

TURBULENT PRIESTS

Few would have predicted, in 1979,
that the Church of England would assume the mantle
of the moral voice against Thatcherism.

Many members of the Church of England are socialists and would establish a commonwealth whose people should own the land and the industrial capital and administer them cooperatively for the good of all. Such public ownership they regard as urgent and as a necessary deduction from the teachings of the church.¹

This unlikely passage comes from the colourful Anglican revolutionary Conrad Noel, vicar of Thaxted, Essex, in the early years of the century. Noel (1869-1942) founded the Catholic Crusade, whose aim was 'to smash the British Empire and all empires to bits.' It stood for 'a revolutionary attitude in politics, and the establishment, if necessary by force, of a classless cooperative society on communist lines.' The flying of the red flag from Thaxted church led to fierce controversy and violent clashes.

What those who have described the recent Archbishop's Commission Report as 'Marxist' would have made of Noel and his comrades, one can only speculate. While Noel, with his strong commitment to the Russian Revolution, was by no means typical of the Anglican socialism of his period, it is true to say that by the beginning of the 20th century a vague kind of socialism did represent the mainstream thinking of the Church of England, while the smaller but more militant groups within it, of which the Crusade was one, made that socialism more explicit. At the vague semi-official level, 'a kind of socialism' was expressed in statements from the Lambeth Conferences and the powerful Christian Social Union, and more specifically in such reports as that of the Archbishop's 5th Commission of Inquiry on *Christianity and Industrial Problems* (1918) and the famous Malvern Conference (1941).

The culmination of the tradition of reformist socialism was represented in the figure of William Temple, who was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 to his death in 1944. Temple has been hailed as the pioneer of the welfare state, and he was certainly the first writer to use the term.² He had joined the Labour party as a young man (though had left it before he

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became archbishop) and had claimed, in an article in 1908, that the choice before the church was between socialism and heresy. In that article he referred to 'evolutionary socialism'. But in a book published in 1927 he made it clear that what he was arguing for was gradual conservative reform.³ Temple was in fact a believer in capitalism with a human face.

There were many more openly socialist groups within the Church of England from Stewart Headlam's Guild of St Matthew, founded in 1877, which campaigned for the nationalisation of land as well as for recognition of ballet, the music hall, the pub, and school reform, to such groups as the Council of Clergy and Ministers for

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Common Ownership (1942), a group dominated by the Reverend Stanley Evans who was well known in the Communist party. Today there are a number of Christian socialist groupings, the only explicitly Anglican one being the Jubilee Group, founded at Bethnal Green in 1974.

Not so trendy

Much of this Anglican socialist tradition has been forgotten, or was never known, by current right-wing critics, who therefore see the church's involvement in the political arena as something novel and 'trendy'. In fact, the Church of England, both at its official level (bishops, conferences, etc) and through its clergy and parishes, was probably more involved in the social and political arena in the period from the 1870s to the death of Temple than in recent years. Statements of the bishops in the last few years look quite mild compared with some of the earlier writers and activists. Thus the Lambeth Conference Report of 1948 claimed that Marxism was closer to Christian doctrine than any other philosophy. Michael Ramsey, later

to become Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote, in his first book in 1936, that 'individualism. . . has no place in Christianity, and Christianity verily means its extinction.'⁴

The recent report *Faith in the City*, as its authors themselves point out, 'proceeds from a long tradition of Christian social concern.'⁵ Those critics who have referred the church back to its 'spiritual' role, thinking that in so doing they were representing 'orthodox' opinion against some new trend, stand within the other tradition, much less ancient, typified by Stanley Baldwin when he asked, when the bishops tried to intervene in the 1926 coal strike, how would they feel were he to refer the revision of the Athanasian Creed to the Iron and Steel Federation.

What is relatively new in the attacks on the report is the use of the word 'Marxist'. Of course, the use of 'Marxist' as accusation rather than description has been a well-established feature of right-wing polemic for some years. Rarely does the term bear any relationship to Marx or the Marxist tradition. Within right-wing Christian circles, the term was used some sixteen times in a recent symposium: in no case was the use of the term explained, nor was there any reference to Marx or any Marxist thinker.⁶ A few years earlier an attack on the General Synod of the Church of England had appeared with the fascinating title *A Marxist Heaven?*⁷ The use of the term in relation to the recent report has been at the same unintelligent level. 'Tory anger at C of E Marxists' was the *Daily Telegraph* headline on December 2 last,

¹ Conrad Noel *Socialism in Church History* London Frank Palmer 1910 p7.

² William Temple *Christianity and the State* 1929 and *Citizen and Churchman* 1941.

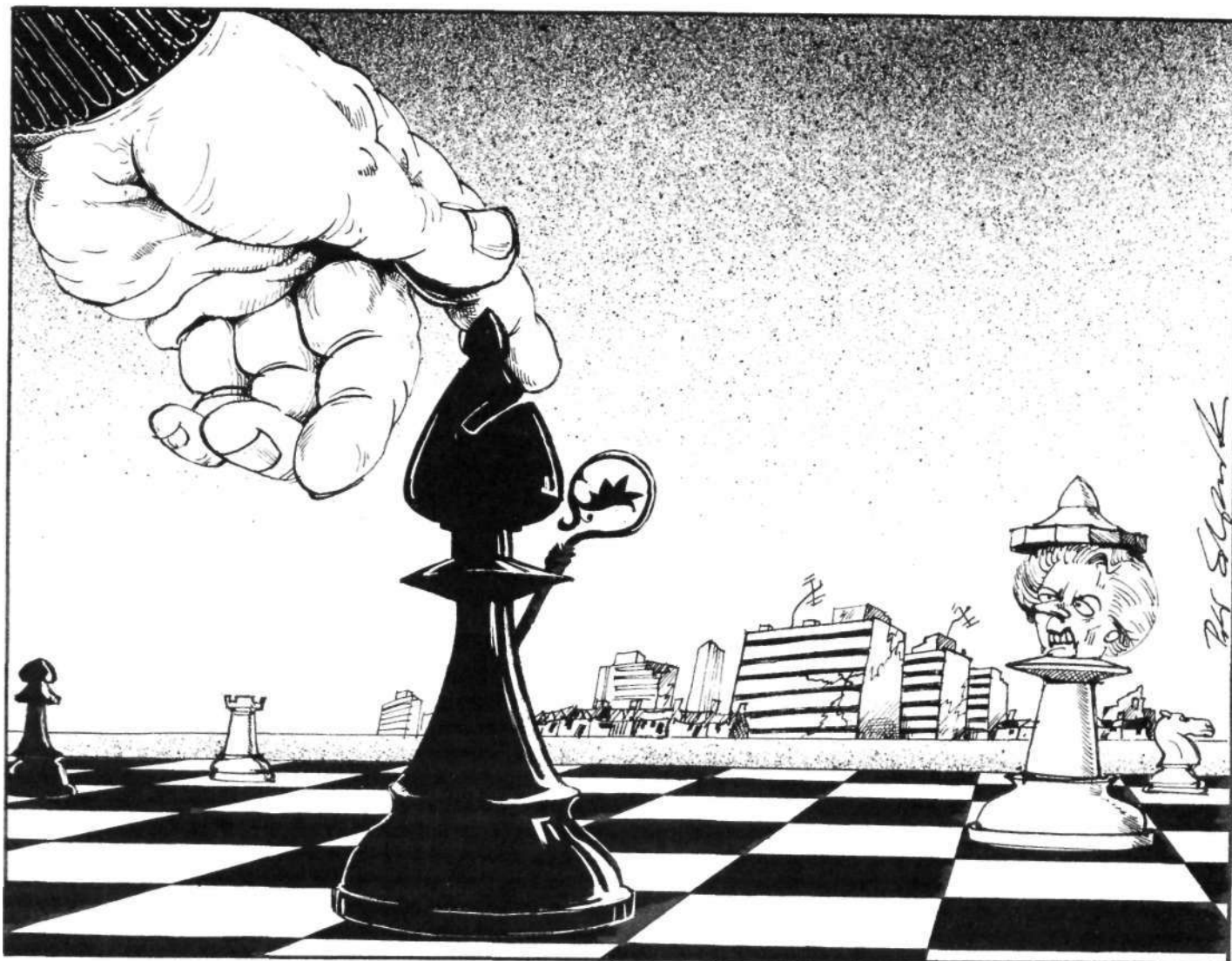
³ William Temple *Essays on Christian Politics and Kindred Subjects* Longmans 1927 p65.

⁴ A M Ramsey *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* Longmans 1936 p38.

⁵ *Faith in the City* Church House Publishing 1985 p57.

⁶ Digby Anderson ed *The Kindness That Kills: the churches' simplistic response to complex social issues* SPCK 1984.

⁷ National Federation of Self-Employed and Small Businesses, 1979.



while Auberon Waugh in *The Spectator* was true to type. The report was 'more overtly Marxist and anti-religious' than usual, he claimed, and went on to speak of 'the Archbishop's explicit adoption of Marx.'⁸

Re-assertion of liberalism

Whether Marxists would be pleased that the Archbishop had joined the ranks or suspicious of his motivation I do not know, but the fact is that, while there are a number of influences, both theological and political, which one can detect in the pages of the report, Marx is certainly not one of them. This is not to say that Marx has had no influence on world Christianity. Some, though by no means all, of the writers known as 'liberation theologians', based mainly in south and central America, draw heavily on Marxist analytical tools. One of the best-known such writers is Jose Miranda, author of *Marx and the Bible* (Orbis 1974). But, in spite of the title, 270 of its 312 pages consist of biblical exegesis, and

only 42 of socio-economic analysis. And this is true of the entire Latin American tradition. Where it is used, Marxist analysis is seen as an aid to understanding the development of capitalist societies. But the theology is deeply, and even conservatively, Christian.

There are other Christian traditions which have learnt a good deal from Marxism, such as some north American black theology associated with the Yale professor Cornel West. But very little of this thinking has affected the Church of England. Indeed, it is probably true to say that Marxism was more fashionable in Anglican circles in the 1930s and 40s than it is today. What has been happening in recent years has been a renewal of the social conscience of the church as it existed prior to the second world war. It is a return to the tradition of Temple, rather than the appearance of something new.

It was the immediate postwar period, the era of Archbishop Fisher, which was in a sense the 'freak' period. Fisher, in his

presidential address to the Convocations in 1947, after referring to the pressing needs of the nation, went on to speak of the 'first and most essential step', the revision of Canon Law, on which the church then spent years. Michael Ramsey, a man deeply influenced by the self-styled socialist F D Maurice and the genuine socialist Charles Gore, rescued the church from its self-absorption, and it is the blossoming of this renewed social tradition which we are now seeing. But it is not particularly a socialist tradition, though there are socialists within it. It is more a liberal reformist tradition which looks more left wing simply because the government has moved so far to the right. The Bishop of Southwark has suggested that the church may have become more critical of the government because of the lack of a strong opposition party, and this is partly true.

A growing radicalism

But the source of the present conflict can also be sought in the increased awareness

which the bishops have of concrete political realities. This is in part due to the efficient and well-informed work of the Board for Social Responsibility, and its equivalents in the dioceses, and in part to the involvement throughout the country of churchpeople, priests and laity, in such issues as housing, homelessness, racism, the peace movement, and so on. Since 1979 we have witnessed continual clashes between church and government over a whole series of issues: over child benefits; over *The Church and the Bomb* report; over the Nationality Act and the Immigration Rules (on which the General Synod was unanimous in its vote of condemnation); over economic policy; over the Falkland Islands service; and so on. And it is significant that, in spite of suggestions from Tory spokespersons that the church often does not 'get its facts right', bishops and clergy have access to experience and information which is more accurate and reality-based than that of the government which is increasingly remote from the people. If the Archbishop's Commission is correct that there has been an increased polarisation of rich and poor, undoubtedly

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the clergy are closer to the areas of poverty, and to its victims, than are the government, and can speak with greater authority and credibility.

It would be absurd to deny that there has been a 'radicalisation' of the episcopate, including some of its conservative members. The strong positions taken by Graham Leonard, the Bishop of London, over nationality and immigration issues and over the abolition of the GLC, are worth noting. A common Tory jibe is that bishops are remote from people. But, however much the right-wing media may seek to discredit them, such bishops as David Sheppard of Liverpool, John Austin Baker of Salisbury, David Jenkins of Durham and Archbishop Runcie himself are listened to with great respect by, and have credibility with, thousands of churchpeople. Sheppard and Jenkins are known to speak out of genuine knowledge of the inner urban scene. It is also worth noting that, with the exception of Sheppard, these men are former university or college teachers, and many of the present

clergy have sat at their feet as students.

If it is true that social and economic conditions have pushed many churchpeople to be reluctant radicals, it is equally true that there has been a renewal of sound theology in recent years. Marxists should be the last to deny the importance of theory and of ideas. Recent years in the church have seen the abandonment of the individualistic and otherworldly theology associated with some wings of the Reformation. Sheppard represents a new breed of radical evangelical whose theology is deeply rooted in the Bible. In the Catholic wing of the Church, the influence of the Second Vatican Council with its more socially critical direction, and of the liberation theology which has developed from it, are having their effect on many Anglicans. As in the Roman church, there is a conservative swing. Edward Norman's 1978 Reith Lectures on *Christianity and the World Order* were an amateurish attempt to revive the otherworldly tradition. But it has come too late.

There is a new reformation under way, and it centres around the theme of the 'Kingdom of God'. In an interesting essay of 1922, the socialist priest Percy Widdington predicted that the recovery of the Kingdom of God as a hope for the transformation of the world would bring about a reformation compared with which that of the 16th century would seem a very small thing. That time has now come to pass. Increasingly the real division within world Christianity does not run along historic denominational lines. It is a division between those who believe that the Kingdom of God involves the transformation of the world and its structures of injustice, and those who do not.

And more to come?

However, in assessing the Church of England and its political role, we must ask not only 'what does it say?' but 'whose interests does it represent?' Marx did not write much about religion, and even less about the Church of England, but one of the few things he did say about it was that it would sooner give up 38 of its 39 articles than one-thirty-ninth of its income. So, when we have listened to all the radical rhetoric, where does the Church of England stand within the class structure? The recent report accepts what all social historians have shown, that the Church of England has never been part of working class culture or life. While the church has shown great concern about the conditions of the poor, the unemployed, the homeless, and so on, its character as part of the

upper and middle class, as part of the establishment, is very clear. And there is no evidence that the official spokespersons of the church have any desire to change the system: rather they wish it to function in a more caring and compassionate way. Many of the bishops would be happier in the company of Harold Macmillan or Edward Heath than of Margaret Thatcher. The changing face of the Tory party has probably pushed many churchpeople to an SDP position. Indeed the similarity between the conclusions of Anthony Heath and his colleagues about the Alliance in the last issue of *Marxism Today*, and that of George Moyser on the General Synod of the Church of England is very striking. According to Heath, the Alliance shows a combination of liberal attitudes on social and 'moral' issues, and a conservative attitude on class and economic ones.¹⁰ Moyser makes the same point about the church.

Like Prince Charles, the bishops are probably worried about a divided nation. The difference is that they can no longer be said to rule it: they are not prince bishops, and only lord bishops in the technical sense. They may still speak as if they were the leaders of the national church, but in fact they are increasingly the leaders of a minority among other minorities within a secular state. Minority status is no guarantee of radicalism, but it may mean that in the future both the bishops and the church as a whole will be less concerned with social respectability, status or maintaining the status quo. And that may even apply to the status quo within the church itself. For it is logically and morally impossible in the long run for the church to offer moral principles to the nation which it does not apply to itself. After the Malvern Conference of 1941, Temple wrote: "

'Christians, clergy and laity alike, cannot take part in this work unless they are ready to advocate and bring about a complete change in the internal financial position of the church.'

In the aftermath of the recent report, it would be surprising if that point were lost. The next few years should be very interesting. •

⁸ Auberger Waugh Runcieballs revisited, or what to do with the Beveridge boys' *The Spectator* 21-28 December 1985.

⁹ *The Times* 6 December 1984.

¹⁰ Anthony Heath *et al* in *Marxism Today* January 1986 pp. 18-21; George Moyser 'The political organisation of the middle class: the case of the Church of England' in John Garrard *et al*, *The Middle Class in Politics* Saxon House 1978. "Reynolds News 26 January 1941.