are almost everywhere in the hands of tradesmen and professional men.³³

Thus, just as the labour movement was finding its political feet, Nonconformity was more likely to express outright hostility to it than offer support. It was precisely such opposition that occasioned the formation of the Bradford Labour Church. In the run-up to the 1892 general election, wealthy Nonconformist ministers sat on the platform at a meeting in support of a Liberal opponent of the socialist candidate, the Congregationalist Ben Tillett. Fred Jowett, also a Christian Socialist, stood up and warned them, 'if you persist in opposing the Labour movement ... we shall establish our own Labour Church.'³⁴

Exactly what is it, then, that the Labour Party owes to Methodism? What is clear is that at some point Nonconformity broke its historical relationship with the Liberals (as did Catholicism, following the settling of the Irish question) and formed a new one with Labour. By the interwar years, Nonconformity was heavily represented in the Party. In 1929 Arthur Henderson, intermittently leader of the Labour Party and Foreign Secretary in Ramsay MacDonald's minority government, observed that:

It is a demonstrable fact that the bulk of the members of the Parliamentary Labour Party at any given time during the last twenty five years had graduated into their wider sphere of activity via the Sunday School, the Bible Class, the temperance society or the pulpit.³⁵

Of the English and Welsh MPs in the inter war period, nearly half were Nonconformist and less than 10 per cent had no religion.³⁶ A similar overrepresentation of Nonconformity has been observed at other times and in other parts of the Party. Why this should be the case is a matter of some debate. Pelling offers no substantial explanation, except to say that where religious consciousness remained strong, socialism 'took on most completely the guise of religion',³⁷ while elsewhere socialism pursued its ordinary path, described by Beatrice Webb as the 'flight of emotion away from the service of God to the service of Man'.³⁸ It could be that after periods of Liberal inaction on key Nonconformist issues – temperance, secular (non-Anglican) education and disestablishment – the majority probably felt that their bread would be buttered just as well by the Labour Party. Kier Hardie, for instance, was a temperance campaigner and a supporter of secular education.

This is no doubt true of the political issues which were the stock in trade of the Nonconformist tradition, but it ignores an important dynamic. As early as 1820, the poet Robert Southey suggested that being part of such a community offered some form of preparation for public life:

Perhaps the manner in which Methodism has familiarised the lower classes to the work of combining in associations, making rules for their own governance,

raising funds, and communicating from one part of the kingdom to another, may be reckoned among the incident evils which have resulted from it.³⁹

E.P. Thompson observed that once the transference was made, the same dedication which enabled men to serve in the church could be seen in those who held office in trade union and Hampden Clubs, educated themselves far into the night, and had the responsibility of conducting working class organisations.⁴⁰ Thompson, of course, is speaking of the emergence of an organised working class in industrial England, but it takes no great leap of imagination to see the direct implications for the Labour Party: 'Nonconformity', claimed Ramsay MacDonald, 'has trained our speakers in its pulpits and fashioned devoted workers in its Sunday Schools'.⁴¹ G.M. Young's suggestion that old Labour leaders were 'trained in the administrative habits of Methodism, equally accustomed to declamation and conference'⁴² is widely endorsed by Labour historians. Greenleaf recalls that even Beatrice Webb, during a period of time living in Bacup in Lancashire, remarked on the way in which the chapel and its forms prepared the community for democracy and for self-government.⁴³ It was not Methodism's theology that flowed into the Labour Party, but the 'fluency of its social life, plain common sense, the obstinate vitality of older community traditions'.⁴⁴

Arthur Henderson in many ways symbolises the place of the Methodist tradition within the Labour Party. He was a hard working old union man (working for a period as a paid organiser in the Friendly Society of Iron Founders).⁴⁵ One biographer – Leventhal – comments on the identity and community with which Methodism furnished him: 'Wesleyanism gave him a place in society, enriching his life with the companionship of similarly inclined young people (including Eleanor Watson, his future wife) among whom he seems to have been quickly recognised as a leader. His closest friendships were made within the chapel, with those who shared his unswerving faith'.⁴⁶ Leventhal also notes what many of his contemporaries saw as a lack of sophistication – Henderson's reading consisted primarily of the Bible and the sermons of Wesley and nonconformist preachers, resulting in what were initially limited intellectual horizons (as he himself freely acknowledged):

Being brought at sixteen years into active church and social work and engaged in serving my apprenticeship in the foundry, my time for exceptional reading was limited. My Bible has ever been an immense help, not only for its great influence but for its literary helpfulness. My best book has been close contact with, and deep interest in, the spiritual, moral, social and industrial affairs of life.⁴⁷

Again we can make a distinction between how Methodism shaped his politics in terms of political aspirations, and the tools with which that community furnished him to pursue those aspirations. Methodism, for Leventhal, evoked in Henderson a political response to the problems that surrounded him more akin to reforming Liberalism than out and out socialism (he was briefly a member of the Liberal Party). As with the Christian Socialists, political and economic reform would not, for Henderson, be enough, if people were not to respond to new freedoms in a mature way: 'If reformation and reform could change the world, the world would have been perfect long ago. What we want along with our reforms is the spirit of regeneration'.⁴⁸ Thus, Henderson's union activity in the Friendly Society of Iron Founders was characterised not by the activism of the new unionism, but by deliberate moderation, and was imbued with a strong sense of craft dignity.⁴⁹ But Henderson's speaking experience was obtained as a popular lay preacher, and his early skills in managing meetings and organising (his skills were as a backroom politician, credited with building the party machinery as treasurer and chair) were honed in the Methodist Church before they were deployed in the union, and in politics.

The theology of early Labour leaders

We see, then, that even the secular historiography of Beatrice Webb and E.P. Thompson is comfortable with the idea

that the early Labour leaders' engagement in the Christian tradition served as a kind of finishing school for working class politicians. Their essential political vision and activity, however, is usually assumed to have been drawn from elsewhere. It is certainly true that none of the sources we will review embarked upon a grand constructive theoretical enterprise, or formed a social vision that purported in its fabric to be Christian. To what extent was the substance of Christianity coincidental, a matter of historical contingency, which furnished religiously inclined socialists with a particular language with which to baptise what was an essentially secular political movement? Or, was the faith of Hardie, Henderson, Snowden, Mann, Lansbury and the rest, a determinative factor?

We do not have time to develop a psychobiography for each case, even if it were possible to make 'windows into men's souls'. Such an approach, familiar from recent works, has been criticised as failing to bring specificity to the investigation.

[O]ne approach is to describe any Labour politician or thinker with a more than vestigial commitment to the Christian religion as a Christian socialist. This catholic interpretation allows the inclusion of politicians from the Labour left, right and centre. Both the socialist credentials and perhaps the Christian credentials of some of 'God's politicians' ... may be challenged, but their variety

hardly suggests a specifically Christian socialist tradition within Labour's broad church.⁵⁰

How can we avoid simply pointing to the Christianity of Labour politicians? Let us offer a hypothesis, and then see if the evidence lends it support: none of the Labour leaders were systematic 'theologians', either in the sense of fully understanding or appropriating a Marxist analysis, or in developing a rounded Christian social vision. Rather, they drew organically, pragmatically and passionately on all available intellectual or moral resources to build their case for social change.

In a comparative European perspective, Labour was a relatively late arrival on the political scene, and was forced to engage from a relatively early stage in the pragmatic business of parliamentary politics.⁵¹ Long before this, they were engaged in various forms of practical activism, from contesting local elections, to union activity, to campaigning on industrial conditions. They did not have the opportunity, nor did they share a felt need, to enter into a constructive theoretical exploration of their movement, or require a political analysis embedded in dialectical materialism, in order to conduct their business. They 'knew' the nature of the problem – the vulnerable position of the working class – because most of them were working class themselves (this

was rarer amongst the luminaries of the labour movement than we might imagine – consider Cambridge-educated Henry Hyndman, for example).

Kier Hardie's childhood experience had been of industrial poverty in the shipbuilding districts of Glasgow and then from the age of ten, like Tom Mann, as a trapper in a coal mine. Arthur Henderson began work at the age of twelve at the Robert Stephenson locomotive works in Newcastle.

Hardie and colleagues would utilise others' constructive work to a greater or lesser extent as occasion permitted. In *From Serfdom to Socialism* Hardie recommends Marx's *Capital*, but also books by Robert Blatchford, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Henry George and Sidney Webb.⁵² Henderson, for reasons of eminent practicality, was even more averse to anything that resembled dogmatic socialist theorising. He didn't even join the Fabian Society until 1912 and then perhaps only because his eligibility to serve as Secretary of the British Section of the International might have been questioned had he remained unaffiliated to any socialist organisation.⁵³ Similarly, although Labour leaders would address themselves to political problems in theological terms, they were not doing so in the same way as Maurice, Headlam, or Gore had done. They made no appeal to the latter's arguments from Anglican sacramentalism or from the 'Kingdom of Christ'. If anything, their

position resembled the biblical radicalism of the early nineteenth century Chartists or Primitive Methodists.

Hardie's treatment of the Bible is surprisingly literal. The historicity of Christ is assumed and the public and political relevance of Christ's teachings left largely undebated. What Jesus said would matter to Hardie and colleagues because they believed in Jesus too, and would see that what he taught, if it could be clearly expounded, was binding.

It would, however, be an easy task to show that Communism, the final goal of Socialism, is a form of Social Economy very closely akin to the principles set forth in the Sermon on the Mount. Christ recognised clearly that the possession of private property came between a man and his welfare both for time and eternity.⁵⁴

Hardie would as readily apply the Old Testament as the New, and also argued from the practice of the early Church and the teaching of the Church fathers. But the overriding force is of a simple appeal to the ethical wisdom of the Bible, for 'socialism, like any other problem of life, is at bottom a question of ethics and morals ... to do with relationships which should exist between a man and his fellows' and it was exactly to these points which Christianity spoke.

Thus, Hardie's appeal to Christianity was always uncomplicated. Indeed, theology

was a problem, a distraction from the Christianity of Christ. In an address to the Congregational Union of England and Wales in 1893, he caused uproar by suggesting that 'Christianity today lay buried, bound up in the ceremonies of dead and lifeless theology. It awaited a decent burial, and they in the Labour movement had come to resuscitate the Christianity of Christ, to go back to the time when the poor should have the gospel preached to them, and the gospel should be good news and joy of happiness in life'.⁵⁵ 'The more a man knows about theology,' suggested Hardie, 'the less he is likely to know about Christianity'.⁵⁶ Hardie was articulating a distaste for theorising and systematising faith which he thought enabled the evasion of its very obvious moral demands, whether they be in questions of economic policy ('I lay it down as a broad, unchallengeable Christian principle that any system of production or exchange which sanctions the exploitation of the weak by the strong or the unscrupulous is wrong and therefore sinful'), or in his insistence that Christianity was impossible for those who led a materially degraded existence ('a competitive and profit mongering system of industry put it out of the reach of people').

Often, Hardie seemed to engage his faith most explicitly when launching stinging attacks against what he thought to be the hypocrisy of churches or Christians. Writing in the *Labour Leader* of the injustices

children were suffering at the hands of Christian employers, he says:

A holocaust of every church building in Christendom tonight would be an act of sweet savour in the sight of Him whose name is supposed to be worshiped within their walls. If the spiritually proud and pride-blinded professors of Christianity could only be made to feel and see that Christ is here, ever present with us, and that they are urging on the stripes and binding the brow afresh with thorns and making shed tears of blood in a million homes. Surely the world could be made more sweet by the establishment of His kingdom.⁵⁷

Hardie's sense of genuine anger and distaste for hypocrisy, grounded in a Christian faith that was his own, is very clear. Hardie was not looking to marshal arguments that would appeal to others; these are arguments that mattered to him. That he reserves his most stinging critique for the Church and for Christianity, often resulted in him being called an atheist, was indicative of the strength of his conviction. This was not – contrary to the usual interpretation – necessarily indicative of a low view of Christianity or the Church, or any particular brand of heterodoxy; if anything, they were evidence of his frustration that the Church obscured the good news for the poor to which it should have been pointing. His religious beliefs offered him a powerful narrative,

a grand context from which he drew basic ethical imperatives for equality and justice which enabled him to interpret the world: a religious idealism, a moral order every bit as absolute as Marxism against which to measure the shortcomings of the world.⁵⁸ And if one were to accuse Hardie of being theologically unsophisticated, he would thank you for the compliment. Theological sophistication was, for him, avoidance of, and not engagement with, Christianity.

Hardie, then, was an unconscious inheritor of a kind of religious-political reasoning prevalent amongst Chartists and other working class political movements around in the earlier nineteenth century. Although in later life he did not attend church, Hardie does not fit neatly into the secular historiography of Labour history. Certainly, his thinking and rhetoric did not secularise. Thus, addressing striking railway men in his constituency in 1910, he adopted an almost evangelistic turn of phrase:

Oh men and women, in the name of God in whom you profess to believe in, in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth who died to save your souls, how long do you intend to submit to a system which is defacing God's image upon you ... which is blurring and marring God's handiwork, which is destroying the lives of men, women and children ... fight for the coming day when in your body, soul and spirit you will be free to live your own lives and give glory to your Creator.⁵⁹

Either we contend with the prospect that Hardie had simply played to his audience, and knew just how to appeal to their latent and not so latent religiosity, or we accept that Hardie's faith shaped how he thought, spoke and reacted to political issues. For Hardie and his like, however, changing the social system was never enough. Socialism needed Christianity, because hearts needed to be changed as well.⁶⁰ So close was the identification, that 'should Christianity ... disappear, there could be no Socialist State, for Socialist doctrines are Christianity applied to economic life'.⁶¹

The thesis of a gradual transference of emotion from service of God to service of man, of a secularising of the industrial working consciousness, must at least be described as overly simplistic. As Catterall points out, the strongest social critique often came from leaders of impeccable faith, such as Lansbury. Christianity provided a sustaining logic to the party, casting the problems of the industrial working classes as problems of a system grounded in unethical and immoral practices.

The Labour Church Movement

If Keir Hardie's faith could be described as primitive biblical radicalism, then there were also less vital forms of Christianity in the labour movement. The short lived Labour Church Movement, which has prompted some recent scholarly interest, is one example of a synthesis of theology, politics

and spirituality which briefly flourished but rapidly foundered.⁶²

The Movement was founded in 1891 by John Trevor, a Unitarian minister, who argued that the failure of existing churches (Anglican or Nonconformist) to support the existing labour movement made it necessary for a new movement to embody the religious aspect of their quest for emancipation. It grew rapidly, but peaked within a few years and quickly fell back, to the point that it had ceased to exist entirely by the outbreak of the First World War. Hardie was a frequent speaker, along with Snowden, Katherine Glaisher and a series of other leading Christian figures in the movement. Few of these were members, and few mentioned it in their autobiographies. For Henry Pelling, this was indicative of the marginality of the movement. Statistics vary too widely to be trustworthy, but there were perhaps around 50 churches in 1895, some with substantial membership (between 300–500 people).⁶³

For some, like Pelling, the Labour Church existed as an intermediary stage on the journey from a pre-political religious socialism to a fully developed secular political movement. Others, however, have sought to suggest that it did not follow the narrative of secularisation, and that only a strong prior judgement that a mature socialism must be secular could lead historians to reinterpret the religious self-understanding of those involved in the

Labour Churches as transitional. Rather, according to Mark Bevir, Labour Churches traded in a theology of 'immanentism'.⁶⁴ Bevir describes this mainly as a reaction to the Victorian crisis of faith, brought on by the advance of science and the advent of critical scholarship. Immanentists tended to de-emphasise what others considered to be distinctively Christian doctrine and theology (some commentators found the Labour Church to be 'barely Christian') and instead favoured an emphasis on the presence of the divine in the world – sometimes in the person of Jesus, sometimes in a vaguer universal spirit. Bevir observes that philosophical idealists such as T.H. Green and D.G. Ritchie drew on Hegelianism and Darwinism to suggest that human affairs embody just such a universal spirit, conceived as a progressive force.⁶⁵ In its Christian incarnations, immanentism thus undermined spiritual (i.e., non-material) experience focused on the destination of the eternal soul, and by contrast emphasised the issues of the secular public world. Like Hardie's Christianity, and the theology of Maurice, Labour Churches existed partly because of a need to insist on the public nature of Christianity. Bevir notes how D.B. Foster – in a way reminiscent of Hardie's frustration with theology as against practical Christianity – argued that the Labour Churches attracted those frustrated by the other-worldliness of existing churches.

Immanentism, however, was something of a de-mythologized Christianity, supplanting the redemptive activity of God and the Spirit in the Church with the inevitable progression towards universal brotherhood. Theologically speaking, humanity was an expression of the progressive unfolding of the divine will. Socialism as universal fellowship was an inevitable result of the unfolding progressive story. What is distinctive about the development of this theology in the context of the Labour Church movement, as opposed to F.D. Maurice's insistence on the present reality of the Kingdom, was that it implicitly identified the labour movement as the means through which the unfolding purposes of God would, almost inevitably, be realised.

The symbiotically close relationship between the ILP and the Labour Churches, along with this loss (or disavowal) of distinctive Christian belief and practice, resulted in internal struggles in the Labour Church over forms of 'worship' (even down to controversy around the use of the word 'God'). Most traditional Christian forms of worship were ignored or abandoned, the services used in the main part for platforming key Labour leaders.⁶⁶ John Trevor, the movement's founder, resigned in 1898 because of the Churches' virtual synonymy with the ILP, particularly under the leadership of Fred Brocklehurst.

In 1902 one A.B. Forster conducted an inquest into just how much 'religion' was

present in the Labour Church. He found 'many loud and persistent demands for economic change but little interest into the development of the human soul.'⁶⁷ The key objective was not to make disciples of Christ, but to make socialists – men and women fully cognisant of the brotherhood of humanity – and then to allow politics to take care of itself. Others would reminisce in later years that it was a very similar experience to that of attending a meeting of a branch of the ILP. Bevir even speculates that at least some Labour Churches were founded in order to circumvent laws prohibiting political meetings on Sundays. The Dundee Labour Church, for instance, was formed not only to keep the religious element in the cause robust, but also to allow lectures to obtain a hearing on Sundays.

Rejecting Pelling's interpretation which attributes the failure and decline of the Labour Churches to the increasing secularisation in the wider movement, Bevir argues instead that immanentism provided 'a fairly stable solution to the [Victorian] crisis of faith', and recounts how many Labour Church leaders continued to pursue activities that seemed driven by that approach.⁶⁸ In other words, they did not simply secularise. Rather, he suggests, immanentism was of little use as a political doctrine.

... the problem is that immanentists usually have to appeal to a wider

audience if they are to acquire the support necessary for effective political action, but to make such an appeal, they have to play down their religious faith. If they remain true to their faith, there remains little effective political activity they can undertake, but if they try to formulate an effective political stance, they undermine their religious identity ... this conflict leads to sterility and decline ...⁶⁹

From a theological perspective, we might add to Bevir's analysis that, as a political theology, immanentism simply did not do the work of relating traditional Christian beliefs or practices to social questions. It lacked a binding account of what the Labour Church, or what a Christianity sympathetic to Labour issues, was and meant, as distinct from the wider labour movement. We have already noted how the concrete practices of Labour Churches were similar in nature to those of an average ILP branch meeting – a socialist hymn or song, a reading from a religious book (not usually the Bible), and an address by a prominent speaker from the ILP.

One can indeed question whether the Labour Church as a whole was a genuinely Christian movement in the labour tradition. This is not to suggest, alongside earlier interpreters, that it was a stage in the secularisation of labour politics – that it was un-theological – but to locate it within pseudo-religious or mystical ethical

socialisms. The Labour Church Movement gave no account of classical Christian doctrines, one way or another: it de-emphasised soteriology – the need for a redemptive act from God – because it underplayed sinfulness on an individual or structural level. Its Christology was weak, framing Jesus as a proto-socialist, rather than as a unique and specific occasion of God's immanence, from which ethical and political reflection could proceed. Its ecclesiology diminished the Church to a voluntary association of the socially concerned. Its pneumatology collapsed the Spirit into the spirit of brotherhood in humanity. Its eschatology was realised in the progressive achievements of the labour movement, brought about by the making of many socialists.

In fact, by simply equating the immanence of God with the human processes of politics – his presence within the unfolding story of the world and in the progressive achievements of the Labour movement – Labour Churches made God redundant. Bevir is right to suggest that they were not simply a point on a scale of conversion to secularism – they were profoundly theological. But they were, theologically speaking, a parody of orthodox Christianity. In their ideas and practices, they offered nothing to the labour movement that it did not already have, except a brief diversion for the theologically discontented (Trevor's rationale for leaving his Unitarian church was that he felt 'unable to breath' in

chapel), a brief flurry of charitable and educative activity, and a platform for the national leadership of the ILP.

The Labour Church is perhaps an example of the awkward position of faith-based engagement with political parties, succeeding only in baptising a particular brand of politics, and providing neither a critical framework nor sufficient grounds for political activity, failing on both counts. Hardie, for all his anticlericalism, provides a striking counter example. Consciously or unconsciously, he drew on resources that were more or less proximate to orthodox Christianity, knowing – perhaps innately – that it is in orthodox Christianity that the Gospel holds its social power. There would be no more powerful motivating force than to take the witness of Scripture, and the Jesus of the Bible, seriously and to accept as true and binding his announcement of freedom for the prisoner, recovery of sight for the blind, release for the oppressed.⁷⁰

Trevor and his colleagues were convinced that they were shaking away the husks of religion, retaining the kernel of true faith, but in fact they were engaged in an evisceration of social Christianity. It is little surprise that it was a short-lived and ineffective engagement.

Notes

¹ Stevenson, J. 'Social aspects of the Industrial Revolution,' in Patrick O'Brien and Roland Quinault,

(eds.), *The Industrial Revolution and British Society*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, 238.

² For a full account, see Yeo, E, 'Christianity and the Chartist Struggle,' *Past & Present*, 9.1, 1981, 109–139.

³ Hilton's use of the term 'evangelical' is a technical one, and specifically relates to those who held a certain position vis-à-vis political economy. It should not be equated with the word in contemporary usage, though some 'evangelicals' are certainly admired by modern evangelicals.

⁴ Walsh, C. 'The Incarnation and the Christian Socialist Conscience,' *Journal of British Studies* 34, 1995, 352.

⁵ Hilton, B. 'The role of Providence in evangelical social thought,' in Beales, D. and Best, G. (eds.), *History, Society and the Churches: Essays in Honour of Owen Chadwick*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, 220.

⁶ Walsh, C. 'Incarnation and the Christian Socialist Conscience', 354.

⁷ The Charter demanded a vote for every man above twenty one years of age, the introduction of a secret ballot, no property qualifications for Members of Parliament, payment of Members of Parliament, equal sized constituencies, and annual Parliaments.

⁸ Charles Fourier (7 April 1772–10 October 1837) was a French utopian socialist who inspired the founding of a cooperative community called La Reunion near present-day Dallas, Texas as well as several other communities within the United States of America, such as the North American Phalanx in New Jersey and Community Place and five others in New York State.

⁹ See Maurice, F.D. 'Reasons for Cooperation', in Atherton, J. (ed.), *Social Christianity: A Reader*, SPCK, 1994, 56–57.

¹⁰ Maurice, F.D. 'Dialogue Between Somebody (a Person of Respectability) and Nobody (the Writer)', *Tracts on Christian Socialism* 1, 1850, 1. Marx would have decried this, had he known about it: 'Nothing is easier than to give Christian Asceticism a Socialist tinge'.

¹¹ Atherton, J. *Social Christianity*, 53.

- ¹² Quoted in Morris, J. *To Build Christ's Kingdom: F.D. Maurice and His Writings*, Canterbury Press, 2007, 45.
- ¹³ Maurice, F.D. 'Dialogue Between Somebody', 528.
- ¹⁴ Morris, J. *To Build Christ's Kingdom*, 51.
- ¹⁵ See, for instance, Maurice, F.D. 'Christianity Against Mammon', in Atherton, J. *Social Christianity*, 73.
- ¹⁶ Maurice, F.D. *The Kingdom of Christ*, Gilbert and Rivington, 1842, 528–529.
- ¹⁷ Allen, P. 'F.D. Maurice and J. M. Ludlow: A Reassessment of the Leaders of Christian Socialism,' *Victorian Studies*, 11.4, 1968, 473.
- ¹⁸ Raven, C.E. *Christian Socialism, 1848–1854*, Taylor & Francis, 1968, 89.
- ¹⁹ Norman, E.R. *The Victorian Christian Socialists*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 11.
- ²⁰ Raven, C.E. *Christian Socialism*, 307.
- ²¹ wmcollege.ac.uk/
- ²² Norman, E.R. *The Victorian Christian Socialists*, 2.
- ²³ Ludlow, J.M. and Jones, L. *Progress of the Working Class*, 1867, 304.
- ²⁴ Ludlow, J.M. 'Government' in Maurice, F.D. and Ludlow, J.M. (eds.), *Politics for the People*, J.W. Parker, 1848, 124.
- ²⁵ Adelman, P. *The Rise of the Labour Party 1880–1945*, Longman, 1996, 20.
- ²⁶ Adelman, P. *The Rise of the Labour Party 1880–1945*, 23.
- ²⁷ Without pretending that all of these were people of faith, these would include Jim Callaghan, Harold Wilson, Michael Foot, Anthony Crosland.
- ²⁸ Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, 1991, 45.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 392
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 43.
- ³² Pelling, H. *Origins of the Labour Party*, Oxford University Press, 1965, 125.
- ³³ *Methodist Times*, 20 October, 1892, quoted in Pelling, H. *Origins of the Labour Party*, 130.
- ³⁴ Bevir, M. 'The Labour Church Movement, 1891–1902', *Journal of British Studies* 38, 1999, 222.
- ³⁵ Henderson, A. 'British Labour and Religion', in Davis, J. (ed.), *Labor Speaks for Itself on Religion*, New York, 1929, 144–5.
- ³⁶ Catterall, P. 'Morality and Politics: The Free Churches and the Labour Party between the Wars', *Historical Journal*, 36.3, 1993, 668–9.
- ³⁷ Pelling, H. *Origins of the Labour Party*, 143.
- ³⁸ Webb, B. *My Apprenticeship*, quoted in Pelling, H. *Origins of the Labour Party*, 144.
- ³⁹ Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*, 42.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 380.
- ⁴¹ Catterall, P. 'The Distinctiveness of British Socialism' 132.
- ⁴² Young, G.M. *Victorian England: Portrait of an Age*, 1936, 2nd ed., London 1966, 170.
- ⁴³ Greenleaf, W.H. *The British Political Tradition Volume Two: The Ideological Heritage*, Routledge, 1983, 353.
- ⁴⁴ Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*, 380. Graham Maddox, in his *Religion and the Rise of Democracy*, Routledge, 1996, broadens this argument to encompass the importance of Christianity *per se* in the development of a democratic consciousness.
- ⁴⁵ The distinction between 'new' and 'old' unionism is between older craft unions, which organised workers in established trades along hierarchical models, and general industrial unions which organised on a membership basis, often including unskilled, manual or irregular labourers. These emerged in the 1880s, and were a significant source of support for the ILP. 'Old' Unionism tended to be more conservative, and was more firmly attached to the Liberal Party.

⁴⁶ Leventhal, F.M. *Arthur Henderson*, Manchester University Press, 1989, 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁸ Dale, G. *God's Politicians*, HarperCollins, 2000, 59.

⁴⁹ Leventhal, F.M. *Arthur Henderson*, 5.

⁵⁰ Leach, 'Christian Socialism, 6. Robert Leach refers specifically to Dale, G. *God's Politicians*, HarperCollins, 2000. Other works might include, Wilkinson, A. *Christian Socialism: Scott Holland to Tony Blair*, SCM, 1998 or, for an individual portrait, Holman, B. *Kier Hardie: Labour's Greatest Hero*, Lion, 2010. Against this, the Christian commitments, vestigial or otherwise, of the early Labour leaders are hardly irrelevant, and are at least part of the social and cultural milieu from which individuals emerged and in which the movement was forged. Dale, for instance, simply attempts to provide a basic narrative covering one hundred years of the Labour Party's life, and point to occasions and ways in which it has come into contact with the Christian tradition. For the comprehensive, Dale trades the critical, but in so doing he provides a useful overview.

⁵¹ Catterall, P. 'The Distinctiveness of British Socialism?' 138.

⁵² Holman, B. *Kier Hardie*, 133.

⁵³ Leventhal, F.M. *Arthur Henderson*, 29. Henderson was, however, responsible with Sidney Webb for the drafting and inclusion of Clause IV of the Labour Party constitution. Leventhal presents this as a moderate formulation, through which Henderson intended neither state capitalism nor state socialism, but industrial democracy – expanded nationalisation of railways, shipping, mines, and the purchase and distribution of raw materials. The primary objective, however, was political: maintaining the ongoing support of both the trade unions and the socialist militants (76–77).

⁵⁴ Hardie, J.K. *From Serfdom to Socialism*, G. Allen, 1907.

⁵⁵ Holman, B. *Kier Hardie*, Lion Hudson, 2010, 85.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁵⁸ Catterall, P. 'The Distinctiveness of British Socialism?', 151.

⁵⁹ Holman, P. 'The Distinctiveness of British Socialism?', 167.

⁶⁰ Catterall, P. 'The Distinctiveness of British Socialism?', 151.

⁶¹ J.R. Clynes, quoted in Catterall, P. 'Morality and Politics', 152.

⁶² See Turner, J. 'Labour's Lost Soul? Recovering the Labour Church', in Worley, M. ed., *The Foundations of the British Labour Party*, Ashgate, 2009; and Bevir, M. 'The Labour Church Movement, 1891–1902', *Journal of British Studies* 38, 1999, 217–245.

⁶³ Turner, J. 'Labour's Lost Soul?' 156.

⁶⁴ Bevir, M. 'The Labour Church Movement, 1891–1902', *Journal of British Studies* 38, 1999, 217–245.

⁶⁵ Bevir, M. 'The Labour Church Movement, 1891–1902', 7.

⁶⁶ Bevir records that the *Labour Church Hymn Book* contained few traditional hymns, being composed mainly of socialist songs written by writers such as Carpenter and Morris and poems by Emerson and Charles Kingsley. Readings also came from these writers, with Trevor complaining that 'the Bible is so frightfully and falsely conventionalised... it is difficult to make a Bible reading a real and helpful thing to a Labour Church audience'.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Turner, J. 'Labour's Lost Soul?' 167.

⁶⁸ John Trevor, interestingly, became active in the basically humanist South Place Ethical Society.

⁶⁹ Bevir, M. 'The Labour Church Movement, 1891–1902'.

⁷⁰ Luke 4.18b–19

Twentieth century engagements

Themes in the work of R.H. Tawney

On the occasion of his eightieth birthday, *The Times* wrote that 'no man alive has put more people in his spiritual and intellectual debt than Richard Henry Tawney'.¹ But if he ever did have a place in the pantheon of the great thinkers of the British left then, in the five decades since his death, that place has come into question.

The political historian William Greenleaf found his writing to have an air of 'meanness' about it.² Economist David Martin suggests that Tawney's relative eclipse was due to the growing perception of him, in the years immediately following his death, as a genteel moralist, evolutionary socialist and specialist in the academic backwater of the history of the fifteenth century.³ As a political thinker, many have judged his work to be derivative. In the field of economic history the Tawney tradition is said to be in decline, and even in adult education a case has been made for the contemporary irrelevance of the 'Tawney legend'. Then there are those who have not been content to suggest irrelevance, and who argue that his influence has been downright pernicious. Neville Johnson has suggested that: 'At least one generation, and that a crucial one, was given grounds for believing

that everything that contributed to the greatness and success of their country derived from a sinful selfishness and money-grubbing wickedness', or that he 'helped to make a whole generation believe that the achievement of equality in the distribution of social goods was impossible within an acquisitive society'.⁴ In 1964, the (at that time Marxist) philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre suggested that Tawney's social critique was riddled with 'cliché-ridden high mindedness' and 'banal earnestness'.⁵ None of this suggests that Tawney's work might usefully be revived or reclaimed for reflection on contemporary social, economic or political issues.

This may come as a surprise to many, since politicians of many stripes have been kinder, and have indeed been eager to suggest the Tawney heritage as their own. He has been claimed variously by the founding

members of the Social Democratic Party (its Tawney Society think-tank lasted until the party merged with the Liberals in 1988), Michael Foot (in angry response to the SDP), the Kinnock-Hattersley axis and, of course, Tony Blair. Wright recalls how Tawney was a ubiquitous presence in the Labour leadership elections of 1983, prompting *The Guardian* to nominate Tawney – Tawney as the ideal double ticket. Of course, in some cases the Tawney move is more symbolic than actual, the invocation of his work more a statement about what the speaker prefers not to be, rather than a thoroughgoing engagement with any given aspect of his work. Yet the fact that his name has become a kind of sobriquet for all kinds of socialism is indicative of his emotional influence over the Labour movement and a testament to its often unarticulated need for a foundational moral – indeed spiritual – critique.

Tawney's background was fairly prosperous. He attended Rugby school, though later became a strong critic of educational systems which divide social classes. Famously, he was a contemporary and friend of William Temple, the most influential Archbishop of the twentieth century and a leading social reformer. In 1899, he went to Balliol College Oxford, of which Tony Wright writes:

It is difficult at this range to get inside the atmosphere of turn-of-the-century Balliol, with its particular emphasis

on a mixture of scholarship and social concern, but it clearly contained elements capable of producing a powerful and durable response in many of those who breathed it in ... There was also an emphasis on social duties and responsibilities, which could take many forms but which was an explicit part of the Balliol ethos ... [Tawney] left Oxford inspired by the severe injunction of Caird, the Master of Balliol, that 'when we had done with Oxford studies, some of us should go to Poplar to discover why with so much wealth, there was so much poverty in London'.⁶

Tawney, bedevilled by slow handwriting and an 'insufficiently narrowed mind', left Balliol with only a second in 'Greats', prompting his father to ask how he proposed to wipe out the disgrace and Caird to comment that the examiners had failed to detect the chaos of a great mind. In later life, Tawney was indifferent to this academic failure. For him, his most formative years were those spent in the East End immediately after his graduation, and in Workers' Educational Association classes in Rochdale, Longton, Littleborough and Wrexham. Here the 'friendly smiting of weavers, potters, miners, and engineers taught [him] much about the problems of political and economic science which can not easily be learnt from books'.⁷

In 1909 he was asked by the Oxford University Tutorial Classes Committee, which by then was Tawney's employer, to

prepare a book on the industrial history of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Tawney's career as an economic historian began in earnest, and the book was published in 1912 under the underwhelming title of *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*. Wright calls it 'a masterpiece, a triumphant combination of scrupulous scholarship and moral commitment'. Dedicated to William Temple and Albert Mansbridge of the Workers' Educational Association, it focused on the social changes wrought by large scale land enclosures. Yet the book was not a dry historical chronicle, but emphasised the role of contending conceptions of the proper conduct of economic and social life. 'Economic policies are not to be explained in terms of economics alone', he insisted; for when 'an old and strong society is challenged by a new phenomenon, its response is torn from a living body of assumptions as to the right conduct of human affairs, which feels that more than material interests are menaced, and which braces itself anxiously against the shock'.⁸

This proposition that the rules of the economic game are intimately and indivisibly bound up with ethical and moral considerations was foundational in Tawney's work. The sickness of the acquisitive society was a moral sickness, the appropriate prescription and treatment therefore depended at least in part on shaping the ethical landscape. This basic orientation towards the ethical dimension of

economic problems distinguishes Tawney's prescriptions in important ways from some of his contemporaries in the Labour Party, not least his friends Sidney and Beatrice Webb.

This basic orientation never changed, although Greenleaf suggests that his experience in the Great War (he had served as a 'gentleman ranker', and was injured on the first day of the Battle of the Somme) forced him to reflect on what practical social reforms might be achieved through the activity of the state. The war had occasioned social and intellectual tumult, and also disenchantment with existing social systems and an expectation that things might change. He spoke of a 'new moral and intellectual atmosphere', brought about in 'the forcing-house of war'.⁹ It was in the light of his tactical acceptance of parliamentary socialism that he became increasingly involved in the practicalities of public life. He was a member of the Sankey Commission on industrial relations, and reputedly deeply involved in the drafting of the 1918 Education Act and the interwar Hadow Reports on education. He also participated in several church commissions on public life. His influence, along with William Temple's, is said to have been formative on the Archbishop's 5th Committee, *Christianity and Industrial Problems*.

Tawney, therefore, was more grounded in the life of the Church than any Christian

Socialist since F.D. Maurice. The Church had an ongoing social role; indeed, the assumption that religion was irrelevant to social and economic questions was a problem near the root of society's ills. It was Christian thinking that would impose limits on the ruthless egoism that had come to characterise the capitalist economy. He consciously drew on and expounded a broad tradition of Christian economic thinking, speaking of 'the formidable edifice of speculation, precept and law' developed by anti-capitalist religious theorists of the Middle Ages and the 'agreeably intemperate fulminations' of Reformation thinkers against usury, land-grabbing and extortionate prices. This body of reflection was 'so extensive, and sometimes so learned and acute' that it could not be easily dismissed: 'whatever its aberrations and lacunae, it forms a characteristic chapter in religious and political thought'.¹⁰

Thus, as Tony Wright suggests, Tawney's project across his major areas of endeavour, whether the academic practice of history, adult education, social criticism or the practice of political theory, was to draw his work together within a unified framework of moral, theological, economic and political understanding. Such a framework could not only make sense of the society around him but also indicate a way (he hoped) in which that society could find a durable solution to the industrial and social problems increasingly tearing it apart.¹¹ Greenleaf applies to Tawney's work an architecture

consisting of four distinct aspects: first, his critique of the 'acquisitive society'; second, his alternative of the 'functional society'; third, his proposed method of transformation, and; fourth, his emphasis on the importance of education.¹²

In *The Acquisitive Society* Tawney argues that the secularisation of economics (not least because of changes in the seventeenth century theological landscape) had resulted in a situation where human affairs were conducted 'in the light of no other end than the temporary appetites of individuals' and 'the unreasoning and morbid pursuit of pecuniary gain'. This was a matter of convenience and desire, as opposed to the (Christian) assertion, that 'all men are children of God ... the rights of all men were equal'.¹³ The 'whole tendency and interest and preoccupation [of such a society] is to promote the acquisition of wealth'. This draws deeply on human sinfulness – a subject upon which Tawney reflects elsewhere – which allows the strong 'unfettered exercise' of power, and the weak the 'hope that they too will one day be strong'.¹⁴ The acquisitive society 'assures men that there are no ends other than their ends, no law other than their desires, no limit other than that which they think desirable'.¹⁵ The result is the degradation of those who labour, a perversion of attitudes that fixates on wealth, the waste and misapplication of productive power in the multiplication of luxuries, the divorce of reward from service, industrial warfare and

an unchristian inequality. Vested interests would prevent the reorganisation of society on more just and rational lines.¹⁶

In its place, Tawney aspired to create a 'functional society'.¹⁷ Or, more properly, he understood all societies as functional (i.e., orientated towards a particular end), but some ends were admirable, others less so. The function of a capitalist system is to open opportunities to individuals to obtain ends which they perceive to be advantageous to themselves, and so become only 'acquisitive'.

If asked the end or criterion of social organisation, they would give an answer reminiscent of the formula the greatest happiness of the greatest number. But to say that the end of social institutions is happiness, is to say that they have no common end at all. For happiness is individual, and to make happiness the object of society is to resolve society itself into the ambitions of numberless individuals, each directed towards the attainment of some personal purpose.¹⁸

Rather, Tawney is looking for a society where the exercise of economic power is contingent on social obligation. In such a society, individual rights and property could not be seen as absolute, but conditional only on their ordering and use against a greater principle or social object. Economic power would thus cease to be an irresponsible tyrant, and become

the servant of society, working within clearly defined limits, and accountable to public authority.¹⁹ As we shall see, Tawney was profoundly interested in freedom and democracy, but he was not a liberal. Freedom, as a social good, was highly desirable but neither primary nor unlimited. It could only be predicated on 'the common good' – a phrase Tawney never used, but one that seems to capture his meaning well.

A functional society, moreover, would need to see a substantial reorganisation of industry. If the unrestricted power and influence of the capitalist was brought to an end, then labour too would need to take responsibility for the carrying out of industry in a functional way. Trade unions would change from being defensive agencies – consumed with resisting the downward thrust of capitalism on workers' standard of living – into being holders of power, able to advise, initiate and enforce upon their own members the obligations of their craft.

The functional society would be brought about primarily by a change in economic psychology. This sat squarely on Tawney's insistence that most industrial, economic and social problems were, at their root, human and moral. He was not indifferent, however, to institutional questions. On the one hand, he was suspicious of Fabian collectivism, on the basis that public ownership would not resolve the deep-seated problem: 'supposing unearned incomes, rents, etc. are pooled ... will the

world, with its present philosophy, do anything but gobble them up and look up with an impatient grunt for more'.²⁰ Considering his dim view of human sinfulness and his long membership of and involvement with the Fabians, Tawney was surprisingly resistant to the kind of bureaucratic system proposed by the Webbs. He felt that they lacked a comprehensive vision of socially just, ethical society, and at best their proposals would have the effect of 'tidying the room', but 'opening no windows in the soul', and would be an instance of making a 'surgical experiment on a man who is dying of starvation or who is poisoned by foul air'. On the contrary, however fallen human beings were, Tawney could not countenance a negation of their essential dignity under an all-powerful state. 'However the socialist ideal may be expressed, few things could be more remote from it than a herd of tame animals with wise rulers in command.'²¹

Tawney, along with the Guild Socialists and thinkers like Harold Laski, did not – first and foremost – advocate extensive public ownership or welfarism, but the extension of democracy into areas of life that had hitherto escaped its influence.²² The challenge was to change the psychology of different vocations, in a way that had been possible with medicine or teaching, and direct it towards the public good, while giving the worker the opportunity of participation and control. In political society, a measure of democracy and

equality had been achieved, but it should be matched with similar endeavour in the industrial environment, and in the social system. If in the industrial environment the answer was to democratise, in the social environment a socialist party should, he suggested, seek to abolish class disparities of wealth, opportunity, social provision, and economic power. It is in this context that we should see his lifelong activity in the arena of education, where class was such a determining feature of the quality of provision. In this, he foresaw a substantial expansion of state activity: nursery schools in all areas, school medical services, adequate meals, and primary and secondary level education.

The social aspirations, which have created the industrial and political labour movements, have in fact had as their counterpart the growth of an educational idealism which regards the widest possible extension of educational facilities as the indispensable condition of realising the type of social order which it is the purpose of those movements to bring into existence.²³

Why is it, then, that later assessments of Tawney have been so unkind? Why is he thought of as, at best, a quaint English moralist? Why is his work often referred to, but so rarely explicated? His critique of the acquisitive society could hardly be more

prescient for our own times, so much so that it is hard to understand why the analysis could have been made so persuasively and celebrated so widely within the Labour movement and beyond, yet have had so little traction over the course of time. His voice became a minority one in the era of the 'Keynes-plus-Beveridge-state'²⁴ and his latter day appropriation at the early stages of New Labour now seems highly ironic. As Ruskin once said, 'They read my words, say that they are pretty, and then go on their way'.²⁵

It seems that Tawney understood the nature of the challenge. Again, for him achieving political change was not simply a matter of the state pulling the right levers: resources had to be found for moral and intellectual reform. Unfortunately for his project, the moral capital which was the common property of all Christian nations was diminished in the 1960s. Towards the end of his life, after several periods of Labour government, he warned that the future could consist of 'merely a more widely disseminated cult of betting-coupons, comforts and careers'. This might be some gain, 'but it would hardly be worth the century of sweat which, together with some tears, has been needed to produce it'.²⁶

Tawney's thinking was deeply and undeniably Christian, indeed, more seriously and deeply so than many religious contributions we have reviewed. His case was self-consciously made from within

a Christian tradition, and his complaint against the 'acquisitive society' was that it was unchristian, indeed anti-Christian. The kind of economic life that it embodied had come about precisely because of the evisceration of Christian concepts from the public square. What is crucial to the case that Tawney makes in *The Acquisitive Society* is not just that capitalism is critiqued from an economic perspective but that renewed economic and political practices are held out as ethical alternatives. As Wright puts it, socialism was a choice available to all. If society is to be anything other than a mechanism, a kind of repository of labour, capital and consumers, then it would have to be 'a community of wills capable of being inspired by devotion to common ends'.²⁷ And that common end was shaped by a foundational ethic:

The essence of all morality is this: to believe that every human being is of infinite importance, and therefore that no consideration of expediency can justify the oppression of one by another. But to believe that it is necessary to believe in God. To estimate men simply by their place in the social order is to sanction the sacrifice of man to that order. It is only when we realise that each individual soul is related to a power above other men, that we are able to regard each as an end in itself ... The social order is judged and condemned by a power transcending it.²⁸

It is not easy to deduce Tawney's theological views from his published works. Perhaps even in the 1920s he was aware that, to paraphrase Clement Atlee, there would be plenty of co-belligerents who would accept Christian ethics so long as they did not come packaged with any 'mumbo-jumbo'. Tawney wrote in his *Commonplace Book* in language full of 'mumbo-jumbo'; of a 'consciousness of contact', and a sense of the closeness of God – a 'fact of direct experience infinitely more immediate than reflection on an absent but existing person, and analogous to the consciousness of the presence of a person in the same room as oneself' – and a consciousness of the deep fallenness of human nature. Yet his membership of and involvement with the Fabian Society, the fact that according to Beatrice Webb he was 'a saint', his engagement with practical politics and real policy, indicate that he managed to carry his theology in a way which did not prevent him from working with others.

Nevertheless, his theology was determinative of his politics. As Greenleaf notes, whatever agreement there might be on particular proposals for change, Tawney could never be at one with the Fabians or the Marxists, both of whom proposed to create social change chiefly through the agency of a powerful, 'scientific' state. Tawney's vision was of human liberty and dignity in the context of accountability to a conception of the good. This can be traced to Tawney's essentially Christian

vision of equality and socialism, rooted in an unashamedly biblical anthropology – for 'by affirming that all men are the children of God, it insists that the rights of all men are equal' and, 'by affirming that men are men and nothing more, it is a warning that those rights are conditional and derivative – a commission of service, not a property'. Under such an understanding of social institutions, economic activity and industrial organisation cannot be seen as neutral or functional – 'they are judged, not merely by their convenience, but by the standards of right and wrong. They become stages in the progress of mankind to perfection, and derive a certain sacramental significance from the spiritual end to which, if only as a kind of squalid scaffolding, they are ultimately related'.²⁹

Much of Tawney's analysis would sit awkwardly with contemporary members of the Labour Party, which has pursued redistribution without seeking psychological and moral changes, and latterly adopted the market as the driver of improvement in public services and the paymaster of the welfare state. Tawney might ask, have we not consumed, and looked up with an impatient grunt for more?

The Roman Catholic tradition

Thus far, our discussion of the Christian contribution to the Labour Party has focussed on either Anglicanism (F.D. Maurie, Tawney) or Nonconformity (Methodism, Hardie, the Labour Churches).

It would be wrong to proceed any further without giving some account of the important role of Roman Catholicism.

This is a task of a different kind. The Catholic Church stands alone in having a central and authoritative corpus of political and social teaching that addresses exactly the same questions as socialism, and indeed the legitimacy of socialism as against Roman Catholic social teaching. In response to the industrial unrest of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it offered (and offers) both succour to labour and a clear repudiation of 'socialism', understood as the 'striving to do away with private property', and the contention that 'individual possessions should become the common property of all, to be administered by the State or by municipal bodies'.³⁰ Thus, Roman Catholics have always been in tension with the most central commitments of the historical left, common ownership of the means of production administered by the state (as expressed, albeit moderately, by the original Clause IV). Indeed, when Clause IV was introduced into the Labour Party constitution, one Manchester party member, John Burns, attempted to establish a new party – the Centre Labour Party – which excluded Clause IV. It was not unsuccessful in gaining support.

Yet some Catholics, notably John Wheatley, were very clear about the shared interests of Catholicism and socialism.³¹ In response to a lecture given at the Athenaeum Hall in

Glasgow under the auspices of the Catholic Truth Society, which sought to distinguish between the innocuous socialism of the Labour MPs elected in 1906 and the anti-Christian socialism of Robert Blatchford, Wheatley wrote to the *Glasgow Herald*, quoting widely from Catholic literature and concluding:

The Catholic Church has always leaned more to socialism or collectivism and equality, than to individualism and inequality. It has always been the church of the poor and all the historical attacks on it have emanated from the rich. Its Divine Founder on every occasion condemned the accumulation of wealth.³²

Catholics could thus sustain a commitment to the Church, in spite of its ambivalence to socialism, by virtue of its consistent endorsement of the legitimate claims of the working-class. The predominantly working-class League of the Cross in September 1906 heard their Archbishop, Charles Maguire, welcome the advent of the working class as a political force in its own right, while a notable Franciscan, Father David, felt able to tell a questioner at one of his lectures that since the Church had not, at that stage, condemned the ILP, Catholics were free in conscience to join it.³³ 'Our socialism', wrote Wheatley, 'is not confiscation or robbery nor the destruction of family life, nor anything like what you have heard our opponents describe it. It

differs from the Socialism condemned by the Pope in that it retains the right to own private property. It is simply a scheme to abolish poverty'.³⁴ Catholic engagement in the ILP and the Labour Party was thus fashioned on the template provided by the seminal papal encyclical on capital, labour and industrialisation, *Rerum Novarum* of 1891. While explicit in its condemnation of socialism as a political doctrine, this had endorsed many aspects of the labour movement's social and political programme, particularly affirming some of the political devices by which socialism was to be approached (a living wage, rights of association). In spite of the tension, Catholics had room for manoeuvre.

In 1906 Wheatley founded the Catholic Socialist Society with the intent of ensuring that 'Socialism could be preached in an atmosphere free from any irreligious taint'. One biographer, Ian Wood, suggests that the actual membership was always small, but its ideas attracted a broad audience, with the CSS's first pamphlet, *Economic Discontent* by Father Hagerty, selling 50,000 copies.³⁵ After starting in Wheatley's Glasgow, it founded three other chapters in Scotland, two in England and one in Belfast. The Leeds society was stillborn, however, when a local bishop condemned it in a pastoral letter, with attendance dwindling as a result.³⁶

The antagonism was very real, and on one occasion Wheatley's home was visited

by a Catholic mob. But underneath the tension lay a reality that saw Catholic Church rhetoric soften over time: while theoretically and theologically the Catholic hierarchy found aspects of Labour doctrine objectionable, it was also equally aware that there were more extreme options available for (often already radical) Catholic workers. If parishioners were supporting a dubious Labour Party, then at least they were not indulging in out and out communism. While Catholics gained positive permission to vote for and join the Party in the 1920s, their role would always be seen in some senses as one of permeation and ideological damage limitation, keeping the party on the straight and narrow.³⁷

Wheatley wound up the Catholic Socialist Society in 1919. Dale suggests that 'the reason for its existence had largely been achieved'.³⁸ But there was no shortage of other Catholic 'ginger groups'. The Catholic Social Guild was launched, according to Henry Sommerville, to promote the maintenance and defence of the Christian family, the establishment of a living wage, worker partnership in industry and the wider diffusion of property. Among its activities was the development of skills amongst Catholic workers – study groups with books, pamphlets and reading lists. A considerable number of attendees ended up as executive members of their trade union and Labour Party branches.³⁹ The CSG, therefore, functioned in a way not unlike the

Methodist chapels, furnishing its members not just with ideas but with capabilities.

Dale's suggestion points to the way in which 'the Catholic vote' has historically been of much more interest to the Labour Party than that of other denominations. Although Nonconformity provided Labour with personnel, it never aligned as a whole in terms of votes. The divided political allegiances of Nonconformity became commonplace in the 1920s, and 'there is some circumstantial evidence to suggest that Liberalism remained the dominant political creed of Nonconformity for some time' after that.⁴⁰ Catholicism, in contrast, was low-hanging fruit for the Labour Party. Working Catholics were, in terms of social class, natural Labour supporters, concentrated in urban wards and more inclined to vote in predictable ways on a series of issues (birth control, Catholic education, etc., as well as on economic issues). Catterall rehearses some of the more obvious efforts to court Catholic opinion.⁴¹ In Bolton, Catholics were selected as running mates of Albert Law, a Wesleyan lay preacher, in this two member constituency in 1929, 1931 and 1935. In Bradford, the Labour Party entered into an electoral agreement with Irish Nationalists.

Yet the fact that, even in the 1930s, the Labour Party was still strenuously courting the Catholic vote belies Dale's assertion that the Catholic Socialist Society had got the Catholic vote 'in the bag'. A series of issues

came onto the agenda which disrupted the relationship between Catholics and Labour, each revisiting the inherent tension between the Labour Party and Catholicism, and giving it added electoral bite. During the 1929 General Election campaign, for instance, the Catholic Church had organised intensive lobbying of prospective MPs from all parties, eager to secure increased funding for Catholic schools while retaining the right to appoint teachers and supervise religious teaching. Significant numbers of MPs in Catholic areas supported Catholic attempts to change and ultimately wreck Trevelyan's 1931 Education Bill, prompting his resignation.⁴² Neil Riddell suggests that, in spite of the Catholic victory, unease about the direction of the Party amongst Catholic voters contributed both to the Party's loss of the 1931 Sunderland by-election and the selection of a Catholic candidate Ashton-under-Lyne although, again, Labour lost the seat.⁴³

Nor was this the only issue which would strain the association between the Catholic Church and Labour: from the 1920s parts of the Labour Party began to advocate birth control as a means to control poverty. In 1929, a number of local authorities decided to act unilaterally, prompting Catholics in the North West to disrupt Labour meetings, with the Catholic hierarchy's direct involvement.⁴⁴ Aspects of foreign policy were also sources of frustration for the Catholic Church. In 1930, Foreign Secretary Arthur Henderson supported the suspension

of the Maltese constitution on the grounds that it was biased against non-Catholics, and in 1931 Pope Pius XI's encyclical on social and labour questions – *Quadragesimo Anno* – reiterated the incompatibility of Catholicism and socialism. Indeed, the encyclical was a sustained deconstruction of socialist principles that could leave no doubt in the mind of Catholics of the Church's absolute repudiation of collectivism. Christian teaching, it argued, suggested that:

man, endowed with a social nature, is placed on this earth so that by leading a life in society and under an authority ordained of God he may fully cultivate and develop all his faculties unto the praise and glory of his Creator; and that by faithfully fulfilling the duties of his craft or other calling he may obtain for himself temporal and at the same time eternal happiness. Socialism, on the other hand, wholly ignoring and indifferent to this sublime end of both man and society, affirms that human association has been instituted for the sake of material advantage alone.⁴⁵

The Labour government further alienated the Catholic Church by reopening diplomatic relations with the USSR and adopting a policy of non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War (the extreme anticlericalism of parts of the republican movement saw the Catholic Church Europe-wide supporting the nationalists).

In the post-war period a succession of Catholic Labour members attempted to resolve this longstanding tension between Catholicism and Labour through the advocacy of Christian Democracy. The People and Freedom Group, founded with the encouragement of exiled Italian Christian Democrat and Catholic priest, Don Luigi Sturzo, sought to portray European Christian Democrat parties as being on the left, and therefore natural allies of the Labour Party. Its journal, *People and Freedom*, even went so far as to argue that Christian Democracy was inseparable from social democracy.⁴⁶ Generally speaking, this seems to have been either impolitely ignored or resisted outright, with those associating with European Christian Democrats being roundly criticized both at home and abroad (for instance, Frank Pakenham – Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster with responsibility for the British zones of Austria and Germany – maintained a close relationship with German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer).⁴⁷ Efforts to get the Labour Party to engage in the pan-European umbrella group *Nouvelles Équipes Internationales* came to nothing, to the palpable frustration of the People and Freedom Group. The only Labour Party member to attend its congress in 1948 was George Caitlin – father of Shirley Williams – reputedly annoying the Party hierarchy.

Yet British Socialists (the Christian Socialist parliamentary group as vehemently as any) spurn Christian

democracy as 'of the Right' and utterly alien ... Christian Democrats and personalist socialists, supported by true liberals and by progressive conservatives who believe in human rights, are fighting for the soul of Europe. Gladly would they accept the leadership of Britain. But Britain cannot assist their cause by promoting division rather than healing it, by blanketing in hostile incomprehension the axial force on which the whole battle depends – Christian Democracy.⁴⁸

The core ideological fault line lay, according to the late Catholic scholar Michael Fogarty, in different views of the role of the state: the Christian Democrat would not, he argued, 'look outwards' from the state, rather they would look to the social structure as a whole and 'bring the State, among other groups, into its proper perspective'. In Britain, suggests Keating, those best positioned to understand this would be either social conservatives or social democrats.⁴⁹ While the Christian Democrat tradition, therefore, would not be completely foreign to Labour, it was one that would have a hard time in the post war period, with the welfare state and the nationalisation of industry approaching its zenith.

At the time, there was no natural route into the party for Christian Democracy. Working class Catholics were generally more politically radical than the People and Freedom Group and existing Christian

politicians (Stafford Cripps, for example), although sympathetic to the policy positions of Christian Democracy, were opposed to the notion of specifically Christian political parties along Christian democratic lines. Christian Socialist groups provided no support either – indeed, George Caitlin argued that the Parliamentary Christian Socialists were a group of 'Socialist neophytes concerned to show ultra Socialist orthodoxy'.⁵⁰

The People and Freedom Group tired of its advocacy of Christian Democracy for the Labour Party. In 1950 George Caitlin expressed the view that a Christian Democratic Party might become a necessity if the government did not pay respect to 'freedom as well as planning, to personal dignity as well as "welfare"'.⁵¹ The Group did not survive the decade. As one commentator put it, it was a marginal movement, a minority within a minority. It was, nevertheless, an attempt to resolve the obvious tensions between Catholic social teaching and mainstream Labour politics. It sought to do that, however, by shifting the Labour Party's centre of gravity away from the Fabian welfarism of the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. In retrospect, this was obviously too grand a vision for a group that neither commanded any broad-based support amongst working Catholics, nor drew the sympathy of key national leaders.

The latter half of the twentieth century has seen continuity in the theme of shared interests mixed with ongoing tension. While the importance of the working class Catholic vote has diminished over time (though this is not to say that it has now completely disappeared⁵²) the number of Catholic Members of Parliament remains remarkably high. For reasons we shall explore below, the social libertarian turn of the Party, beginning in the 1960s but continuing to the present day, has proved to be another source of significant tension. There have been three significant conflicts over the course of the last Parliament alone: the passage of the Human Fertilization and Embryology Act, attempts to determine the admissions policy of Catholic schools, and the closure of Roman Catholic adoption agencies because of the passage of the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation Regulations) 2007.

This has even surfaced as an explicit debate about the role of Catholic politicians, prompted by Labour MEP Mary Honeyball's article in *The Guardian* suggesting that Gordon Brown was 'kowtowing' to pressure from Catholic ministers in allowing free votes on the HFE Bill. The article concluded with the (rhetorical?) question, 'Should devout Catholics such as [Ruth] Kelly, [Des] Browne and [Paul] Murphy be allowed on the government front bench in the light of their predilection to favour the Pope's word above the government's?'⁵³ Yet, in spite of attempts to portray the Catholic Church

as conservative and reactionary, on many policy issues (immigration, unemployment, the economy) it has consistently stood well to the left of the now departed New Labour government. Over time, Catholic social positions have remained remarkably consistent while Labour's – for reasons we explore below – have gone through successive reorientations.

The relationship of Catholicism social teaching and socialism is fundamentally a relationship of opposition:

If Socialism, like all errors, contains some truth (which, moreover, the Supreme Pontiffs have never denied), it is based nevertheless on a theory of human society peculiar to itself and irreconcilable with true Christianity. Religious socialism, Christian socialism, are contradictory terms; no one can be at the same time a good Catholic and a true socialist.⁵⁴

Quadragesimo Anno, of course, is using the word 'socialist' in *Rerum Novarum's* technical sense of 'a community of goods'. Therefore, we must be careful not to read this straight across to Catholicism's relationship with the Labour Party, which is, as critics and admirers have observed, far from socialist. Understood more loosely, elements of Catholic social teaching closely resemble types of Christian Socialism. Just as with the Christian Socialist tradition, Catholicism and Labour have managed to

be fellow travellers, not least because of the Party's ideological flexibility. Catholicism's opposition to liberal capitalism is no less trenchant than its repudiation of socialism:

... it is still possible today, as in the days of *Rerum Novarum*, to speak of inhuman exploitation. In spite of the great changes which have taken place in the more advanced societies, the human inadequacies of capitalism and the resulting domination of things over people are far from disappearing. In fact, for the poor, to the lack of material goods has been added a lack of knowledge and training which prevents them from escaping their state of humiliating subjection.⁵⁵

Whether this remains the case in the twenty-first century will depend on the direction of Labour's next evolution. British Catholicism should surely now be well used to the fact that the broad coalition that is the Labour Party contains many voices that differ from Catholic social teaching on a range of social and political issues (both those on which it would be seen to be conservative and those which it would be seen to be 'liberal' – i.e., stem cell research and gay adoption *and* asylum and immigration and the Iraq war). If one of the final bridges between Catholic social teaching and Labour thinking – a deep critique of the ideologies underpinning market capitalism and its effects on the vulnerable, developed powerfully in Pope

Benedict XVI's third encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* – were to dissolve, it would be difficult indeed to see this longstanding relationship endure with any vigour through the twenty first century.⁵⁶

Notes

¹ *The Times* (London), 28 November 1960.

² Greenleaf, W.H. *The British Political Tradition Volume Two*, 440.

³ Martin, D.A. *Journal of Economic Issues*, 16.2, June 1982, 535–543.

⁴ Nevil Johnson, quoted in Wright, T. R.H. *Tawney*, Manchester University Press, 1987, 134.

⁵ MacIntyre, A. *Against the Self-Images of the Age*, quoted in Greenleaf, W.H. *The British Political Tradition Volume Two*, 452.

⁶ Wright, T. R.H. *Tawney*, Manchester University Press, 1987, 1–2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹ Tawney, R.H. 'The Conditions of Economic Liberty', quoted in Greenleaf, W.H. *The British Political Tradition Volume Two*, 448–449.

¹⁰ Tawney, R.H. 'Religion and Economic Life', *TLS*, 6 January 1956, quoted in Greenleaf, W.H. *The British Political Tradition Volume Two*, 442.

¹¹ In the ten year period 1893–1902, an annual average of 8.75 million working days were lost through strike action. In the period 1913–22, the comparable figure was 20.58 million.

¹² Greenleaf, W.H. *British Political Tradition*, 452–462.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 450.

¹⁴ Tawney wrote in his *Commonplace Book* that any goodness an individual or community could achieve is 'a house built on piles driven into black slime and

always slipping down into it unless we are building night and day’.

¹⁵ Quoted in Wright, T. R.H. *Tawney*, 176.

¹⁶ Tawney, R.H. *Equality*, quoted in Greenleaf, W.H. *The British Political Tradition Volume Two*, 453.

¹⁷ According to Greenleaf, the notion may have been drawn from John Ruskin, Professor Ernest Barker of Oxford University, or the Roman Catholic theorist Ramiro de Maetzu. In any case, the idea was probably not his own.

¹⁸ Tawney, R.H. *The Acquisitive Society*, 29.

¹⁹ Tawney, R.H. *Equality*, 455.

²⁰ Tawney, R.H. *Commonplace Book*, quoted in Greenleaf, W.H. *The British Political Tradition Volume Two*, 446

²¹ *Ibid.*, 444–445.

²² Tawney, R.H. *The Radical Tradition*, quoted in Greenleaf, W.H. *The British Political Tradition Volume Two*, 457.

²³ Tawney, R.H. *The British Labour Movement*, quoted in Greenleaf, W.H. *The British Political Tradition Volume Two*, 462.

²⁴ Wright, T. R.H. *Tawney*, 143.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁶ Tawney, R.H. ‘A note on Christianity and the Social Order’, in *The Attack and Other Papers*, quoted in Wright, T. R.H. *Tawney*, 141.

²⁷ Greenleaf, W.H. *British Political Tradition*, 449.

²⁸ Tawney, R.H. *Commonplace Book*, 449.

²⁹ Tawney, R.H. *The Acquisitive Society*, quoted in Greenleaf, W.H. *The British Political Tradition Volume Two*, 450.

³⁰ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum: On Capital and Labour*, 15 May 1891. papalencyclicals.net/Leo13/113rerum.htm

³¹ Wheatley (1869–12 May 1930) was an Irish immigrant who worked as a miner in Braehead. He later set up his own printing business, specialising in his own political tracts: *How the Miners are Robbed*

(1907), *The Catholic Workingman* (1909), *Miners, Mines and Misery* (1909), *Eight Pound Cottages for Glasgow Citizens* (1913), *Municipal Banking* (1920) and *The New Rent Act* (1920). He was a member of the ILP from 1907, and one of the famously radical group of ‘Red Clydesiders’ elected in the 1922 General Election. Although experiencing a tense relationship with MacDonald, he became Minister of Health in 1924 and was responsible for the passage of the significant Financial Provisions Housing Act (1924), which saw a massive expansion in affordable municipal housing. Around 500,000 houses were built using the subsidy provided by the Act.

³² Quoted in Wood, I.S. *John Wheatley*, Manchester University Press, 1990, 18.

³³ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁴ Quoted in Dale, G. *God’s Politicians*, 72.

³⁵ Wood, I.S. *John Wheatley*, 22.

³⁶ Dale, G. *God’s Politicians*, 74.

³⁷ Keating, J. ‘The British Experience: Christian Democrats Without a Party’, in Hanley, D.L. (ed.), *Christian Democracy in Europe: A Comparative Perspective*, Pinter, 1994, 169.

³⁸ Dale, G. *God’s Politicians*, 75.

³⁹ Keating, J. ‘The British Experience’, 170.

⁴⁰ Catterall, P. ‘The Distinctiveness of British Socialism?’ 144.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 142.

⁴³ Riddell, N. *Labour in Crisis: The Second Labour Government, 1929–31*, Manchester University Press, 1999, 113.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴⁵ Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno: On Reconstruction of the Social Order*, 15 May 1931, vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno_en.html, paragraph 118. In line with *Rerum Novarum*, however, it outlined a special concern

for justice for the poor delivered by the State and defended the place of associationism, criticising socialist parties for not taking it up.

⁴⁶ *People and Freedom*, February 1950, quoted in Keating, J. 'The British Experience', 175.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* According to Keating, German SDP leader Kurt Schumacher called Pakenham a 'psuedo-socialist'.

⁴⁸ *People and Freedom*, quoted in Keating, J. 'The British Experience', 175.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Keating, J. 'The British Experience', 176.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁵² There was some speculation about the role of the Catholic vote in Labour's defeat in the Glasgow East by-election in 2008, focusing particularly on the

opposition of the Catholic community to the Human Fertilization and Embryology Bill. In the 2010 General Election, Labour's Margaret Curran (same candidate as the 2008 by-election) won the seat with a 11,000 majority.

⁵³ Honeyball, M. 'Cardinals' Sins', *Guardian—Comment is Free*, 20 May 2008. guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/may/20/cardinalsins

⁵⁴ Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, 15 May 1931, paragraph 120.

⁵⁵ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 1 May 1991, paragraph 33.

⁵⁶ In 2008, Cardinal Archbishop Cormac Murphy-O'Connor suggested that he was 'not so sure' that Labour stood for the needs of Catholics. See timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article427996.ece

Twenty-first century engagements

Contemporary Christian Socialism

Christian Socialism has never really 'gone away'. In the later half of the twentieth century its narrative becomes more firmly tied to an institution yet simultaneously more intellectually fragmented. Since Tawney and Temple, there have been no acknowledged authoritative philosophical or theological voices capable of commanding the attention both of the Church and the Party. Yet in spite of this, the last thirty years have seen an upsurge in the churches' activism on the left, partly in reaction to the programmes of the successive Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s.

Methodist Donald Soper was clearly a towering figure in successive expressions of Christian Socialism, including the Christian Socialist Movement (CSM). The dominant theme of his political life was nuclear disarmament and the campaign against the arms trade. In the way in which he strongly aligned his exposition of Christian Socialism with pacifism, in his uncompromising egalitarianism and his hostility towards 'theology' as against following Jesus, he evoked something of the biblical radicalism of Hardie (he was also a teetotaler and opponent of gambling). Indeed, it is probably that aura that contributed to the sense of him being so highly respected by the Party. From a policy point of view, however, it is hard to imagine how the Labour Party could have distanced

itself more from the principles of Christian Socialists like Soper in the years since his death.

Yet the organisation for which Soper is most remembered – the modern Christian Socialist Movement (CSM) – has succeeded in achieving more longevity than any previous Christian Socialist entity. An amalgam of the Society of Socialist Clergy and Ministers and the Socialist Christian League, it launched in 1960. R.H. Tawney attended its inaugural public meeting.

It affiliated to the Party in 1988,¹ and its closeness to Labour has been both a great strength and, according to some, a significant weakness. On the one hand, it has helped sustain the Party's conversation

with faith groups over the course of the Labour administration, not least because a significant number of MPs and government ministers (including, of course, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown) were members. It has also provided a focal point for the organisation and training of members of the Party sympathetic to the public witness of Christianity. It is, for instance, active at Party conferences, engaging the membership of the Party in conversations around Christianity and politics. Latterly, it has taken an interesting turn from campaigning not just on 'soft' issues such as international development, but on harder policy issues such as banking and tax reform and the regulation of vulture funds. As with other strands of ethical socialism, the moral bankruptcies of global capitalism have breathed some new life into the organisation and its thinking – such campaigns represent a serious attempt to engage the witness of the Christian socialist tradition with the most egregious aspects of modern global capitalism.

On the other hand, CSM has, at various times over the past thirteen years, been accused of having too close a relationship with the Labour Government. According to some critics, the proper position of Christian Socialism is always one of tension and prophetic critique, including critique of the Labour Party. During a BBC Radio 4 debate on Christian Socialism in June 2007, between Alun Michael MP (current Chair of CSM), theologian John Milbank

and Jonathan Bartley of Ekklesia, Alun Michael was consistently challenged to give examples of the 'prophetic voice' of the CSM.² Specifically, criticisms were levelled at failing to oppose the war on Iraq or what Milbank described as the New Labour neo-liberal economic project, as if indeed they were 'the religious wing of New Labour'. Refusing to 'flag wave' on a selective range of issues, Michael suggested rather that the role of the movement was to bring together Christians with a wide range of political and theological views for fellowship and mutual support.

In a way reminiscent of the Victorian Christian Socialists, two different visions of the outworking of Christian Socialism are in tension. One is moderately hostile to the existing institutions of democracy, seeing them as part of the problem that Christian Socialism speaks against. Milbank, for example, places a much greater emphasis on the socialism of intermediary institutions, against both the market and the state. The other account of Christian Socialism sees engagement in political institutions – including in political parties – a legitimate, indeed desirable, vehicle for the pursuit of Christian missiological engagement, working for renewal and restoration through secular structures. Indeed, the nature of the engagement – the building of relationships, affecting the culture of the party – is itself part of the mission. The CSM clearly falls within the latter model.

Unlike predecessor groups or entities such as Kenneth Leach's Jubilee Group, the CSM builds itself around this theological model and expectation of engagement, not necessarily on substantial agreement around political and theological issues. Specifically, it now aspires to be a community, not just for Christian Labour Party activists, but also one which is increasingly seeking to draw on a wider reservoirs of Christian activism, moving people from inaction in the face of social challenges, through charitable response and campaigning, to formal party politics as a legitimate and effect witness of the gospel: 'We want to be a family and support for the adventure of rolling up your sleeves and getting involved'.³

At the Christian Socialist Movement in the last few years we have noticed a surge of interest from young people and twenty-somethings. They are to a large extent the 'Make Poverty History generation' ... Also far beyond the confines of the church, in the thriving NGO sector, there is a river of energy flowing containing many folks who are naturally left-sided, but who need some confidence-building measures before engaging in party politics. Hence CSM's 'Do not send this postcard' campaign. It encourages those for whom campaigning and postcard-sending have become second nature, to see themselves as future recipients of postcards, in positions of responsibility, rather than

acting on a presumption that they will always be shouting from the sidelines. The hookline is 'Don't send. Be sent'.⁴

Historically, it is difficult to tell whether the 'revival' of Christian Socialism discussed above is a by-product of the rise of three religiously inclined leaders in succession (and so destined to wane as the Party 'reverts to type'), or whether it comes as part of a broader revival. On the above account, there is something of a distinction between the Christian Socialism of the New Labour leadership (to which we will shortly turn) and the CSM's aspiration to build a broader, more energetic 'missional' engagement amongst Christians who may lean toward the left, but are not yet actively engaged in Party politics.

According to the former Director of the CSM, Graham Dale, John Smith was responsible for creating the space in which the upcoming generation of Labour leadership could articulate their faith. Smith argued that he was a Christian Socialist in the tradition of R.H. Tawney, though he was *par excellence* a political practitioner rather than a political thinker. Christianity (understood in an appropriately broad, un-dogmatic, and un-exclusive way) provided him with a useful ethical backdrop for his development of a 'post Thatcherite agenda'. What mattered for him was that politics was a 'moral activity', and that Christianity

provided a context in which a policy could be pursued because it was ‘the right thing to do’. Smith spoke of ‘community’ and so created ground for political argument to the left of Thatcherite individualism, without appealing to the discredited and unpopular modes of old-style socialism.⁵

After Smith’s untimely death in 1994, Tony Blair seemed to offer a more sophisticated Christian Socialism, founded on the thinking of philosopher John Macmurray, though ultimately its tactical political effect was broadly the same (i.e., it enabled the construction of a meaningful public discourse critical of Thatcherism and the neo-liberal economic agenda while nevertheless steering clear of anything that smacked of left wing ideology). Blair encountered the work of Macmurray through Peter Thomson, an Australian priest who served as something of a chaplain to Blair up until his early years as Labour leader. In 1994 he said, somewhat evasively, ‘If you really want to understand what I’m all about you have to take a look at a guy called John Macmurray. It’s all there.’

According to Bevir and O’Brien, Macmurray stands somewhat upstream of the contemporary communitarian tradition of Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor and within the older liberal idealist tradition of T.H. Green and George Caird which had been so influential on Tawney, Beveridge and William Temple. All these thinkers have affirmed that individuals only exist

as beings within community. For each, this has entailed a positive account of freedom situated within the common good, as opposed to libertarian positions which emphasized freedom as the mere absence of coercion. By promoting the value of fellowship, the earlier idealists provided a context within which there flourished a range of progressive political programmes that came to coalesce around the welfare state.

For Macmurray, there were elements of the idealist tradition which were naïve and blandly progressive; these were fundamentally challenged by the social trauma of the First and Second World Wars. Before these conflicts, history had appeared to exhibit a progressive purpose that could reinforce faith, but it now seemed to be driven by irrational desires and violence, thereby challenging faith. Thus he remodelled classical idealism, de-emphasising the universal mind and universal human fellowship in favour of the priority of action – put bluntly, the need to practice fellowship. Because the human capacity for absolute freedom can be expressed only through action in community, our freedom is, therefore, inherently relative, especially in relation to material resources, the control of desire, and the extent of fellowship.⁶

In 1996, Blair praised Macmurray specifically for delineating the starting point of a modern concept of community

through his rigorous location of individuals in social settings such that they cannot properly ignore their obligations to others.⁷ It is here that we find one of the philosophical roots of the rhetoric of 'rights and responsibility' that became such a touchstone of New Labour, though this has since evolved in ways that Macmurray would have found unacceptable. In her book, *Blair's Community: Communitarian Thought and New Labour*, Sarah Hale has argued that New Labour rhetoric on community is usually strongly contractual (e.g., where continuing anti-social behaviour could result in lost benefits), and so betrays an understanding which is appreciably different from Macmurray's.⁸

This is not to say that Blair's use of Macmurray was purely presentational. In the closing paragraph of his maiden speech in the House of Commons, during which he had been heavily critical of the Conservative Government for failing to do anything about high levels of unemployment, he briefly referred to his own understanding of socialism:

I am a Socialist not through reading a textbook that has caught my intellectual fancy, nor through unthinking tradition, but because I believe that, at its best, Socialism corresponds most closely to an existence that is both rational and moral. It stands for co-operation, not confrontation; for fellowship, not fear. It stands for equality, not because it wants

people to be the same but because only through equality in our economic circumstances can our individuality develop properly. British democracy rests ultimately on the shared perception by all the people that they participate in the benefits of the common weal.⁹

Without trying to establish a direct link, it is clear that the early Blair articulated his political philosophy in a broadly idealist idiom, in the tradition of T.H. Green, Macmurray or, indeed, Maurice. But he found himself confronted with the demands of forming a policy programme for a prospective government, and addressing the sheer difficulties of responding to intractable governmental challenges like low-level anti-social behaviour, public security and the need to respond to the pressure for legislative change from socially libertarian elements of the party. The result was a series of compromises and syntheses with other agendas. While retaining the language of community – not least as a kind of continuing protest against the hyper-individualism of elements of the Conservative/neo-liberal period – the political actuality was far more ambiguous. We explore this in more depth below.

So we arrive at departing and defeated Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown, famously a 'Son of the Manse'. Unlike Tony Blair, whose interest in religious matters developed during his time at university, Gordon Brown had been exposed to

Christian faith and practice from the cradle. This umbilical link to his parents' faith and work has sustained in him what he himself has called 'social Christianity'.¹⁰ This, he has always claimed, left him sensitive to the life of ordinary working people in de-industrialising Britain:

Living in a manse, he related, 'You find out very quickly about life and death and the meaning of poverty, justice and unemployment.' ... [and are] bequeathed an osmotic understanding of the Bible.¹¹

This is Brown's early life as he would narrate it, emphasising a moral connection to communities in need, the importance of gainful employment and a rejection of revolutionary socialism in favour of a Presbyterian-flavoured egalitarianism. Commenting on Brown's prospects during his apprenticeship in provincial Scottish Labour politics, the not-so-sympathetic biographer Tom Bower suggests that the party recognised Brown's ability but 'wanted evidence of more than a commitment to the community and worship of the Bible, Burns and Kier Hardie'.¹² Over the trajectory of his public life, some of Brown's key political concerns have often cohered with those of his alleged religious tradition, though we should not necessarily deduce causation from correlation. Foremost among these have been cancellation of third world debt, which has been linked presentationally, and sometimes substantially, to the social codes of the Old Testament.¹³ This issue

is one on which Brown would frequently trade in religious and Scriptural references. Journalistic accounts of his Presbyterian moral compass demonstrate a widely held belief that Brown, otherwise technocratic in style, somehow 'comes alive' when dealing with these issues – that this is the 'real' him:

... put him in a church and the effect can be electrifying. One of his best performances, eloquent and uplifting, was in St Paul's Cathedral in 2005 on the eve of the Gleneagles summit, talking about the rich world's obligations to the poor. Here the Biblical cadences of his vocabulary were allowed full range.¹⁴

Those who emphasise Brown's religious narrative also highlight his engagement with religious thinkers. Jim Wallis, a left of centre American evangelical, has been labelled 'Brown's religious guru' (Brown has read and commended his works). In turn, Wallis has suggested that 'it's in his DNA, Christian thinking ... It really is very powerful in him. Where he is, where any of us are on our own journey of faith, is something that he can answer for himself but he knows the scriptures, he knows what God requires ... The deep commitment and motivation within him is moral and personal, not just political'.¹⁵

What we know of Brown's earlier years, however, doesn't always cohere with this narrative. Very early in his political career Brown's intellectual horizons were much

broader: for example, an essay in the *Red Paper on Scotland* (a collection that he edited at the age of 24) revealed an admiration for Antonio Gramsci, while his Ph.D. thesis focused on James Maxton, leader of the Independent Labour Party (a fellow Red Clydesider with John Wheatley, he espoused a Christianity somewhat similar in nature to Hardie's). Thus, a biographical enterprise which places faith at the heart of Brown's psyche deserves more detailed scrutiny than it is often given.¹⁶ Rarely, if ever, does Brown make direct reference to personal faith (as opposed to the formative influence of his parents' faith) and when Brown's authorised biographer insists that he is Christian, he offers no further evidence or explanation.¹⁷ Bower suggests that the rugby injuries which resulted in his loss of sight also disturbed an earlier confidence: 'Neither in public nor in private would he ever express thanks to God or refer to Christianity as an influence, guide or support for his life'.¹⁸

Brown's public comments on his father's faith indicate a degree of distance from the subject: in his 2006 Labour Party conference speech, Brown observed, 'My father was a minister of the church. His motive was not theological zeal but compassion ... Most of all my parents taught me that each of us should live by a moral compass'.¹⁹ Elsewhere, he has contrasted his father's 'social Christianity', expressed as the desire to treat everyone equally, with 'fundamentalism'.²⁰ Without exploring the contours of John

Brown's theology, we can nevertheless see that Brown invokes his spiritual legacy but tends to de-particularise it, detaching compassion from any confessional context, beliefs about the nature of God or the mission of the Church. Thus, Doug Gay finds Brown to be one among a generation of Scottish Protestants now in public life who display a residual loyalty to the Kirk as a source of identity, but who show very little sign of having ever been emotionally, spiritually or intellectually captured by the Christian gospel: in his words, Brown is the 'quintessential, modernist, demythologized, liberal, *kultur*-Presbyterian'.²¹

If pushed to identify his philosophical heritage, Brown would see himself standing in the tradition of the 'sympathy theorists', of the Scottish Enlightenment – men like Smith and Hume. The ethical backdrop for political action is a common feeling that springs directly from the human condition. Rhetorically, this is borne out in the discourse of 'our shared moral sense that moves human beings even in the most comfortable places to sympathy and solidarity with fellow human beings even in far-away places in distress'.²²

Brown was one of the most rhetorically religious politicians in our history but, given his caution on the subject, his Christian Socialism is hard to define precisely. He certainly followed in the footsteps of Smith and Blair, synthesising what he could from his Christian background with his

political project. But, without seeking a window into Brown's soul, it seems likely that once the analysis moves beyond superficial journalistic attempts to unpick his intellectual commitments, the influence of Christianity on Brown's political life was indirect – a significant and profound part of his background, but one which he never personally felt full confidence in.

Revisionism and the turn to a liberal Labour tradition

In February 2002 Labour backbencher Tony McWalter asked an awkward question:

Mr. McWalter: My right hon. Friend is sometimes subject to rather unflattering or even malevolent descriptions of his motivation. Will he provide the House with a brief characterisation of the political philosophy that he espouses and which underlies his policies?

Mr Blair, after a moment's silence, gave what seemed to be an evasive, confused and confusing answer:

The Prime Minister: First, I should thank my hon. Friend for his question, which has evinced such sympathy in all parts of the House, about the criticism of me. The best example that I can give is the rebuilding of the national health service today under this Government – extra investment. For example, there is the appointment today of Sir Magdi Yacoub to head up the fellowship scheme that

will allow internationally acclaimed surgeons and consultants from around the world to work in this country. I can assure the House and the country that that extra investment in our NHS will continue under this Government. Of course, it would be taken out by the Conservative Party.²³

Somewhat in defence of Blair, Roy Hattersley argued in *The Guardian* that few party leaders would have been able to answer the question with anything other than generalities. 'G.D.H. Cole', he noted, 'although himself an egalitarian, conceded the electoral advantage of a party being "almost without doctrine – so undefined in its doctrinal basis as to make recruits readily available among people of quite different types"' in the pursuit of the interests of 'the bottom dog'. On a more critical note, he argued that Blair had occupied an especially difficult position by describing Labour as 'new', and so renouncing not just the historic means (e.g., ownership of the means of production) of the British labour movement but also its end (e.g., equality). New Labour presented itself as an entirely classless party, 'intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich' as long as they paid their taxes. It was created, and survived, on the questionable basis that the interests of conflicting groups can be reconciled by increased efficiency and good will. Into the political vacuity, implied Hattersley, seeped a nonsensical mix of communitarianism, the Third Way, the stakeholder society, and so on.²⁴

Hattersley perhaps overstated the extent to which Blair dug his own philosophical grave, since he was in effect responding to a political-ideological problem that has now bedevilled the Labour Party for several generations.

The Labour Party emerged organically, and quite un-ideologically, as a broad cultural movement centring on a moral protest against poverty and extreme inequality – as Hattersley suggests, ‘a broad movement on behalf of the bottom dog’. This attracted individuals of a variety of persuasions. But with the welfare state in place, the worst deficiencies of labour law corrected, the nationalisation of significant parts of the economy and the eradication of the worst excesses of poverty, Tony Crosland, who very much defined the answers to this conundrum that New Labour came to propound, was already asking how socialism could be embodied in a realistic political programme in 1956.

If growth proceeded at the expected rate, material want, poverty and deprivation of essential goods would gradually cease to be a problem. He asked for the determination to ‘improve an already improved society’. The key issues would not be the economic causes of distress, but the social and psychological causes: ‘we shall rely less on broad, sweeping measures of expenditure than on concentrated measures of aid to limited groups ... individual therapy, casework and preventative treatment ...

new and more subtle social problems, hitherto concealed by a natural obsession with material standards, now come to the surface and demand attention.’²⁵ Crosland still advanced an argument for greater social equality, but the foundation of the argument had changed, or had at least moved in a new direction from early theorists like Tawney. Inequality was not objectively morally aberrant, but questionable on the grounds of restriction of freedom of choice: ‘... areas of avoidable social distress and physical squalor ... are still on a scale which narrowly restricts freedom of choice and movement for a large number of individuals’.²⁶

Equality itself would include greater access to ‘prestige symbols of high consumption’. For Tawney, part of the problem was the waste produced in the production and excessive consumption of luxury goods. For Crosland, the increasing acceptance of the social norm of access to luxury goods was a sign of the ‘threshold of an era of new abundance’. This is not just a case of Crosland against Christian asceticism, but a fundamentally different articulation of the good, a socialism turned ironically towards liberty and consumption. Engels had called Britain ‘the most bourgeois of all nations ... a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat besides the bourgeoisie itself’. Now for Crosland, this became the impulse for a thorough revision of the Labour Party’s fundamental objectives:

... the Labour Party ... would be ill advised to continue making a largely proletarian class appeal when a majority of the population is gradually attaining a middle class standard of life, and distinct symptoms even of a middle-class psychology.²⁷

This is the philosophy behind the Labour Party's search for 'Mondeo man'. Thus, though he was many years ahead of most of the rest of the Labour Party, Crosland's logic and its conclusions are now obvious enough. As the political, social and economic challenges reshaped the landscape, so the Labour Party would have to do the same. This was, in a word, simple revisionism. In another way, however, it is clear that the usually neat distinction between means and ends made by most revisionists is not simple: Crosland wanted a modification of ends as well, away from the solidaristic, collectivist, group-centred themes of the past towards an individualist and aesthetic approach.

For Crosland, defining himself against both the Fabians and nonconformists, the Labour Party would direct its attention more and more to 'the freedom of personal and leisure life', evincing ahead of time many of the policy themes that have interested recent Labour governments. So there was not just a reconsideration of the means, but an alteration of the ends also:

We need not only higher exports and old age pensions, but more open air cafés, brighter and gayer streets at night, later closing hours for public houses, more local repertory theatres, better and more hospitable hoteliers and restaurateurs, brighter and cleaner eating houses, more riverside cafés, more pleasure gardens on the Battersea model, more murals and pictures in public places, better design for furniture and pottery and women's clothes, statues in the centre of new housing estates, better designed street lamps and telephone kiosks, and so on *ad infinitum*.²⁸

On a more serious turn, Crosland attacked 'socially-imposed restrictions on the individual's private life and liberty': 'prehistoric' abortion laws, licensing, obsolete penalties for sexual abnormality, the illiterate censorship of books and plays. He called the divorce laws hypocritical, and wrote that, 'a time will come, as material standards rise, when divorce law reform will increase the sum of human welfare more than a rise in the food subsidies.'²⁹ In short, the main plank of Crosland's revisionism was a turn from purely economic equality (this having been realised through a mix of the ameliorating welfare activity of the state and a growth in the economy) to social equality, to be realised through the repeal and enactment of pieces of legislation.

The 'Third Way', represented most clearly in the work of sociologist Anthony Giddens,

is a recognition of and a justification for exactly the dynamic which Crosland identified, albeit mediated through the new and wider challenge of globalisation. Writing on the changes in European centre left politics in the 1980s, and specifically on the German SPD's 'Basic Programme', Giddens noted the move from an ethos of collectivism and solidarity to one of individual achievement and economic competitiveness, an emphasis on private consumption rather than state activity:

That these policy shifts were necessary is indicated by changes in patterns of political support, to which all social democratic parties have had to react. The class relations that used to underlie voting and political affiliation have shifted dramatically, owing to the steep decline in the blue-collar working class ... Self expression and the desire for meaningful work are replacing the maximising of economic rewards.³⁰

In any case, it would be fair to say that the Labour Party has never been able to pursue a deeply socialist programme in government. From fairly early on after the Second World War it was obliged to abandon aspirations for a socially controlled economy, in which resources would be allocated by administrative processes rather than through the price mechanism, and settle for a mixture of Keynesian economic management and a Beveridgean welfare state. Both Will Hutton and David

Marquand suggest that, fundamentally, the liberal case for the market has been proved. For Hutton in particular, no distinctively socialist critique of capitalism is possible, and thus Labour's intellectual and social base is eroded.

Through the contexts of these two revisionist moments – Croslandite revisionism and the Third Way – we see that the Labour Party is in the midst of a generational process of explaining its ongoing *raison d'être*. Indeed, revisionism is a now held to be a permanent process rather than a settled position. According to Lord Mandelson, New Labour died on 6th May 2010, but 'the cast of mind that new Labour represents – aspirational, reforming, in touch and that faces up to the choices power demands – must not die with it if our party is to be a serious party of government again'.³¹

One response has been the attempt to reinvent Labour as a partly liberal, partly social democratic entity. In a speech at Demos in February 2010, David Miliband (then Foreign Secretary) celebrated exactly this turn. 'The core value we espouse', he argued 'is a commitment to use government to help give people the power to shape their own lives'. While this is not an astonishing departure, it is hardly a restatement of Clause IV, or of democratic socialism, but rather is a conscious attempt to draw on a liberal discourse.

In the 1990s, spurred by David Marquand's book *The Progressive Dilemma*, Labour embraced a more pluralist centre-left politics, in a conscious effort to draw on its liberal as well as social democratic heritage. That coalition has now dominated politics for a decade, bringing together individual rights in a market economy with collective provision to promote social justice.

I am proud of the long lists of changes in each category. I think we have changed the country for the better. The liberal achievements – gay rights, human rights, employee rights, disability rights – on the one hand. The social democratic ones – childcare, university places, health provision – on the other. And then those areas that fused the best of both: a New Deal for the Unemployed that uses the private and voluntary sector, devolved budgets for disabled people, the digital switchover, Academies, all combine government leadership with bottom up innovation and engagement.³²

The two facets of the liberal turn are a diminution in the role of the state as a manager of the economy, and its development as a source of social rights, whether in the equality and human rights agenda, in healthcare (later in the speech Miliband celebrates the cancer guarantee) or education. The role of government is not to control markets but to mobilise them,

argued Miliband, and balance them with strong communities and strong government.

From a Christian perspective, there is some wisdom in this: part of the witness of key voices in Christian Socialism is that an expanded sphere of activity for the state would not and does not speak to the underlying problems of society, which are ethical and relational. If one result of such ideological flexibility is the ability to adopt a more pluralist approach to delivering the common good, allowing 'civil society' to flourish and work to meet social challenges, then so much the better.

The problem is that this is probably not the best description of the ideological workings of New Labour. In key policy areas, we see an extension of the competitive principles of the market – take, for example, the way in which 'voluntary sector' agencies have been encouraged to compete with the private and state sectors for contracts to deliver welfare services. According to some critics, this is not a rebalancing of the state and the market with civil society, but a synthesis of state and market against society. This fully-fledged embrace of the market has, unsurprisingly, led to an intensified sense of anomie amongst Party members³³ – particularly Christian members – and some uncertainty and distrust amongst the electorate. Revisionism is an entirely appropriate response for a political party born in industrial Britain, struggling to come to terms with what it exists to do in a post

industrial era. But not all possible revisions are worthwhile or coherent within a tradition. In the way that it has been carried forward, revisionism has cut Labour adrift not only from an electorally embarrassing commitment to nationalisation, but also from its core narratives of solidarity, community, and faith and any critique at all of the operation of the market. This ideological and policy development has been matched by a linguistic turn. Perhaps in view of what Hutton describes as a lack of a coherent story and an ideological position to cohere around, the Labour Party is now much wedded to its self-description as a 'progressive' entity.

This essay has been primarily concerned to outline historical relationships between the labour movement and Christianity. We have argued that the labour movement emerged from a social milieu in which Christians were actively engaging in social questions, that Christians within the party were motivated by their faith, and that Christian thinkers have led the labour movement in engaging in its critique of the 'acquisitive society'. Intellectually, the Labour movement depends on a conception of human dignity which is fundamentally Christian. As A. J. Penty put it:

To understand the Socialist movement, it must be realised that it is primarily a moral revolt. The movement draws

its recruits from among those who are outraged by the corruption and injustices of our industrial system, and if we are to see the movement in its proper perspective this fact must never be forgotten.³⁴

In spite of the apparent flowering of Christian Socialism in the last fifteen years, the contemporary landscape is one of some tension. Croslandite revisionism, the Third Way and the development of the liberal labour tradition have all resulted in a sense of alienation amongst Christians. Why? The liberal turn, it is arguable, represents a turn away from the Fabian collectivism that may, in Tawney's memorable phrase, tidy the room but provide no windows for the soul. But several babies have gone out with the bathwater – liberal social legislation on gambling, licensing laws, civil partnerships and bioethical issues may have frustrated Christians, but they are equally frustrated by New Labour's easiness with the market, militarism and tolerance of massive economic inequality, albeit with a bolstered welfare system. Aside from one or two honourable exceptions – international development, faith-based provision of domestic social welfare (under tightly controlled conditions) – Christian Socialism has been worn lightly. It may have marshalled thinking against extreme New Right individualism and helped explain the broad 'communitarian' ethos of the Party in the run up to the 1997 general election, but its traction on the Party in government

– again with honourable exceptions – has seemed limited.

The revisionist programme which assumed that ongoing economic growth would continue to deliver more or less greater wellbeing surely faces a number of obvious practical challenges. As the banking crisis and credit fuelled consumer boom amply demonstrate, not all kinds of economic growth are good kinds of growth. Not all promote a fair distribution of resources, create an ecologically or financially sustainable economy, or promote economic development in all parts of the country, to name just a few complaints that can be levelled against the system. Beyond this, Christian Socialism would lodge a deeper moral critique: now that the Labour Party is of no fixed ideological abode, no substantive vision of the ‘the good’ is offered, either for our economic system or for society at large. Tawney would surely characterise our society as ‘acquisitive’ – human affairs conducted ‘in the light of no other end than the temporary appetites of individuals’ and ‘the unreasoning and morbid pursuit of pecuniary gain.’ We have assured men ‘that there are no ends other than their ends, no law other than their desires, no limit other than that which they think desirable’.³⁵

This is not to say that Labour is responsible wholesale for a culture of consumerism. But, in adopting social liberalism as its guiding philosophical principle, it has done nothing

to prevent it, or indeed to encourage the institutions which would seek to prevent it. Nor is it to suggest that, after all, the concrete political problems are tractable or that there are any ethically neat answers. But it is to suggest that revisionism jumped the gun in assuming that economic growth and a sufficiently targeted welfare state could deliver to the vulnerable that which they need. The Labour movement’s deepest challenges to the free market have always been ethical and, indeed, theological. Marx was perhaps wrong in suggesting that liberal capitalism would collapse, others wrong in suggesting that the state would be a more efficient manager of economic resources, but the ethical critique of the acquisitive society remains. This places profound questions against the Party’s sequestration of the market as a driver of human flourishing.

If the Labour Party continues to aspire to be the Party of ‘a just society, which judges its strength by the condition of the weak as much as the strong, provides security against fear, and justice at work, which nurtures families, promotes equality of opportunity and delivers people from the tyranny of poverty, prejudice and the abuse of power’³⁶, then, inasmuch as it makes a critique which is consonant with the Christian Socialist tradition, it will command high levels of support and involvement from amongst the Christian community. If the idea that the Labour Party owes more to Methodism than it does to Marx

contains any truth, it is the truth that faith communities can provide personnel. Religious belief has a unique affective power, and being part of a faith institution can train someone in the virtues of citizenship, service and common endeavour – virtues without which no political party can long survive.³⁷

So what future for Christian Socialism? Is it destined to recede as the leadership of the Party is taken up by those who are simply less familiar with, or perhaps more suspicious of, the role of the Christian tradition within the Party? In conclusion, we want to make three separate but related points – two of which hint at a bright future, and a third which poses challenges.

First, the theological resources are strong. If the precise nature of Christian Socialism is hard to define, it may well be that this is because the tradition is characterised by legitimate and welcome diversity. It ranges from Hardie's biblical radicalism (and his refusal to allow those that claimed Christianity to simply theorise themselves out of the obvious biblical injunction to care for the most vulnerable), through theologically nuanced treatments of the social implications the Gospels' announcement of the Kingdom of God, to the deep resources of Roman Catholic social teaching and the impressive and morally serious work of Tawney. Theologian John Milbank is continuing to develop the tradition, drawing a variety of these strands

together into a new synthesis (it is indeed 'strong meat' – not without its tensions with other models of Christian Socialism – but is worthy of significant attention even from ordinary Party members³⁸). None of the historical Christian traditions within the labour movement would be content with the Labour Party as it is, but this should act as a spur to greater engagement and faithful participation.

Second, historically it has always been the case that Christian communities provide energy, motivation, inspiration, commitment and training – in other words, the kind of social capital that the Labour Party needs. This was true of Methodism, of the Catholic Social Guild, and of the Jubilee Debt Campaign. Recent changes in the CSM hint in the same direction. After a generation of Christians in leadership of the Party, together with all the intellectual and political compromises, CSM is eschewing a Christian Socialism from above and pursuing a Christian Socialism from below in a spirit of missional engagement.

Third, the prospects for Christian Socialism are not the same as the prospects for the Christian Socialist Movement. The two face distinct challenges. The latter's emphasis on involvement in the Party is, critics would argue, the very thing which blunts the movement's 'prophetic edge'. Such critics favour a Christian Socialism free of Party ties. The brief and unimpressive history of the Labour Church stands as a warning of

the dangers of co-option and 'civil religion' – to use Stanley Hauerwas' definition, of 'supplying epistemological and moral justifications for ... arrangements that made and continue to make the church politically irrelevant'.³⁹ Yet wise, if subversive, participation in existing democratic processes and institutions must surely be the norm for Christian socialists, or else they will be caught in theological inaction. The challenge for those who advance a 'prophetic voice' model is to give an account of how they aspire to actually achieve political change, just as the challenge to those who pursue Christian Socialism from within the Labour Party is to pursue a model of relationality and engagement while retaining intellectual integrity and a distinctively Christian and theological voice.

The problems come when a line of thought, or the work of an organisation, become autonomous from what O'Donovan calls 'evangelical authority'. Christianity will be protected against political conformity to the extent to which the Church is truly possessed of the Gospel, with its many spiritual, social and political implications.⁴⁰

Notes

¹ There are fifteen affiliated socialist societies.

² See theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk/2007/07/06/roundtable-on-christian-socialism/.

³ See thecsm.org.uk/Groups/87272/Christian_Socialist_Movement/About_CSM/Who_we_are/Who_we_are.aspx

⁴ Flannagan, A. 'Mission not Meetings'. thecsm.org.uk/Articles/206038/Christian_Socialist_Movement/Articles/Exclusive_web_content/Labour_Neighbours_Mission.aspx

⁵ Smith, J. 'Reclaiming the Ground', in Bryant, C. (ed.), *Reclaiming the Ground*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1994, 127–141.

⁶ Bevir, M. and O'Brien, D. 'From Idealism to Communitarianism: The Inheritance and Legacy of John Macmurray', *History of Political Thought*, 24, 2003, 305–329. Retrieved from: escholarship.org/uc/item/95m6q13r

⁷ Blair, T. 'Foreword', in Conford, P. (ed.), *The Personal World: John Macmurray on Self and Society*, Edinburgh, 1996.

⁸ Hale, S. *Blair's Community: Communitarian Thought and New Labour*, Manchester University Press, 2006, 156.

⁹ hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1983/jul/06/finance-bill#S6CV0045P0_19830706_HOC_248

¹⁰ Bower, T. *Gordon Brown, Prime Minister*, Harper Perennial, 2007, 60.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 25.

¹³ Hutton, W. 'The Jubilee Line That Works', *The Guardian*, 2 October 1999.

¹⁴ Cockett, R. 'Leap of Faith', *Prospect*, issue 136, July 2007, prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=9665 (accessed on 22 March 2009).

¹⁵ Hinsliff, G. 'Meet Jim Wallis, the Chancellor's religious guru', *The Observer*, 5 February, 2006. My emphasis.

¹⁶ Gay, D. 'Gordon Brown's Presbyterian Moral Compass', in Scott, P.M., Barker, C.R. and Graham E.L. (eds.) *Remoralizing Britain? Political, Ethical and Theological Perspectives on New Labour*, Continuum, 2009, 67.

¹⁷ Robert Peston, quoted in Lloyd, J. 'An Intellectual in Power', *Prospect*, issue 136, July 2007, [prospect-](http://prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=9665)

magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=9687 (accessed on 22 March 2009).

¹⁸ Bower, T. *Gordon Brown, Prime Minister*, 11.

¹⁹ Gordon Brown, 'Labour Party Conference Speech,' 25 September, 2006. See guardian.co.uk/politics/2006/sep/25/labourconference.labour2 (accessed 22 March 2009).

²⁰ Bower, T. *Gordon Brown, Prime Minister*, 3.

²¹ Gay, D. 'Faith in, with and under Gordon Brown: A Scottish Presbyterian/Calvinist Reflection,' *International Journal of Public Theology* 1:3–4, 2007, 318–319.

²² Brown, G. *Moving Britain Forward: Selected Speeches, 1997–2006*, Bloomsbury, 2006, 49.

²³ Hansard, 27 February 2002: col. 698.

²⁴ Hattersley, R. 'So what is it that Tony believes in?' *The Guardian*, 4 March 2002 (Online). guardian.co.uk/politics/2002/mar/04/labour.politicalcolumnists

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁶ Crosland, A. *The Future of Socialism*, 90.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 246.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 403

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 403.

³⁰ Giddens, A. *The Third Way: the Renewal of Social Democracy*, Polity Press, 1998, 20–21.

³¹ Mandelson, P. 'New Labour is dead. Long live new Labour,' *The Times*, 3 June 2010 timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article7142863.ece

³² www2.labour.org.uk/tory-traditions-david-miliband-speech,2010-02-23

³³ See, for instance, the essays in Harrington P. and Burks, B.K. (eds.) *What next for Labour? Ideas for the progressive left* (Demos, 2009)

³⁴ Penty, A.J. *Towards a Christian Sociology*, G. Allen & Unwin, 1923, 14.

³⁵ Quoted in Wright, T. *R.H. Tawney*, 176.

³⁶ The Labour Party Constitution, Clause IV 2(b).

³⁷ For a more contemporary example, consider the significant role of faith institutions in community organising. See Bretherton, L. 'Labour's Organising Roots,' *The Guardian* (online), 16 July 2010. Available at: guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/jul/16/community-organising-religion (accessed 2 August 2010).

³⁸ For a summary, see Milbank, J. 'The Real Third Way', in Ritchie, A. (ed.), *Crunch Time: A Call to Action*, Contextual Theology Centre, 2010, 53–88. Available at theology-centre.org/resources/books.

³⁹ Hauerwas, A. *After Christendom*, Abingdon Press, 1991, 27.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

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