4 New Labour and Christian Socialism

Alan Wilkinson

A photograph in the Independent on 30 September 1996 of the Blairs at the Labour Party Conference said it all. It showed the smiling couple walking from the rain towards a building with two men holding umbrellas over them. What the caption did not say was that they were going to the Conference service and that the two men with umbrellas (admittedly in mufti) were both priests, one Anglican (chairman of the Christian Socialist Movement [CSM]) the other Roman Catholic (the co-ordinator of the CSM). The omission by the newspaper of the religious context is characteristic of our society which ignores religious motivation, allegiance and institutions at both a popular and an academic level. So for example, Andrew Thorpe’s recent History of the British Labour Party (1997) offers a wholly secular interpretation. Yet Christian influences on the Labour Party from the beginning have been considerable. In order to understand the current revival of Christian Socialism and the indebtedness of some of New Labour’s leaders to its theology and moralism, we need to know something of its history since the mid-nineteenth century.

During the nineteenth century, the recurrent fear of revolution led to a policy of repression alongside church- and school-building in the early decades, and social reform and Christian Socialism later on. During the first half of the nineteenth century, Evangelicalism, the main religious tradition, supported Political Economy. Its morality was essentially personal. So compulsory charity through taxation was morally worthless (Hilton, 1988; Waterman, 1991). The Christian tradition taught that those with power should exercise it paternally. But what did this mean? For Evangelicals, life was a time of testing and it was foolish compassion to try to remove God-sent trials. Many believed that the chief cause of poverty was irreligion. The poor would prosper if they gave up drink, stopped relying on relief, sought education, worked hard, and thought of the Day of Judgement. J. B. Sumner (Archbishop of Canterbury 1848–62) a member of the Poor Law Commission, wrote: “Turn not your face from any poor man”; but inquire into the circumstances of his distress, and point out to him the
mode in which the prudent regulations of society have directed that it should be relieved’ (Atherton, 1994, p. 351). The churches, often unwittingly, were agents of social change, for example through education. The Church of England raised large sums of money for education, so by 1861 it was educating 76.2 per cent of the children in day schools, and by 1886 it was training 67.5 per cent of teachers (Kitson Clark, 1973, pp. 122–7).

Christian Socialism was one result of moral revulsion against the harsh concept of God implied by Political Economy. It looked for an inclusive theology with a God of universal compassion, not a Calvinist God for the elect only. It was also a version of that type of Victorian paternalism which wanted to enable, not repress, and which asked for moral citizenship in return for improved conditions and social inclusion. It owed something also to noblesse oblige and those Anglican Tories who disliked the New Poor Law and mounted piecemeal challenges to laissez-faire on moral grounds. So Bishop Samuel Wilberforce told the Lords in 1847 that he supported the Ten Hours Bill because ‘it was wrong to create wealth by the sacrifice of the health and morals of a portion of the people’ (Norman, 1976, p. 138). Christian Socialists strongly approved of paternalistic manufacturers from Robert Owen onwards, who behaved like Anglican Tory squires, and provided not only model physical conditions but also applied sanctions against immorality and laziness. Also, Christian Socialism resulted from the interaction between Romanticism and Catholicism (Anglican and Roman). Romantic writers from Blake to Morris rejected an atomistic view of society dominated by the market. Cobbett and Pugin looked back longingly to communal life in pre-industrial society. Anglican socialism owed much to the Anglo-Catholic revival which rejected erastianism, called on the church to stand against the state, recovered a sacramental view of life, was convinced that the church should be more classless and looked back nostalgically to the Middle Ages. Christian socialism also had roots in Nonconformity which provided many working people with responsibility as lay preachers and chapel officials. Though it was never so close to Labour as it had once been with the Liberals, many of the first Labour leaders were Nonconformists. The early life of Arthur Henderson, Foreign Secretary 1929–31, illustrated the regenerative power of the chapels. He was born in poverty, and a teenage conversion led him to become a Sunday School teacher, a lay preacher, a visitor to the sick and needy and to forswear drink, gambling and smoking. Dissent from the established church was as much a political as a religious act. Yet by the turn of the century, the