

CHRISTIAN TRADITION IN THE ENGLISH LABOUR MOVEMENT

WHETHER we date the beginning of the English Labour Movement from the years when the famous "Junta" of trade union secretaries consolidated the societies of skilled workmen in the mid-Victorian period, trace its origins to fiercely democratic Chartism, or earlier still to Robert Owen's "socialism" and the national trades-union of a "New Moral World," the Labour Movement as we know it to-day in Great Britain is really but little more than fifty years old—its course steadily, at first almost imperceptibly, directed to a co-operative commonwealth.

Two notes in the character of this movement have always puzzled and often shocked the leaders of continental trade unionism. Our British trade unions never require profession of political faith from their members; neither do they encourage hostility to the Christian religion. They seek neither to overturn the state nor intrude the dogma of atheism. This indifference to the "materialist conception of history", and all the rest of it as revealed to Karl Marx, perplexed and distressed the German labour leaders in the years before the War. The Marxian "class-conscious proletariat" should quite definitely affirm its aloofness from Christianity the Germans maintained. French leaders of labour, Catholic and secularist alike, shrugged their shoulders at *les Anglais*, with their Catholics and Protestants, agnostics and freethinkers, all mixed up in the same trade unions.

At that time the labour unions of Spain and Italy were very largely anarchist in their philosophy. Following the doctrine of the Russian Bakunin (the Jabberwock whom Marx alleged he had slain) hating the State, distrusting every form of central government, as heartily contemptuous of "politicians" as our own distributists, they never understood the complete lack of revolutionary fervour in British trade-unionist officials. To this day the anarchist-syndicalist

unions of Spain—Barcelona their stronghold—cannot abide the notion of constitutional government or a Communist régime of social democracy. (The writings of Bakunin and Kropotkine with the “News from Nowhere” of William Morris are still in Barcelona text books of social revolution.)

With every desire in the world to forward the international labour movement, live in good will with his continental fellow workers, subscribing to the Marxian formula “workers of the world unite”—without very clearly seeing how it is to be done—the average British trade-unionist of the Labour Party simply cannot see himself (or herself) as a class-conscious proletarian; at least not all the time. In the bitterness of a prolonged strike or lock-out, in the face of successful resistance by mine owners in Parliament to proposals favourable to the miner but calculated to reduce dividends, the evidence of class-struggle, capital v. labour, seems all too apparent. At other times, what with falling in love, getting married, domestic interests, football cup ties, and football “pools,” cricket—in especial cricket at the Oval, at Bramall Lane, Trent Bridge and Old Trafford—to say nothing of “naps” and “doubles” when the odds are too good to be resisted, how can a British trade-unionist, with so many distractions, remember to be a “class-conscious proletarian”? As for being an anarchist or syndicalist it would entail a vast deal more responsibility on the workman if there were no government to protect trade union funds; besides it’s worth while for the capitalist to be in Parliament, therefore it’s worth while for the trade unionist—so the argument goes.

Deeper still, though perhaps not more frequently expressed, is the Christian tradition in the Labour Movement; the tradition that makes the soil quite unfertile for Marxism; irresponsive alike to atheism or anarchism.

For one thing the British trade unions preceded the social movement; their elected officers with the rank and file were trade-unionists first, socialists second. Whereas in Germany the trade unions were created by social democrats and in constitution avowedly Marxist. It was too

much to expect an English workman to tackle the complicated analysis of capital and theory of value expounded by Marx. *Das Kapital* is very hard reading even in an English translation, and the higher critics have never decided how much is Marx and how much Engels. British trade-unionists in the mass were as much repelled from the notion of hard study of economics as they were from the anarchist plan for general strikes, with an uprising of the working class and seizure of power in the midst of revolutionary disorder.

From the very beginning a Christian tradition existed in the English labour movement. Local lay preachers of the Methodist body were conspicuously active in trade union organisation in the northern counties. They brought the experience of management gained in the chapel (the term "free church" was not in common use fifty years ago) to the trade union lodge. They were articulate, effective speakers, these lay preachers, and their language on the platform was enriched by their knowledge of the Bible. Men brought up on the Authorised Version had no time for the economics of Karl Marx. Christ, they would declare—I have heard them—was the first trade-unionist. Christianity was inseparably bound up with all social movements for the betterment of one's neighbour. Free church ministers and laymen became as strong a force in the Labour Party as the "nonconformist conscience" had been in the days of Gladstonian Liberalism. The late Arthur Henderson—"Uncle Arthur" of the labour movement, by trade an iron founder—was an earnest Wesleyan.

When the trade union movement was enlarged in the 'eighties and early 'nineties by the inclusion of dockers and general labourers, hitherto neglected by skilled workmen, and enlarged mentally by the new teaching of socialism, with its appeal to the young, an Anglican influence strengthened the Christian tradition. A small but particularly active group of Anglican clergy joined together in their Guild of St. Matthew, and led by the Rev. Stewart Duckworth Headlam—an old Etonian and Trinity College, Cambridge man, entirely fearless and indifferent to censure

—contended in season and out of season for the rights of labour and would not be silenced. Headlam, a disciple of Frederick Denison Maurice, who with Charles Kingsley had raised the banner of "Christian Socialism" within the Established Church in Chartist times, was content before he died to see an Anglican Christian Social Union supersede his militant Guild of St. Matthew. Bishops, notably Charles Gore and B. F. Westcott of Durham, with deans of cathedrals, canons and other dignitaries belonged to the Christian Social Union and played their part as Christian ministers in the defence of labour programmes and trade union demands for shorter hours and a living wage. Bishop Westcott, by insisting that all who believed in co-operation rather than in competition in industry might rightly call themselves socialists, helped to clear away an immense amount of prejudice against the word "socialism"; so that Sir William Harcourt could blandly declare: "We're all socialists now." The Christian Social Union in due course went the way of the Anglican Guild of St. Matthew, but the influence it exerted remained. The social conscience, recognisable to-day in men and women of good will in all political parties and beyond, was quickened by the Anglican Christian Socialists.

Quickened also by the Irish Catholic element in the labour movement of the 'nineties, and by the public action of Cardinal Manning at the time of the great London dock strike of 1889. Manning had stood up for the rights of labour before he became Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster. He had justified the need of trade unions for the labourer when there were few in high places to accept the doctrine of a living wage. The old Catholic families of England were by instinct and hard training conservative, averse from this new Labour Movement that seemed to threaten the existing order. Manning was openly suspect as a "socialist"—and that of course he never was. In his frank support of the London dockers, out on strike for six-pence an hour wage, in his successful arbitration that brought the strike to an end the great Cardinal stood almost

alone. For the most part neither Catholic clergy nor prominent Catholic laymen in England sympathised with what seemed at the time a startling departure from ecclesiastical usage. Pope Leo XIII's historic encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, confirming the social doctrine of Manning, was coldly received. To this day many parishes can be named where the papal messages on social justice are never mentioned; are in fact entirely unregarded.

To the Irish Catholic dockers Cardinal Manning appeared as the champion of their cause; the protector of the poor. On that day of January, 1892, when the Cardinal went "home to Paradise by way of Kensal Green," the London dockers brought their banners to the solemn requiem at Brompton Oratory and the working people of London lined the streets. (There must be few of us now alive who were at that last reception held by the dead Cardinal. We, who only knew that a Prince of the Church and the friend of the unfriended had gone from among us.)

Dockers and general labourers found Irish Catholics to lead them. At Liverpool, Jim Sexton—in ripe old age knighted, Sir James Sexton—gave all the best years of his brave adventurous life to the service of the dock labourers. In London Tom McCarthy, a stevedore, was worn out at thirty-three by the wear and tear of the life of a national organiser in Ben Tillett's dockers' union. A very "under-paid agitator," Pete Curran, a Glasgow blacksmith, became the chief organiser of Will Thorne's gasworkers' and general labourers' union—which had an Anglican parson for its first trustee—and died at fifty. These three men were more than organisers of unskilled labour, they were untiring in the campaign for social justice, inspiring the new Labour Movement with faith in a better order of society. Sexton, too, was one of the writers in that amazing paper the "Clarion." A paper that had on its staff one Edward Fay, an old Ushaw (or was it Stonyhurst?) boy, and persuaded more people to look favourably on "Socialism" in the early 'nineties of the last century than any other periodical. *Das Kapital* was a positive stumbling block

where the "Clarion" was a source of innocent merriment, convicting capitalism of sin and extolling the co-operative commonwealth.

When the Independent Labour Party (better known as the I.L.P.) came into being in 1893, its first treasurer was John Lister, the squire of Shibden Hall, a convert from Anglo-Catholicism and the ready disciple of Manning in the cause of labour. John Lister was an old Wykehamist and B.N.C. Oxford man. His tastes were antiquarian and archaeological. Yet he joined the Fabian Society, twice contested (unsuccessfully) Halifax as an I.L.P. parliamentary candidate, and only retired from public life to return to the studies he loved when the Labour Movement had fully emerged and no longer needed his services. These are but a few of the Catholics who helped to maintain the Christian tradition in the English Labour Movement.

The Communist Party in Great Britain is tremendously hampered and shackled by its doctrinaire profession of atheism and Marxism. A positive declaration of unbelief is as disagreeable to the average Englishman as a definite confession of faith. Yet politically the Labour Movement might be drawn by an aggressive minority into anti-clericalism and anti-Catholicism.

The Catholic Social Guild, with its Workers' College at Oxford and its study circles in various towns; the group responsible for the monthly *Catholic Worker*; the Catholic women with their St. Joan's Society and *Catholic Citizen*—all these bear witness to the Christian tradition in our politics. But the membership of the Catholic Social Guild is deplorably small and in how many parishes the cry for social justice falls on deaf ears! Not in the stars, not in wickedness of "communists," but in ourselves is the fault. On ourselves lies the responsibility for the disaffection from the Faith and the estrangement from the Church that are overtaking multitudes—in England as elsewhere. The pity of it.

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