

R. H. TAWNEY AND THE CHRISTIAN
POLITICAL TRADITION

THE conservative Catholic critic of socialist thought in this country is inclined to argue that at the level of explicit theory the neo-marxism of, say, Professor Laski is representative; but that the inarticulate masses in the Labour movement feel differently and would, were they articulate, express a theory more in line with the traditional Christian social philosophy. I dare say there is much truth in this argument, though whether it follows from it that the Conservative Party is closer than the Labour Party to the Christian tradition in politics is another matter, and one I do not propose to discuss. It is perfectly true that Professor Laski, with his uneasy combination of liberalism and marxism, is on the whole representative of the socialist intelligentsia. But it may be worth noticing that there is at least one socialist thinker of eminence whose work derives from the Christian tradition and is plainly of the highest order. I have in mind Professor R. H. Tawney. Certainly, his work has been less immediately influential than that of Professor Laski or Mr John Strachey. He has not been 'put across' by any publicity machine and, indeed, his thought is unsuitable for slick generalisation. What he writes is always the work of a scholarly historian and is academic in the best sense. Whether one agrees with him or not, it will probably be admitted that his political writings, *The Acquisitive Society* in particular, are valuable attempts to relate the findings of the social historian and the political philosopher to contemporary problems, attempts which do not make unworthy concessions to current prejudices. Since Tawney¹ is a humanist and a Christian, and one who cares greatly about the future of our society, his writings touch depths and heights avoided by the 'mere scholar'. He has felt and answered the impulse to turn from the blazing light of day and to go back into the cave to enlighten and succour those who sit in darkness, 'fast bound in misery and iron'.

All important writers have a central theme running through their work, one to which, no matter how dispersed their interests, they continually return. There cannot be much doubt that Tawney's central theme is: *the secularization of social life during the last four hundred years*. This theme is central in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*; and it is the point of departure for his critical descrip-

¹ It will save space and be in other respects fitting if I speak of Professor Tawney as one would speak of Acton or Maitland, without a prefix.

tion of capitalism in *The Acquisitive Society*. In the latter work he anatomizes the fully secularized society, suggesting that such a society is not so much the creation of evil men as an expression of human irrationality and, thus, of moral obtuseness, since the appetites for wealth and power are here transformed from indispensable means to a variety of social ends into social ends in themselves. 'They [that is, the governing classes in capitalist society] destroy religion and art and morality, which cannot exist unless they are disinterested; and having destroyed these, which are the end, for the sake of industry, which is a means, they make their industry itself what they make their cities, a desert of unnatural dreariness. . . .' This emphasis on the irrationality (in the most comprehensive sense) and moral desolation of capitalist society distinguishes Tawney from most of his Fabian colleagues; for whereas they have founded themselves on the utilitarian or the marxist tradition, Tawney, in so far as he can be classified in this way, stands rather within the tradition of St Thomas More and of the Anglican and Puritan critics of the capitalist spirit in the seventeenth century. The epigraph of *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* is significant: '. . . He who hath not much meditated upon God, the human mind, and the *summum bonum*, may possibly make a thriving earthworm, but will most indubitably make a sorry patriot and a sorry statesman'. Subscription to such a sentiment is not calculated to endear him to those for whom God is a superfluous and even pernicious hypothesis and for whom all statements about the *summum bonum* are pseudo-statements.

Religion and the Rise of Capitalism attempts with great honesty and objectivity to do justice to the elements of truth contained in two opposed interpretations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Max Weber had appeared to suggest that, in its Calvinistic form, Protestantism was the creator of the capitalist spirit: the spirit of rational calculation in economic matters and of devotion to material gain, springing, it was suggested, from the 'worldly asceticism' of the Calvinist. The Marxist and near-Marxist historians had argued, from their assumption that religion is a socially engendered delusion, that Protestantism was an unconscious rationalization of the interests of the bourgeoisie and that the religious issues of the period could, at least in principle, be connected with their roots in the interests of social classes and of sections of classes. Tawney makes no attempt to answer the question in terms of *either/or*. His business as historian is to survey the facts in all their complexity and ambiguity and to show the interaction of social interest and religious belief. Although he does not say so, he seems at times to imply that the fundamental philosophical issue, which Marxists settle in

one way, Christians in another, is an issue upon which the historian as such is not called to pronounce,² since it is an issue which cannot be settled by historical investigation itself. Even though the historian as such may not be the person to decide this issue, a great historian will have made his own decision and this will determine the tone and temper of his writing. Tawney does not conceal his view that the secularization of social life is in some sense tragic, that the economic achievements of capitalism have been purchased at a ruinously high price. Such a view is for the Marxist meaningless, since he has already emptied religious belief of its content; certainly, the story of the shedding of an illusion might have its pathos; but it could not have the seriousness and weight necessary for the story to be in any sense tragic.

The chief conclusion of *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* is that, whatever may be true of the dogmatic theology of the reformers, in social philosophy the Reformation was not a decisive revolution, even though it may have been a decisive moment in a long process of change. The secularization of life and thought ante-dates the Reformation, notably in Italy, and throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries most Protestant thinkers continue to judge social and economic life by criteria which, whether they acknowledge or know it, or not,³ are drawn from the social doctrines of the scholastic philosophers and the Canon Law of the medieval Church. This is especially evident in England, where Anglican and Puritan, bishop, Parliamentary lawyer, and Leveller, continue to appeal to the Law of Nature and to the medieval doctrine of a 'king who is below no man, but . . . is below God and the law'. (Henry of Bracton, quoted in F. W. Maitland: *The Constitutional History of England*, 1919, p. 100.) There is in English social thought a clear line of development from St Thomas Aquinas, through Hooker, to Locke and Burke, and, one may add, to Tawney himself, though I fancy he would be more anxious to claim kinship with Langland, with St Thomas More, and with Colonel Rainborough. How is it, then, that throughout the period since the Reformation it has become less and less possible for the Christian moralist to speak persuasively to acquisitive and power-hungry men? In part it is the sheer weight of economic development, the factor to which the Marxists quite properly invite our attention. This has not only directed the will to inferior and illusory goods; religion and economics come to inhabit spheres that are autonomous and distinct, so that acquisitive men do not so much

² But note: 'In the collective affairs of mankind, bad doctrines are always and everywhere more deadly than bad actions'. Introduction to J. P. Mayer: *Political Thought: The European Tradition* (Dent).

³ Some knew this quite well, Richard Baxter, for instance.

neglect the teachings of the moralist as fail to understand that he can have any right to, or any intention of, addressing them; the economic process is dominated by impersonal forces to which man adapts himself, personal decision between right and wrong courses of action is something belonging only to private life.

Nevertheless, Tawney brings out very well the point that Protestant theology, though not perhaps the prime cause, helped to effect the separation of economics from morals and religion. 'In emphasising that God's kingdom is not of this world, Puritanism did not always escape the suggestion that this world is no part of God's Kingdom. The complacent victim of that false antithesis between the social mechanism and the life of the spirit . . . it enthroned religion in the privacy of the individual soul, not without some sighs of sober satisfaction at its abdication from society. . . . Individualism in religion led insensibly, if not quite logically, to an individualistic morality, to a disparagement of the significance of the social fabric as compared with personal character.' In all human societies we find oppression and injustice, and the exploitation of the weak and the innocent cries to heaven for vengeance. Where the middle ages differ from the modern world (Tawney argues) is not in that one contains more avoidable misery and injustice than the other: we have no calculus subtle enough so to compare one period with another: rather, in the middle ages men called things by their right names, whereas today we do not. 'The quality in modern societies, which is most sharply opposed to the teachings ascribed to the Founder of the Christian Faith, lies deeper than the exceptional failures and the abnormal follies against which criticism is most commonly directed. It consists in the assumption, *accepted by most reformers* [my italics] with hardly less *naïveté* than by the defenders of the established order, that the attainment of material riches is the supreme object of human endeavour. . . . Such a philosophy, plausible, militant, and not indisposed, when hard pressed, to silence criticism by persecution, may triumph or may decline. What is certain is that it is the negation of any system of thought or morals which can, except by a metaphor, be described as Christian.' One notes that here Tawney emphasises that the spirit which informs much of the criticism directed against the operations of capitalism is the spirit of capitalism itself, infecting and conquering those who believe themselves to be offering a total resistance to it.

Religion and the Rise of Capitalism is a classic of economic and social history and will endure so long as men delight in vigorous language and in history written with moral passion. *The Acquisitive Society* is, I think, an equally remarkable book, and it is unfortunate

that, perhaps owing to its Christian emphasis, it has had less influence upon socialist thought in England than many inferior works.

We notice, to begin with, that Tawney is independent of the myth of progress which derives from the Enlightenment. He is able to write: 'Whatever the future may contain, the past has shown no more excellent social order than that in which the mass of the people were the masters of the holdings which they ploughed and of the tools with which they worked, and could boast, with the English freeholder, that "it is a quietness to a man's mind to live upon his own and to know his heir certain".' Perhaps no other notable thinker of the Left could have written this sentence. The commercial and industrial bourgeoisie, having directed attention away from the existence of such a period of English history and of such a social order, finds that its opponents are for the most part complacent members of a conspiracy to keep the matter hidden. Of course, Tawney is not suggesting that the period to which he refers, the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, was a golden age. The author of *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* could not be so simple. The point is that he does not measure the societies of the present and the past against some raw utopia, from which all frustration has been banished by legislative decree. Instead, he judges this or that society in the light of secure moral principles ('there is a political morality which is in the nature of things', as he wrote in his brilliant Introduction to J. P. Mayer's *Political Thought: The European Tradition*). Judged by these principles, all societies dwell in twilight; but, as he himself points out, 'what matters is the direction in which [man's] face is set'. He does not doubt that in the acquisitive society man's face is turned away from the source of light.

In *The Acquisitive Society* he advances certain proposals for the replacement of capitalism by a more satisfactory social order. He argues that a good society will be complex, with a great variety of economic forms, public, private, and co-operative. For Tawney, private property as such is not the tyrant. It is rather what the late J. A. Hobson called 'improperty' that is to be feared: private property gone bad, property which cannot be justified in terms of social function. Public ownership as such solves no important problems. The abolition of functionless property must be by way of restoring private property in a form which can be justified in terms of social function and by the replacement, where this is appropriate, of individual forms of ownership by various forms of communal ownership, all of which will have as one of their purposes the restoration of the dignity and sense of responsibility of the ordinary worker. *The Acquisitive Society* was first published in 1921 and it may be that the

specific proposals made by Tawney are now irrelevant. But the spirit pervading the writing seems to me of far more urgent importance and of far greater relevance than when he wrote. I dare say that most members of the Cabinet have read the book at some time. It would be of great advantage to the country if they (and the leaders of the Opposition) were to read it again with attention and humility.

It is typical of Tawney's approach to the problems of politics that when, at the end of *The Acquisitive Society*, he wishes to convey something of the spirit that should animate a decent social order, he turns, not to the dreams of nineteenth-century socialism, but to those lines of *La Divina Commedia* (*Paradiso*. Canto III. lines 70-90) in which Piccarda explains to Dante the happy inequalities of Paradise, lines which are 'a description of a complex and multiform society which is united by overmastering devotion to a common end'.

Frate, la nostra volontà quieta
virtù di carità, che fa volerne
sol quel ch'avemo, e d'altro non ci asseta.

Tawney would, no doubt, agree that no earthly society is likely to conform in all respects to the heavenly pattern, nor is it likely to conform adequately in any particular respect; yet, since we pray: *Thy kingdom come*, nothing less can really satisfy us.

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'THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE'

THERE was once a time when people who wanted to make the working life of the working man more tolerable called themselves socialists. Fourier was not concerned with industrial efficiency so much as with establishing conditions in which the worker could take a pride and pleasure in his work. Robert Owen at New Lanark was primarily concerned with improving the conditions under which his employees lived and worked, even though his expenditure on houses and schools for his workpeople may have reduced the output of his mills' per unit costs; that is, reduced their efficiency. In his projected Villages of Co-operation he wanted to replace the plough not by the gyrotiller but by the spade because he considered that the settlement of as many people as possible on the land raised their 'standard of living' in the literal sense of the words even though it might not always lead to the largest possible output of consumption goods per man per hour. In later years William Morris and others reaffirmed the view that the primary purpose of socialism was not to produce the largest possible quantity of goods but to change the