

Christian Socialism

The historical and contemporary significance of Christian socialism
within the Labour Party

Robert Leach
Leeds Business School
Leeds Metropolitan University

Political Studies Association

Annual Conference

University of Aberdeen, April 5-7, 2002

Introduction: Christian socialism, New Labour and the Third Way

In the expanding academic literature on New Labour and the distinct but related concept of the Third Way there has been little serious discussion of Christian socialism. Blair's own religious commitment and style have been the target of satirists, and the importance of his Christian faith to his personal political convictions and behaviour have certainly been acknowledged in biography and serious journalism (McSmith, 1997, 26-7, Rentoul, 2001: 35-49, Rawnsley, 2001: 276). Attention has also sometimes been drawn to the similar beliefs of some of his colleagues. Yet the implication of these Christian convictions for the wider ideology of the party and their potential impact on policy has not been widely debated. While Christian socialism has long been recognised as important in the emergence and development of the peculiarly British interpretation of socialism or labourism (e.g. Pelling, 1965: 125-144, Benn, 1980: 23-9, Davies, 1996: 79-84, Dell, 2000: 15-16), it has commonly been regarded as essentially an historical phenomenon, of sharply declining significance from the First World War onwards (with some interesting individual exceptions). One would search in vain for a distinctive and important Christian strand of thinking on either side of the internecine struggles within the Labour Party through from the 1950s to the 1980s (although on both sides there were those whose Christianity was more than purely formal).

Has anything really changed? It may be that the Christian commitment of some of the leading members of the current Government is purely or very largely a matter of personal devotion, with no wider implications for party ideology and policy. Yet there is now a well-organised flourishing Christian Socialist Movement of which a tenth of the Parliamentary Labour Party and several Cabinet Ministers and other members of the Government are active and committed members. The organisation holds regular conferences, sponsors other events, publishes literature, runs a full and well-organised web-site, and at the last election put out its own 'mini-manifesto'. While it does not necessarily follow that all this activity has any serious implications for party ideas and policy, the influence of the Christian Socialist Movement is at least worth discussing. Moreover, the influence on Labour of Christian commitment on the one hand and the broader conception of 'faith politics' on the other is by no means confined to this organisation. More generally, the old and comfortable assumption that religion is part of personal sphere with no significant implications for political beliefs and behaviour has been dramatically called into question by both domestic and international developments. Religion is back on the political agenda.

The possible influence of Christian convictions in particular and faith politics more generally on the present Labour Party needs to be placed in some broader ideological and historical context, however. The reasons why religion was once widely perceived as antipathetic to most interpretations of socialism require some re-examination, along with explanations for the rather exceptional influence of variants of Christianity on early British socialism and the fledgling Labour Party, and decline of this influence subsequently. This hopefully will enable a fuller appreciation of the prospects of a revived Christian socialism in today's 'New Labour'.

Socialism and Christianity

While there have been many socialists who have been practising Christians, and some who have claimed a causal link between their Christian faith and their socialist convictions, it is difficult to deny that Christian socialism has been a minority movement within the mainstream socialist tradition in Europe and the west. Marx and Engels were scathing on the subject of mid 19th century Christian socialism in *The Communist Manifesto*

As the parson has ever gone hand in hand with the landlord, so has clerical socialism with feudal socialism.

Nothing is easier than to give Christian asceticism a socialist tinge. Has not Christianity declaimed against private property, against marriage, against the state? Has it not preached, in the place of these, charity and poverty, celibacy and mortification of the flesh, monastic life and Mother Church? Christian socialism is but the holy water with which the priest consecrates the hearthburnings of the aristocrat.

While the hostility of Marx and the mainstream Marxist socialist tradition to Christianity and religion is well known, it is less often appreciated that most of the moderate or revisionist social democratic tradition was at least as hostile. Indeed, socialism and Christianity have been more commonly viewed as mutually incompatible creeds. Thus Lichtheim (1975: 308-9) notes that over most of southern Europe and Latin America ‘socialism ... has until quite recently been associated with militant atheism.’¹ Religion was associated with the dominant economic and political order, and the obstinate religiosity of some communities from the lower classes was widely perceived by socialists as an obstacle to their enlightenment and emancipation. Hobsbawm (1984: 33), not unreasonably, claims ‘The modern working-class socialist movement has developed with an overwhelmingly secular, indeed even often a militantly anti religious, ideology,’ while Sassoon (1997: 243) observes that anticlericalism was ‘one of the driving forces of continental socialism.’

Christian socialism in Britain

The British exception to this general antipathy between religion and socialism is also well known. Why was religion not perceived as an obstacle by most British socialists and radicals, quite contrary to the perspective over much of the rest of Europe? One obvious explanation is the very diversity of Christian faith and practice in 19th century Britain. The Church of England, which itself covered a wide range of tendencies, faced increasing competition from other Christian sects, from a range of Protestant nonconformist churches and from a revived Roman Catholicism.

It has become something of a cliché that Labour’s ideology owes more to Methodism than Marxism. Like most clichés it contains an element of truth, at least if Methodism is taken as shorthand for nonconformism generally. Certainly some Labour politicians were Methodists (of various stripes), although others were Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Unitarians or Quakers. Surveys of religious observance in the 19th century suggest that attendance at non-conformist chapels increasingly outnumbered that at the established church, particularly among the urban

poor. Variants of nonconformism had long been linked with political as well as religious dissent, and indeed some had suffered persecution and restrictions in the relatively recent past. Thus most nonconformists still felt they were outsiders fighting privilegeⁱⁱ, including the privileged position of the established church. Even so, 'to be critical of the Establishment, the ruling class, and the Church of England did not mean, therefore, to be anti-clerical' (Callaghan, 1990: 6). Much of this radical nonconformism which had provided the grassroots of the Liberal Party was effectively transferred to Labour, and early British socialist rhetoric and institutions borrowed extensively from evangelical Christianity.

This vibrant alternative to Anglicanism increased the pressures on the Church of England to re-establish its appeal, not least among manual workers. Thus for all the joking references to the established church as the Tory party at prayer, organised early Christian socialism had more links with Anglicanism than nonconformism. Moreover, some of the most influential British Christian socialists of the 20th century were Anglican (e.g. Tawney, Lansbury and Cripps) rather than nonconformist, while some leading Anglican clerics have been committed socialists (most notably Archbishop William Temple).

Roman Catholicism in the countries of southern Europe was markedly hostile to socialism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and in Britain was generally less sympathetic to socialist ideas than the other churches. Yet even Roman Catholicism was to be influential in British labour politics, partly because of its non-established status in Britain and its association with the working classes in parts of Scotland and other areas of the Britain which have experienced substantial immigration from Ireland, or from Catholic countries on the European continent. Some sought to reconcile their Catholic faith with their socialist politics. Thus, for example, John Wheatley, one of the 'Red Clydesiders' and a rare success in MacDonald's first Labour Government, was a committed Roman Catholic who back in 1906 had formed the Catholic Socialist Society, despite the general hostility of much of the Catholic hierarchy.

At the very least then, organised religion in Britain was not an obstacle to socialism and working class politics, while there were some markedly sympathetic elements in almost all the main religious sects. Thus those who were active in socialist societies or Labour and trade union politics did not feel obliged to choose between their religion and their political convictions, which was often the case in continental Europe. It was possible to remain active in both, and many were. For those brought up within the church or chapel, but who subsequently became far more closely involved in politics it was hardly necessary to repudiate the faith of their childhood. Indeed, many of them instinctively borrowed Christian rhetoric and liturgy for the new religion of socialism, and this language resonated with working class voters. Recruitment and commitment may have considerably assisted by this transfer of a quasi-religious faith into the labour movement.

Christian socialism and Labour ideology

It is easy enough to underline the importance of Christianity in Britain to the development of socialism and the Labour Party in Britain, but rather more difficult to assess the influence of Christian convictions and practices on early British socialism in general and the ideology of the Labour Party in particular. Of course some Christians maintained that socialism was inherent in Christianity, and that a close reading of the Bible would confirm this. However, an obvious problem for those who would claim some mutual dependence between Christianity and socialism is that so many other Christians have derived quite different social, economic and political implications from the same source. As Samuel Beer (1982: 128n.) tartly observes 'Liberals, Radicals, Conservatives, and indeed in their days old Tories and old Whigs had relied on some version of the Biblical message.' Blair's own recent attempts to link his Labour politics with his Christian convictions predictably aroused the wrath of some of the *Daily Telegraph's* Conservative and Christian readers.

If Christianity appeared compatible with such a wide range of mutually hostile ideologies from across the political spectrum, it is hardly likely to have very clear implications for one particular variant of socialism. Perhaps the most that can be claimed is that Christianity helped to impart a pronounced moral flavour to Labour's thinking. While the resulting ethical socialism should not be identified simply with Christian socialism, the latter was always an important constituent element of the former. Christian socialism emphasised the brotherhood of man, fellowship, and community, thus (arguably) diverting the British working classes from revolutionary socialism. Yet it is difficult to be categorical even here. Some British socialists (like Benn, 1980: 23-39) have claimed to derive inspiration from both Marx and the Bible, while others (for example, Tony Crosland) were equally contemptuous of both.

Some critics from across the spectrum of Labour sympathisers have argued that ethical socialism and more particularly Christian socialism have had a generally malign influence on Labour's ideology. Foote (1986: 37) argues that the political thought of the ethical socialists was 'utopian in the worst sense of the word. It was basically a withdrawal from the world and, as such, it was impossible to translate into the practical politics of government.' In similar vein Edmund Dell (2000: 15) observes 'Many Christians found in socialism the earthly equivalent of their hope of salvation,' but 'It was also an escape from the problems on earth.' Socialism, like the Second Coming, was a perfect ideal for a distant future, not a practical answer to immediate problems. Philip Gould (1999: 25) describes religion as 'the second creative force behind Labour' but goes on to suggest 'This fusing of religion and politics generated a sense of mythic destiny: victory will be ours if no compromise is made; if we are true to our principles we will reach the New Jerusalem, not *despite* suffering and setback but *because* of them.' For Gould, apocalyptic visions of a radical socialist New Jerusalem were an impediment to practical progress and reinforced Labour's conservatism.

Yet if Christian socialism may have contributed to utopianism and millennialism, it is difficult to be much more precise about its influence on the direction of the Labour Party. There is little agreement over what Christian socialism essentially is, or whether it amounts to a distinctive and coherent strand of socialism. One approach

(Dale, 2001) is simply 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, and of representatives of both Christian pacifism and the church militant. Both the socialist credentials and perhaps the Christian credentials of some of 'God's politicians' (Dale's title) may be challenged, but their variety hardly suggests a specifically Christian socialist tradition within Labour's broad church.

If Dale's approach seems too comprehensive and uncritical, it is difficult to see on what principle a more precise and authentic Christian socialist tradition might be identified. Some critics have followed Marx and Engels in perceiving Christian socialism in terms of a paternalist social reformism and an obstacle to true socialism.ⁱⁱⁱ More recently, by contrast, some have identified Christian socialism with a radical left wing variant of socialism, stressing common ownership and Christian pacifism (Brown and K. Coates, 1996, Stelzer, 1996). In the case of Michael Barratt Brown and Ken Coates the not-so-hidden agenda here is to demonstrate the extent of the gulf between an 'authentic' left wing Christian socialism and Blair's heretical version.

Yet such an identification of Christian socialism with the left depends on selective quotations from a limited number of role models, ignoring the many active Christians on the right of the party. While Christian socialism has been linked with the ideal of common ownership, this was an ideal it shared with the Labour movement as a whole for most of the twentieth century, and which moreover can be derived from Marxist, Fabian or Morrisonian premises as readily as Christianity. By contrast, many of the individuals and organisations associated with Christian socialism in the 19th century were not committed to common ownership, and if Christian socialists of the 20th century appeared more committed in principle, they were as vague over practical proposals to advance common ownership as the rest of the party. Similarly, some Christian socialists have exhibited strong anti-war and pacifist feeling - from conscientious objection in the First World War, through the Peace Pledge Union and opposition to rearmament in the 1930s to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament from the late 1950s onwards, and more recent anti-war movements. Yet Christian convictions were only ever one strand in these causes, and the majority of Christians and Christian Labour supporters were on the other side in each case. Thus while Hardie and Snowden opposed the First World War, Arthur Henderson and Will Crooks, whose Christian convictions were at least as strong, supported it, along with the bulk of the Parliamentary Labour Party.

It is difficult to make many more precise connections between Christian convictions and policy. Certainly some Christians demonstrated strong religious and moral convictions which had political implications, particularly on education, temperance and sexual morality. But there were often marked differences between and within particular Christian churches, so that little if any of this can be associated clearly with Christian socialism. In practice, Christian socialism has seemed to cover almost as wide a range of political and ethical views as the Labour movement as a whole.

The decline of Christian socialism in 20th century Britain

Yet if Christian socialism played an important role in the early development of British socialism and the Labour Party, it seems to have been a declining phenomenon for much of the twentieth century. This may be seen as the inevitable consequence of declining religious faith and observance in society more generally, and among the working classes in particular. Pelling (1965: 131) attributes this declining attachment to religion in part to 'the conversion of the more literate to secularism' but rather more to the general process of urbanisation and the parallel development of 'co-operative and trade union movements' and 'working class political organizations' which 'provided an alternative outlet for social energy'. Thus while Pelling acknowledges Labour's debt to Christians of all denominations, he sees political commitment as more generally supplanting rather than complementing religious commitment - 'a transfer of social energy from religion to politics' (ibid: 132). Even the Labour Church movement he sees as 'a significant transitional stage' in this transfer, 'a symptom of religious decline', of the transference of religious enthusiasm to the political sphere' (ibid: 142). More specifically, according to Bebbington (1982: 159-60) the 'nonconformist conscience', a critical element in the Liberal and Labour politics of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, ceased to have a general political impact. 'The crusading temper that bound together religion and politics suddenly waned,' he notes, bluntly concluding his historical survey with the uncompromising verdict that 'By 1910 the period of the Nonconformist conscience had come to an end.'

The trend from religious to political commitment was exemplified in the many Labour politicians from across the party who came from a devoutly Christian background but subsequently either contented themselves with nominal commitment or totally abandoned religious faith and observance. Thus Fenner Brockway (1977, p. 11ff.), the progeny of three generations of Christian missionaries, moved away from his non-conformist roots towards a secular socialism. Similarly, Michael Foot, born into a devout Methodist family subsequently 'discarded all religious belief to become an agnostic humanist' (Jones, 1994, p. 25). Hugh Gaitskell abandoned religion in his last year at Winchester and never returned to it (Williams, 1979). James Callaghan, brought up as a Baptist, later 'lost his religious views altogether' Morgan (1997:15), while Tony Crosland conspicuously rebelled against his strict Plymouth brethren upbringing. It is possible to multiply endlessly such individual life stories of Labour politicians which reflect declining religious inspiration and commitment. Although socialism became a substitute religion for some, and religious imagery and language continued to pervade the labour movement, there seems to have been a marked general decline in active Christian commitment among Labour politicians.

Of course, individual Christian socialists continued to play a significant role in Labour politics and thought. Tawney, Lansbury, Cripps and Soper are among the more eminent representatives of the Labour Christian socialist tradition which continued to flourish through from the 1920s to the post Second World War decades. Yet it is probably fair to say that with the possible exception of Donald Soper they were influential as individuals rather than as part of an organised and distinctive Christian socialism. While no-one tried harder than Tawney to tease out the practical socialist implications of Christian principles, he seems to have found it increasingly

difficult to harness together his political and religious commitment. 'Because Christian belief had withered, social Christianity had less to offer socialist thought' one biographer has suggested (Ross Terrill, 1974, p. 249). The character of Lansbury's religious convictions eventually rendered his stopgap leadership of the party impossible. While the Christian principles which inspired Stafford Cripps perhaps help to explain something of his drive and energy and also perhaps his austerity, they did not leave a lasting ideological legacy. Donald Soper as a Methodist Minister was more manifestly Christian than any of these, and perhaps because of this was never, unlike the others, mainstream Labour. Moreover, in the political cause with which he was most prominently associated, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, he worked alongside conspicuous non-believers like Bertrand Russell and Michael Foot.

Soper provides a link between the influential evangelical Christianity of the early twentieth century and the revived Christian Socialist Movement of which he became the first Chairman in 1960, and which has more recently become prominent in Blair's Labour Party. Yet while this re-establishment of a Christian Socialist Movement in 1960^{iv} was presumably of considerable importance for those directly involved, it hardly registered in wider debates over Labour's future. Indeed, for almost the whole period from the Second World War through to the early 1990s, most of the leading figures on all sides of the recurring ideological divisions within the Labour Party and within British socialism more generally seem to have had either no or only token religious convictions. Kenneth Morgan (1997:19, and footnote) records that when Lord Longford, a prominent Catholic member of Wilson's Government, was asked around 1966 by the atheist Tony Crosland how he could justify the claim that Wilson's was a Christian Cabinet, Longford replied, 'I make it eleven Christians, beginning with the top three - Harold Wilson, George Brown and Jim Callaghan - six non or anti-Christians and four don't knows.' Yet it has to be said that even if Longford himself was a committed Christian, the Christianity of most of his claimed fellow believers was vestigial or even imaginary. While Wilson himself had been an active Congregationalist in his youth and later claimed to be still a religious believer, Pimlott (1992: 41) observes that 'Labour colleagues, mainly atheist or agnostic, viewed Harold's piety with cynicism.'

A Christian socialist revival?

Christian socialism only really returned to Labour's agenda with the election of first John Smith and then Tony Blair as leader of the party. Both, in marked contrast with their immediate predecessors, were practising Christians who acknowledged their religious faith as an important inspiration for their political convictions. John Smith was a member of the Christian Socialist Movement, for whom he addressed the annual Tawney lecture in 1993. Dale (2001: 212) claims that part of Smith's legacy to Labour was 'the renewed use of moral language.' It is generally forgotten that before Blair was satirised as the Vicar of St Albion, John Smith was portrayed as making speeches from the pulpit by Rory Bremner. Indeed, Rentoul (2001: 44) observes that Blair's own religion only became visible 'with the election of Christian socialist John Smith as Labour leader in 1992.'

Unlike many previous Labour politicians who had a committed religious upbringing but actively rebelled against it or drifted away from it later, Blair did not come from a particularly Christian household^v but only became a confirmed and committed Christian at Oxford. His religion, by his own testimony, helped to inspire his rejection of Marxism (Blair, 1996, pp. 58-9), and led him to adopt a form of ethical socialism, strongly influenced by the Australian Christian socialist Peter Thomson and through him the then no longer fashionable ethical socialist philosopher, John Macmurray. Blair's rather ecumenical Christianity was further reinforced by his subsequent marriage to the Catholic, Cherie Booth.

Blair's own politico-religious faith might be dismissed as a personal eccentricity with little wider or lasting implications for Labour ideology more generally. Yet partly perhaps because of Blair's own influence and possibly also his patronage, both his Government and his party seem to have a more visible and effective Christian socialist element than was noticeable under the leadership of Wilson and Callaghan. Thus the Christian Socialist Movement listed 44 members standing for Labour at the 2001 election, including 32 sitting Labour MPs^{vi} and 12 new candidates^{vii} at the 2001 election. Those listed include Blair himself, Jack Straw, Hilary Armstrong, Tessa Jowell from the Cabinet and several other ministers such as Michael Meacher, Alun Michael, John Battle and Steven Timms^{viii}, as well as ex-ministers such as Chris Smith.

The extent of the Christian socialist revival should not perhaps be exaggerated. Christian socialism is patently far less significant in the modern than the early Labour Party, and may even prove less substantial than other abortive revivals of the past (e.g. in the 1940s). Even the current membership of the CSM is not particularly impressive - less than a tenth of the PLP and less than a quarter of the Cabinet. However, many of these are visibly active in the movement; they speak at or chair CSM sponsored events and write for its publications. Moreover the current paid-up membership of the CSM is hardly an accurate measure of the strength of Christian socialist thinking within the Labour Party. There are other Labour Ministers and MPs who are active Christians but who are not linked with the CSM. Altogether Christian socialism seems to have a far more visible profile in the Labour Party today than it has for decades.

The return of ethical socialism

Just as Christian socialism before the First World War contributed to the dominant strand of ethical socialism within Labour's ideology, so the more recent modest revival of Christian socialism can be connected with a return to favour of a broadly ethical socialism in the thought of New Labour (Blair, 1995, Mandelson and Liddle, 1996, Bevir, 2000). It may be argued that ethical socialism has never gone away, and certainly a strong moral flavour can be found in the utterances of leading Labour politicians across the years and across the ideological spread within the party. Nevertheless, it does seem as if the party was searching for a more secure and scientific foundation for its ideas and policies beyond ethical maxims from the debacle of 1931 through to the problems of the 1980s. Some sought a more robust basis for their socialism in varieties of Marxism, although the mainstream found the apparent answer in Keynesianism. For the most influential thinkers and politicians in

the Labour party, Keynes had discovered a practical workable middle (or third?) way between laissez-faire capitalism and a command economy. Keynes (never of course any kind of socialist himself) provided the intellectual beef for Labour revisionism and social democracy. Keynesian economics was not about utopian aspirations and moral ideals, but realisable goals founded on rigorous analysis.

When the 1970s undermined faith in Keynesian solutions, this intensified existing divisions and created an ideological crisis within the Labour Party. Writing at the height of the divisions within the party Paul Whiteley (1983: 50) observes that ‘the collapse of Keynesianism ... removed a cornerstone of the Social Democratic case’ which created ‘an intellectual and policy vacuum’ which ‘gave a new lease of life to the revolutionary Marxist tradition within the party’. The social democratic right (both those who stayed within the party and those who deserted for the SDP) sought a modified neo-Keynesian approach, while for many on the left variants of Marxist analysis became still more convincing. Yet neo-Keynesianism seemed increasingly less viable in the face of the onward march of the free market and global capitalism, while the collapse of the USSR generally dealt a severe psychological blow to all champions of socialist planning, whatever their own views of the Soviet Union. If much of Marx’s analysis of capitalism remained prescient, Marxist-inspired solutions no longer seemed so relevant.

This erosion of trust in both Keynes and Marx perhaps contributed to a blurring of the of the sharp left-right divisions within the party, but left an ideological vacuum. Labour’s ethical commitment was all that remained, hence the renewed attractions of the sometimes derided ethical socialism. (This also explains the revived interest in the New Liberalism, also essentially an ethical doctrine, as part of a ‘progressive alliance’). Moral ideals of course do not necessarily depend on religious faith, yet in so far as religious convictions can furnish a powerful commitment to ethical goals, this also provides some explanation for the revived fashion for Christian socialism.

Bevir (2000: 278-9) charts the changes in the influences on Labour MPs through successive surveys. In 1906 Labour MPs claimed they had been most influenced by Ruskin, the Bible, Dickens, Henry George, and Carlyle. In 1962 the influences cited were Shaw, Wells, Cole and Marx. By 1975 Marx topped the list, followed by Tawney, Shaw, Bevan and Wells. Bevir goes on to note that a 1994 survey ‘indicated a return to religious and ethical influences’ with Tressel’s *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* heading the list followed by Tawney, the Bible, Marx, Steinbeck and Orwell. Even if the cited authors reflect prevailing fashion rather than deep reading and significant influence, that still tells us something about Labour’s changing ideology.

The modern Christian Socialist Movement and New Labour

What then does Christian socialism mean today, and what is its significance for New Labour? Critics might deny that the contemporary Christian socialism associated most obviously with Tony Blair bears any real resemblance to the Christian socialism of the past. Indeed, while Blair’s own Christian credentials are admitted, his socialism is sharply contested. Thus Alan Watkins (*The Observer*, 17/03/02) bluntly declares that ‘Mr Blair is not a Christian Socialist because he is not a socialist.’ Yet both socialism

and Christian socialism have been so variously defined to make further analysis here unprofitable. Thus professions of Christian socialism (from Blair and others) are accepted as the provisional (if not uncritical) basis for discussion of the phenomenon.

Whatever Christian socialism may have involved in the past there is little doubt of the close involvement of the contemporary Christian Socialist Movement with the New Labour project. The current Director, Graham Dale, evidently believes that the CSM is already on the inside track. 'We are more convinced than ever of the need to bring Christian Socialist voices to bear on policy and we're excited about the receptiveness of Government to listen to us.'^{ix} Thus while the Movement has sought to identify 'strengths and weaknesses' in the Blair Government, it has been rather muffled on the latter. Dissent has been fairly minimal, partly reflecting perhaps the high profile presence of some CSM members in the government, and the aspirations of others to join the party's ranks at Westminster and, perhaps, within Whitehall.

The close alignment of the CSM with New Labour can be seen in its attempts to influence policy. As an affiliated socialist society to the Labour Party, the Christian Socialist Movement 'was asked to contribute directly to the drafting of the Labour Party's manifesto' in 2001 by drafting two resolutions to the National Policy Forum. These two resolutions were that the Government should 'pursue policies that will strengthen family life, and continue to pursue international debt cancellation.' Beyond these, the CSM published its own 'mini-manifesto', which does not seem to have secured much wider media publicity, partly perhaps because its priorities coincided fairly closely with Labour's official manifesto. Indeed, almost nothing in the mini-manifesto could have caused any anxieties or embarrassment for the party leadership. Thus with respect to aid and international development 'CSM applauds the many achievements of the current government' including particularly 'the leading role of the Chancellor' in debt cancellation. On taxation and spending they called on the government 'to continue the work to eradicate poverty and economic injustice.' On asylum seeking there was some implied criticism of Government policy, with the movement recommending 'a review and simplification of British nationality law and an effective policy for legal immigration'. On the environment 'Christian Socialists view with sorrow and repentance the damage the human race continues to do to our planet', and they go on to urge that 'environmental issues remain a high priority.' On crime 'Christianity not only emphasises justice, but also the opportunity for confession, reparation and forgiveness' so the CSM 'wants to see an emphasis on reparation rather than punishment'. Finally on education and health the Movement supports the direction and extra funding promised by the Government but considers money will not be enough unless staff 'regain a sense of pride and worth in the vitally important work that they do.'^x

The mini-manifesto is scarcely a call to the barricades and is notably short on detailed proposals and precise commitments, but the same point could be made about most mainline party manifestos. More to the point, stripped of its occasionally religious phraseology it is hardly specifically Christian. There is little in the mini-manifesto for Labour members of all faiths and none to disagree with. Awkward issues which might divide Christian socialists from their fellows are ducked in this document. There is not even any attempt here to elaborate on their recommendation to the National Policy Forum that the government should 'pursue policies that will strengthen family

life’ - no indication of the policies which might be involved, nor even a working ‘definition of family life’. Even more surprisingly perhaps, there is no mention in the manifesto of multi-culturalism, nor, under education, of faith schools. This may reflect internal disagreements within the movement; (by no means all Christians are convinced of the desirability of more faith schools, for example). Yet if a Christian Socialist manifesto scarcely departs in tone or content from the Labour manifesto, and if Christian socialists are divided on the very issues where a specifically Christian Socialist contribution might be expected, one wonders if there is any really distinctive ideological space for Christian socialism.

Faith, politics and society

The Christian Socialist Movement might fairly argue that some of the issues which are neglected in their manifesto are explored in other CSM publications and activities, in particular in the report *Faith in Politics*, which followed meetings with the leaders of other faith communities. This is an interesting document which does try to engage with the different problems posed by and for religious faith in our modern multi-faith but predominantly secular society. It serves to emphasise some of the more obvious differences between the position of Christian socialism when Labour was founded and today.

Blair himself has commented, ‘I am an ecumenical Christian. I find many of the angry debates between Catholic and Protestant completely baffling.’ One advantage that modern Christian socialists have is that divisions between Christians are less deep and bitter than they were. The strength of Christian socialism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries is superficially impressive, particularly as later historians are liable to lump all Christian socialists together, forgetting that then there was not only a deep division between Catholics and Protestants, but also between Anglicans and non-conformists, as well as between and often within particular sects. It is not easy now to appreciate the still smouldering passions of the ‘Wee Frees’ in Scotland, or the rigour of the primitive Methodists in parts of England or the convictions which moved some of the Welsh chapels. The decline in religious observance generally is one of the factors which has driven the ecumenical movement (although it needs hardly be added that there are parts of the United Kingdom where this ecumenical spirit has yet to penetrate). However, it is certainly true that for the most part Christian socialists are less divided than they were a century ago, which makes it rather easier for a specific organisation like the Christian Socialist Movement to speak for most (but still not all) Christians who also claim to be socialist.

However, it is rather more obvious that Christian socialists today are faced with another, potentially more serious, problem not encountered by their forebears of a century ago. Then Britain was largely a Christian country, in the sense that the majority of the population at least paid lip service to some variant of Christianity, and there was no serious rival to the faith from other religions. Christian socialism then had, potentially, a near universal and inclusive appeal. That is patently no longer the case. Christians not only have to cope with a largely secular society, but need to relate to a substantial number of other non-Christian religious faiths, with which to some degree they might appear to be in competition. An appeal to Christian values in such a context may appear divisive rather than inclusive.

Indeed, the Christian Socialist Movement seems well aware of the problems and the dangers, and has actively sought to promote a dialogue with representatives of other faiths. Thus the CSM report *Faith in Politics* implicitly rejects the notion that Christianity is in competition with other faiths, and emphasises instead the common interests of all faith communities. The report suggests that the various faiths share a similar agenda on issues such as the family, poverty, urban regeneration, racism, asylum and world debt. Yet, unsurprisingly, this broad faith agenda is even more short on specifics than the Christian socialist agenda. Moreover, potentially divisive issues are either not addressed or skated around (such as practices arising from strongly held religious convictions which may appear morally unacceptable to the wider community, the law, or even internationally acknowledged human rights). When the report routinely calls for strengthening the family and marriage, it skirts awkward issues over definition of the family, and avoids reference to difficult issues such as arranged marriages, divorce and remarriage, and homosexual marriage.

Faith schools

Perhaps the most potentially explosive issue of all is faith schools. If agnostic socialists are looking for an issue in which Christian socialism might have significant and potentially damaging implications, this would seem to be it. Yet if Blair himself is a committed advocate of faith schools, the Christian Socialist Movement has relatively little to say on the subject, at least in its public documents. There is no reference to faith schools in the ‘mini-manifesto’ and they are only mentioned in passing in the very brief section on education in the CSM report *Faith in Politics*:

The involvement of the faith communities in education and other work with children has sensitised them to this Government goal. Some have specifically benefited from the publicly-financed religious schools policy that has developed under Labour. (*Faith in Politics*, p.8)

This might be seen as at least an implicit endorsement of faith schools, although there are no explicit demands for more faith schools, nor any more specific proposals, nor any acknowledgement of any wider issues involved, although this has become an acutely controversial area within the Labour party, among educationalists, parents and the wider community.

A pragmatic rather than religious argument for faith schools is that they often appear to secure good results. This may be because the commitment of a faith community instils more commitment and discipline in pupils which aids a work and achievement ethic, and in an era of league tables and an emphasis on ‘what works’ this may seem sufficient justification for supporting more faith schools. Critics, however, point out that faith schools involve selection and inevitably a non-typical cross section of the age group. Thus the results may to a degree reflect the school’s intake.

The other argument commonly advanced for more faith schools is that it is all about consumer choice. The state is simply responding to an evident demand for religious education. Of course, the demand comes from parents rather than the final consumers

of education, and there are some issues over the respective rights of parents and the wider community over minors who can hardly exercise an informed choice for themselves. Yet there can indeed be no doubt that some parents want an education for their children within a specific religious context. (Even if a few parents may discover or rediscover a lapsed faith in order to secure what is perceived as a more traditional and more disciplined education for their children, or to avoid the, real or imagined, perils of the local mixed race and mixed religion comprehensive school.) It should be noted however that wider choice for those who want more faith schools may sometimes effectively restrict choice for those of all faiths and none who do not want a religious education for their children.

The main argument advanced against faith schools is that they would appear to have some fairly obvious negative implications for the promotion of understanding between faiths and communities. The experience of Northern Ireland provides a melancholy reminder of the way in which religious schools can perpetuate and reinforce divisions. While there is little evidence that Catholic or Anglican schools in mainland Britain have had a marked divisive effect on local communities, the proliferation of faith schools can only reduce intercourse and understanding between faith communities and ethnic groups and impede the development of a genuinely multi-cultural society. It seems unlikely that insistence on the teaching of comparative religion, or requirements on admission policy can significantly ameliorate the potentially damaging impact of educational segregation on religious grounds.

Until recently, it was widely considered that faith schools had little or no implications for the wider national curriculum. The denial of evolution theory and the teaching of the literal truth of the biblical story of creation was (it was comfortably assumed) a bizarre feature of Christian fundamentalist zeal in some American states, unimaginable in Britain. However, considerable media attention has lately focused on the teaching of creationism in some new faith schools, particularly Emmanuel College, Gateshead (a City Technology College) and various other institutions generously funded by the Christian fundamentalist car retailer, Sir Peter Vardy (Bright and McKie, *The Observer*, 17/3/02: 18). A similar approach has been identified in a state-funded Seventh Day Adventist School, John Loughborough in north London, and the problem is apparently not confined to Christian fundamentalism, but extends to schools for Orthodox Jews and Muslims. Rabbi Mordechai Fachler, Director of Jewish Studies at the Hashmonean High School for boys is quoted as saying 'We have to do evolution in science, but as Orthodox Jews it is not what we believe. We would welcome Darwin and evolution being removed from the national curriculum' (Pyke, *The Independent on Sunday*, 17/3/02: 15). The stories have provoked hostile criticism from scientists and some Christians, and have provided a field day for the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society. The latter has commented, 'Mr Blair's enthusiasm for faith schools will give the green light to every crackpot religious group to start peddling heir own mad fantasies in schools that are paid for by the taxpayer' (Pyke, *ibid.*) Roy Hattersley asks rhetorically whether 'the Department of Education' (sic) will 'endorse the creation of a Christian Science, a Scientology or a Mormon School?' but goes on to point out the problems of a more selective support for faith schools. 'If not, it will have to take the intolerable step of nominating state-approved religions' (Hattersley, *The Guardian*, 18/03/02: 18).

This is perhaps the nub of the problem for this government or any government. For largely historical reasons Britain has a large number of state-funded Roman Catholic and Anglican schools. The 1944 Education Act seemed to provide a workable pragmatic compromise to settle the vexed issue of church schools which had been such a divisive political issue in the 19th and into the 20th centuries. No-one then could have anticipated the possible implications for minority Christian sects, let alone for other religions. Yet in a multi-cultural society it appears manifestly unfair that some religious faiths should have state funded education and others not. While a wholly secular education system is the obvious answer, it is (unfortunately or otherwise) not practical politics. No government of any stripe is likely to risk alienating the Catholic Church and the Church of England by abolishing state-funded religious education. Yet it is difficult to find a sensible, rational basis for denying state-funded religious schools for other faiths, even if the long term consequences of divided communities may prove disastrous.

It is certainly feasible that the Government's support for faith schools has something to do with the revival of 'Christian Socialism' within the Government and the Labour Party, yet the connection is perhaps less strong than may be imagined. In terms of its published statements, the Christian Socialist Movement has done little or nothing to push the issue. Conspiracy theorists may assume insider influence (e.g. from Stephen Timms, the Minister for Schools) and effective pressure behind the scenes, but there is little evidence of this. The most manifest 'Christian Socialist' influence on the policy is Blair's own endorsement, which no doubt reflects his own sincere convictions, coupled perhaps with some rationalisation of the choice of schools for his own children. Blair's active support may push the policy further and faster, but any change is incremental rather than radical. The dilemma of what to do about religious schools would still face another Prime Minister with less or no faith, although the Christian socialism of the Prime Minister has undoubtedly added spice to the debate.

Christian socialism, New Labour and the Third Way

The revival of Christian socialism may be seen as the accidental by-product of the unconnected rise of two active Christians to the party leadership following a succession of leaders who were unbelievers or confined their religion to a largely formal observance. It may be a temporary fashion, influenced by Smith, Blair and others as role models, to be discarded when another leader of a different disposition succeeds, a blip in the long term decline in Christian influence on society generally and the Labour Party in particular. Yet it may also be seen as a symptom of a more general revival of ethical socialism, which in turn reflects a wider ideological crisis within the modern party. However, Christian socialism is now, patently, far less well-placed to provide a broadly acceptable underpinning for ethical socialism than was the case a century ago, because of the decline in Christian observance and the rise in significance of other faiths. The general implications of religion for politics may be much weaker for most of the population, but they are far more complex for the various faith communities, with some potentially serious knock-on effects for society as a whole.

Mainstream contemporary Christian socialism, particularly in the form of the Christian Socialist Movement, has become more visible within the Labour Party, but at the same time offers little which appears particularly distinctive. To judge by recent public pronouncements the Christian Socialist Movement lies comfortably within the Blairite party, although it is at least conceivable that a further escalation in the 'war against terror' might lead to some agonising and perhaps a split. Otherwise the CSM seems to offer New Labour broad and fairly uncritical support. Their brand of Christian socialism fits easily within a loose interpretation of the third way as a middle way. As was true of Christian socialism a century ago, the values of community and fellowship involve a rejection of both the selfish individualism of classical liberalism (and modern neo-liberalism) on the one hand and Marxist class conflict on the other.

Stuart White (1999: 177) briefly discusses 'the alleged influence of Christian socialist ideas within new Labour'. He considers fears 'that a new Labour government might try to base public policy on religious values, deploying public authority in a sectarian way that necessarily lacks legitimacy for large numbers of perfectly decent and reasonable citizens who happen not to share these values.' Yet, by contrast, 'religious concerns can enhance our commitment to an essentially civic morality,' White suggests, because 'by cultivating our sense of respect for and solidarity with others, participation in a religious tradition can increase our commitment' to civic values. It follows that 'contemporary social democrats should not be wary of this liberal religiosity...Indeed they should welcome it', as 'a religiosity of this kind may have a vital role to play in countering the ethos of materialism and selfishness that stands as an obstacle to fundamental egalitarian reform of capitalist societies.' However, White goes on to criticise 'religious individuals' using 'state power to enforce or promote his or her religion or the way of life endorsed by this religion, as an end in itself, without any regard to any distinctive civic morality.' This kind of religious intervention in politics, he maintains, should be 'unequivocally' opposed by 'contemporary social democrats.'

Thus White suggests that Christian socialism and religious politics in general is unproblematic and may even be positively useful where it is content to underscore an essentially secular 'civic morality'. Indeed, the Christian Socialist Movement and many other individual Christians within the Labour Party largely seem to restrict themselves to a supportive, non-sectarian role under the broad umbrella of New Labour's ethical socialism. Thus unbelievers may have little to fear from the mainstream contemporary version of Christian socialism. Yet some variants of Christianity and some interpretations of other faiths seem rather less likely to accept White's self-denying ordinance, particularly when aspects of the dominant civic morality appears to conflict with central articles of their faith. Such versions of religious politics may involve a collision course with most versions of socialism, as well as Millite liberalism, and secular politics in general.

Bibliography and references

- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Bebbington, D. W. (1982) | <i>The Nonconformist Conscience: Chapel and Politics 1870-1914</i> , London, Allen and Unwin. |
| Beer, Samuel H. (1982) | <i>Modern British Politics</i> , London, Faber & |

- Faber.
 Benn, Tony (1980) *Arguments for Socialism*, Harmondsworth, Penguin.
- Bevir, Mark (2000) 'New Labour: a study in ideology' *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 2 no. 3,
- Blair, Tony (1996) *New Britain; My Vision of a Young Country*, London, Fourth Estate.
- Brockway, Fenner (1977) *Towards Tomorrow*, London, Hart-Davis, McGibbon.
- Brown, M. B. & Coates, K. (1996) *The Blair Revelation*, Nottingham, Socialist Renewal.
- Callaghan, John (1990) *Socialism in Britain*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell
- Dale, Graham (2000) *God's Politicians; the Christian contribution to 100 years of Labour*, London, HarperCollins.
- Davies, A. J. (1996) *To Build a New Jerusalem*, London, Abacus
- Dell, Edmund (2000) *A Strange Eventful History: Democratic socialism in Britain*, London, HarperCollins.
- Foote, Geoffrey (1986) *The Labour Party's Political Thought: A History*, London, Croom Helm.
- Gould, Philip (1998) *The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers saved the Labour Party*, London, Abacus.
- Hobsbawm, Eric (1984) *Worlds of Labour*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Lichtheim, George (1975) *A Short History of Socialism*, London, Fontana.
- Jones, Mervyn (1994) *Michael Foot*, London, Victor Gollancz.
- McSmith, Andy (1997) *Faces of Labour*, London, Verso.
- Mandelson, P. & Liddle, R. (1996) *The Blair Revolution: Can New Labour Deliver?*
 London, Faber and Faber.
- Morgan, Kenneth, O. (1997) *Callaghan: A Life*, Oxford, OUP..
- Pelling, Henry (1965) *The Origins of the Labour Party 1880-1900*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Pimlott, Ben (1992) *Harold Wilson*, London, HarperCollins.
- Rawnsley, Andrew (2001) *Servants of the People: The Inside Story of New Labour*, Harmondsworth, Penguin.
- Rentoul, John (2001) *Tony Blair, Prime Minister*, London, Little, Brown.
- Sassoon, Donald (1997) *One Hundred Years of Socialism*, London, Fontana
- Stelzer, Irwin, M. (1996) 'Christian Socialism in Britain', *The Public Interest*, 1996
- Terrill, Ross (1974) *R H Tawney and his times*, London, Andre Deutsch
- White, Stuart (1999) 'Rights and Responsibilities: A Social Democratic Perspective' in Gamble and Wright (eds.) *The New Social Democracy*, Oxford, Blackwell.

Whiteley, Paul (1983)
Williams, Philip (1979)

The Labour Party in Crisis, London, Methuen.
Hugh Gaitskell, London, Jonathan Cape.

In addition most of the material cited from the Christian Socialist Movement was obtained from their web site christiansocialist.org.uk, including *Papers from the Lamb* (originally published in 1959) *Faith in Politics* (2001) *Mini-manifesto* (2001) a round up for 2001 (including comments on the election) and various items of news.

There is a wealth of other material on the web under Christian socialism (but of variable quality).

Notes

ⁱ Although Lichtheim also points out that the Protestant tradition of northern Europe accommodated Christian socialists.

ⁱⁱ However, as Pelling (1965: 128-30) notes, many nonconformist churches, and particularly the Methodists, were 'oligarchies of local wealth' associated 'with the rising classes who had made good during the growth of industrialism'.

ⁱⁱⁱ Curiously, the neo-Conservative Roger Scruton defines Christian Socialism in his *Dictionary of Politics* in terms not dissimilar from Marx and the mainstream Marxist tradition.

^{iv} The re-establishment followed a series of informal meetings in 1959 in a pub in Bloomsbury of several Christian socialists including representatives of two earlier organisations, the Socialist Christian League and the Society of Socialist Clergy Ministers. A group produced the founding CSM 'Papers of the Lamb' (not a theological reference but the name of the pub!). Among those who attached their names to the Papers were L. John Collins, Tom Driberg, Donald Soper, Mervyn Stockwood, and Fred Willey. Soper became the first Chair of the Christian Socialist Movement in 1960.

^v Blair's mother was an occasional church goer, his father an atheist (Rentoul, 2001, pp 11-12)

^{vi} The full list of sitting MPs who were members of CSM is as follows: Hilary Armstrong, John Battle, Stuart Bell, Tony Blair, Ben Bradshaw, Anthony Colman, David Drew, Derek Foster, Michael Foster, Barry Gardiner, Win Griffiths, Bruce Grocoat, Joan Humble, Barry Jones, Martyn Jones, Tessa Jowell, Ruth Kelly, Calum MacDonald, Gordon Marsden, Michael Meacher, Alun Michael, Peter Pike, Kerry Pollard, Bridget Prentice, Andy Reed, Barry Sheerman, Chris Smith, Paul Stinchcombe, Jack Straw, David Taylor, Stephen Timms.

^{vii} Three of these were elected; Chris Bryant (a former CSM Chair) for the Rhondda, David Cairns (CSM's first national co-ordinator) for Greenock and Inverclyde and Meg Munn for Sheffield Healey. Among the unsuccessful candidates was the current Director, Graham Dale.

^{viii} Stephen Timms became Schools Minister under Estelle Morris after the 2001 election, and maintains his own website which copiously documents his Christian socialist speeches and activities.

^{ix} From a 'CSM 2001 round-up' (on their website: christiansocialist.org.uk/csmnet/Christmas2001)

^x *A christian socialist movement Mini-manifesto for the 2001 general election* published by the Christian Socialist Movement, Westminster Central Hall, London, April 2001.