

# Strikes: Reformulating Catholic Thinking in Britain

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If it is to be of real value, Catholic discussion in Britain on the right to strike must take into account the main strands of reflection so far on the subject. My object here is simply to draw attention to these, not to describe them in detail, much less to make here a theoretical contribution to the discussion myself.

It may be of interest to begin with three contrasting examples of *clerical* reflection born out of social realities. Cardinal Manning's social thinking had an important influence on trade unionists even in his own lifetime. He seems to have developed personal friendships with some union leaders, described rather ambiguously as 'some of their most famous agitators' by the anonymous writer of the 1934 Preface to a collection of Manning's works on social questions.<sup>1</sup> Manning was deeply and personally involved in the celebrated London dock strike of 1889. Writing a couple of years after that strike, the Cardinal took it as 'evident' that between a capitalist and a working man there can be no true freedom of contract. The capitalist is invulnerable in his wealth. Concerning the nature of strikes he reflected, 'A strike is like war. If for a just cause, a strike is right and inevitable, it is a healthful restraint imposed upon the despotism of capital'.<sup>2</sup> John Lopes was Catholic chaplain at Cambridge from 1922 to 1928. During the General Strike of 1926 he was dismayed to hear of undergraduates volunteering as strike breakers and he warned, 'If there is ever a class war in this country the universities of Oxford and Cambridge began it in 1926'.<sup>3</sup> The Cardinal, preaching at Westminster, condemned the strike; dons were divided. Lopes held that, ethically, the strike was not 'general' but 'sympathetic'. The local bishop printed the Cardinal's statement and had it distributed throughout his diocese. This signed notice was pinned to the chapel door.<sup>4</sup> In 1935 Henry Davis SJ published his massive *Moral and Pastoral Theology*. The events of 1926 were specifically commented on. The General Strike 'was also patently wrong because, in the particular circumstances, it was a challenge to the legitimate Government of the moment. It is not defensible that a section of the people should assume the government of a country' (II, 86).

Men such as Manning, Lopes and Davis would have been formed on traditional moral theology, which if it did not have a thorough grasp of strikes as such, certainly had centuries of reflection on related themes. Explicit thinking on the morality of strikes grew out of moral discourse on the demands of justice, the rights and duties of employers and workers, the binding nature of contracts, the right to form associations, the meaning of a just wage and so on. Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* gave impulse to this growing concern. Official statements about the justification of strikes tended to stress the likely abuses. Dominic Prümmer OP wrote a basic manual of moral theology in 1921. It went through various editions up to the German one in 1949. It appeared in English in 1956. In it, the conclusion is that 'nevertheless it is most rare that recourse to strike action is expedient'.<sup>5</sup> To justify a particular strike, moral theology quite often adopted (with greater or lesser modification) the criteria elaborated for a just war. References to strikes as 'weapons' are standard and numerous.<sup>6</sup>

The received tradition of moral thinking on strikes is particularly vulnerable to accusations of uncertainty or studied ambiguity over the political dimensions of the issue. We can catch several unresolved issues coming to the surface in *A Catholic Catechism of Social Questions* edited by T.J. O'Kane in 1936 for the Catholic Social Guild. O'Kane states that the Church discourages the use of strikes, and then goes on to explain why. The strike, he says, is the weapon of industrial war and like the wars of nations it may have its justification. But the strike foments class war and brings about harmful and dangerous consequences. He goes on to state baldly that it is the duty of the state to interfere when other means fail to secure a fair settlement. Put like this, not much is resolved and much is left unexamined. In the sixties, Vatican II did make a brief reference to the strike (*Gaudium et Spes* n.68) but it was for yet another pope to continue moral thinking on a more elaborate scale in this context. In 1981 John Paul II issued *Laborem Exercens*. On the political dimensions of strikes, his writings too are not without unsettled problems. The pope teaches that Catholic social thought does not hold that unions are no more than a reflection of the 'class' structure of society. Union activity does enter the field of politics, understood as prudent concern for the common good. However, the rôle of unions is not to 'play politics' in the sense that the expression is commonly understood today. The pope goes on to say that unions should not be subjected to the decision of political parties or have too close links with them. As for strikes, they must not be abused, especially for 'political' purposes. John Paul II's teaching has a particular impact on the British scene, where there has been a strong link between the unions and the Labour Party.

Contemporary moral theology has begun to focus on strikes. The nearby Irish bishops issued an important pastoral in 1977, *The Work of*

*Justice*. They dealt with strikes at some length, and interestingly they felt able to say that the right to strike is 'a basic human right' (p.34). Unfortunately, international law, covenants and other secular documents on human rights have not been able to be so categorical.<sup>7</sup> Catholic social teaching had, however, prepared the ground for the Irish bishop's affirmation; we read in O'Kane's *Catechism*, for example, that the Church teaches that workers have a natural right and a just right to strike (p.71). In 1979 the Working Party on Human Rights established by the Episcopal Conference of England and Wales published (through CTS) *The Right to Strike* as a statement for discussion. It received a mixed reception but was used sufficiently widely to need reprinting in 1980. That analysis of the morality of strikes focussed on the legal dimensions, domestic and international, and offered a systematic method by which to test the morality of any proposed strike action. At the end of 1980 a conference was held at Plater College, Oxford, to discuss the Working Party's statement; in the near future a new account of Catholic thinking on strikes will be published.

It should be added that other Christians have also been reflecting on strikes. In 1980 a Church of Scotland Working Party brought out *The Role of Christians in Trade Unions*, significantly with a foreword by Len Murray, General Secretary of the TUC. Strikes were very much on the agenda, 'part of every person's birthright in a free society' (p.23). In 1981 the Church of England's General Synod Board for Social Responsibility sponsored the publication of a report on current industrial relations with special attention devoted to strikes.<sup>8</sup>

To produce more than a note on recent Catholic moral thinking on strikes would require greater documentation, both of theoretical writings and of actual Catholic involvement in particular strikes. The attitudes of trade unionists would be vital here, beginning with such prominent men as Tom O'Brien, Catholic MP and Chairman of the TUC. The Catholic Press, national and local, needs to be studied. An important task is to persuade many people that strikes, and their full context, are an area of pressing moral concern. Perhaps I can comment from my own (limited) experience. I was a member of the Working Party that produced the 1979 statement. It soon became apparent in our work that on the precise issue of strikes the Christian tradition did not offer a substantial body of thinking. This poverty of relevant thinking made our work the more urgent, as well as the more tentative. It was fascinating, if occasionally depressing, to realise just how many Christians found it difficult to regard several aspects of the problem as having much to do with morality at all. An indication of this is the small amount of public, informed debate over recent legislation and government proposals affecting strikes, picketing, political levies, closed shops etc. Too political? Too specific? After a lifetime's apostolate, Manning wrote, 'We must deal with facts, not with memories and lamentations. And to deal with facts

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we must go down into the midst of them. The Incarnation is our law, and wisdom'.<sup>9</sup>

- 1 Cardinal Manning, *The Dignity and Rights of Labour* (London 1934) p.v.
- 2 Manning op.cit. pp 91—92.
- 3 Maurice Couve de Murville and Philip Jenkins, *Catholic Cambridge* (London 1983) p.132
- 4 My lines on Lopes are based on the reminiscences of Professor W.L. Edge published in the 1981 *Newsletter* of the Cambridge University Catholic Chaplaincy, pp .24—7.
- 5 D.M. Prümmer, *Handbook of Moral Theology* (ET Cork 1956) p. 161.
- 6 Rodger Charles and Drostan Maclaren, *The Social Teaching of Vatican II* (Oxford 1982) concede that the analogy between justified strikes and just wars has been customary. They add that the analogy may not be taken to indicate that the Church's social teaching sees industrial relations as a cockpit of the class war (pp.326—7). Yet the language of class war is not rare in Catholic thinking on strikes. Writing in the June 1926 issue of *Blackfriars* (and the date has an obvious significance), Joseph Clayton remarked that the strike and the lock-out 'are not the causes of class struggle; they are but incidents of the struggle, evidences of conflicting interests. The roots of class war are in capitalism itself...' (p. 361).
- 7 A brief summary of the secular material is in *The Right to Strike* (CTS London 1979), more fully in Paul Sieghart, *The International Law of Human Rights* (Oxford 1983).
- 8 *Winters of Discontent*. Industrial Conflict: A Christian Perspective (London 1981).
- 9 Quoted in V.A. McClelland, *Cardinal Manning* (London 1962) p. 156.

## Mark's Story of the Death of Jesus

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The four Gospel accounts of the death of Jesus might be compared to four portraits of him. Rembrandt or Velazquez would present a rather traditional and historical likeness. El Greco presents almost translucent features and elongated limbs, a more mystical likeness. Roualt, who gives perhaps no more than a torso in bold striking colors, brings out the human suffering. Dali presents a cosmic view, the cross hovering over the world. Each presents the same story but with differing emphases; the crucifixion is, at the same time, historical, traditional, mystical, full of human suffering and cosmic.

Similarly, each Evangelist has created a portrait of the death of Jesus. We must ask why. The Evangelists were not just writing biography, nor were they concerned with the purely historical. They were writing from the resurrection faith, from which stems all the theology of the New Testament. They narrate the death of Jesus from this perspective; consequently, the meaning of his death, rather than physical detail, is their central concern.

#### *1. Two points of view*

Their eastern view of narrative differs from our modern Western view.