

**CHRISTIAN SOCIALISM
IN THE CHURCH OF
ENGLAND**

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Christian Socialism in the Church of England by Arthur V. Woodworth

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ARTHUR V. WOODWORTH

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CHAPTER I.

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN SOCIALISTS.

Properly to understand the Christian Socialist Movement in England today it is necessary to go back to the earlier movement under Maurice and Kingsley. For while that ended in apparent failure in 1854, it had sown the seed of a new spirit which, growing stronger and stronger, at last has born fruit in a wider movement of education in the needs of the industrial classes of England, a movement which, rightly guided, promises to exercise a powerful influence on the future of the English church and of the English nation.

The year 1848 or, as Maurice once called it, "that awful year," is one of the landmarks in the social history of Europe. Socialism which had for many years been a smouldering fire, then showed its power to produce profound political changes. The revolution in France was imitated on a smaller scale in most of the continental countries. In France alone the revolutionists overthrew the ruling dynasty, but the European disturbances had the common element of being middle class movements. In England, on the contrary, the agitation was confined to the working classes. Here the Chartist agitation which had been merely smouldering since 1842, burst once more into flame under the unfortunate leadership of Feargus O'Connor. Aside from the spirit of revolution which seemed to be in the air, from 1830 until 1848, there were three main causes which influenced the general trend of the movement in England. The first of these was the direct result of the Reform Bill of 1832. The labouring classes were encouraged to agitate for the passage of this bill, and their leaders were led to believe that it would directly benefit the workingman. The bill as passed, however, extended the franchise to a larger class of copy-holders and freeholders, but actually restricted the rights of freemen to vote. The labour leaders, therefore, felt that the first step should be renewed agitation for a wider extension of the franchise. The second cause was the repeal of the Poor Law of Elizabeth. Under this old law a person only need have the name entered on the parish roll to be sure of relief. But with the repeal of the law in 1834, all outdoor relief stopped, and the one prop on which the labourer had learned to lean was withdrawn. The consequent distress was very great, and the pictures of the shocking conditions under which the poor lived at the time are heart-rending. Finally, the underlying cause of all the distress was the readjustment of economic conditions consequent upon the substitution of machinery for the old hand trades. This meant the introduction of the factory system and the herding of great masses in the towns. It was in fact the first step in the problem of the great cities.

It is, therefore, more intelligible why the demand in England should be for political reform, while in France it was mainly social. The labour leaders wanted the right to vote. They wanted representatives of their own order in Parliament, so that they might make clear the distress

which the repeal of the Poor Law had caused, and they felt a vague sense, which still finds expression, that in some indefinite way righteousness by legislation was the short cut to reform. The People's Charter seemed to offer all that was hoped for, and its six points were the political credo of all socialistic agitators in England. These points were: 1, Universal suffrage; 2, Annual parliaments; 3, Vote by ballot; 4, Equal electoral districts; 5, Payment of members; 6, No property qualification. Certainly not a very revolutionary programme, but one which kept England in a state of alarm until its final disappearance in 1848.

I.

In the midst of the blind terror which the Chartist agitation caused, the Church turned generally a deaf ear to all appeal. So far from making any effort to understand the movement—to separate the true from the false—the clergy's voices were often loudest in the cry for oppression. In the spring of 1848, almost the first clergyman to attempt to understand the need was Frederick Denison Maurice, at that time professor at King's College and chaplain of Lincoln's Inn. Already in March he said in a sermon on the Lord's Prayer:

"How can one ever make it a charge against any people that they hope for a brotherhood upon earth? Every hope points upwards; if it cannot find an object it is in search of one; you cannot crush it without robbing your fellow creature of a witness for God, and an instrument of purification. . . . Christianity as a mere system of doctrines or practices will never make men brothers. By Christianity we must understand the reconciliation of mankind to God in Christ. We must understand the power and privilege of saying 'our Father'—'thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.' . . . This prayer does not treat the projects of men for universal societies, unbounded pantocracies, as too large. It overreaches them all with these words, 'as in Heaven.'" "The whole spirit of Christian Socialism," says Mr. Ludlow, "is in such passages though the term was not used till two years later." (1)

The Chartist movement culminated on the 10th of April, 1848. A monster petition said by the presenters to contain over five million signatures, was to be presented to Parliament by the full force of Chartists marching to Westminster in military order. London was thrown into the wildest terror. The troops were placed under the control of the Duke of Wellington, and a great number of special constables were sworn in. The procession was forbidden by law, and on the eventful day only a few thousand men met at the rendezvous—Kennington Common—and, after the customary speeches on such occasions, dispersed. The petition when examined later was found full of fictitious names, and vastly overestimated in the number of signatures. Unfortunately the affair had been heralded so loudly, and had caused so much terror, that the fiasco was as greatly magnified and Chartism from that day was dead.

Naturally the excitement interested Maurice keenly; and Kingsley, who had made his acquaintance a short time before, came up to London on April 9th, to offer such service as he could. A small knot of

(1)—Atlantic Monthly, January, 1886, pp. 110, 111.

men grouped themselves around Maurice, and decided to issue placards for the walls "to speak a word for God with," (2) as Kingsley put it. Kingsley himself wrote the placard, which was posted all over London on April 11th.

"Workingmen of England: You say that you are wronged. Many of you are wronged; and many besides yourselves know it. Almost all men who have heads and hearts know it—above all the working clergy know it. They go into your houses, they see the shameful filth and darkness in which you are forced to live crowded together; they see your children growing up in ignorance and temptation for want of fit education; they see intelligent and well read men among you shut out from a Freeman's just right of voting, and they see, too, the noble patience and self-control with which you have as yet borne with these evils. They see it and God sees it.

"Workmen of England! You have more friends than you think for. Friends who expect nothing from you, but who love you because you are their brothers; and who fear God, and therefore dare not neglect you His children; men who are drudging and sacrificing themselves to get you your rights; men who know what your rights are better than you know yourselves, who are trying to get for you something nobler than charters and dozens of Acts of Parliament, more useful than this 'fifty-thousandth share in a talker in the National Palaver at Westminster' can give you. You may disbelieve them, insult them—you cannot stop their working for you, beseeching you, as you love yourselves, to turn back from the precipice of riot which ends in the gulf of universal distrust, stagnation, starvation. You think the Charter would make you free—would to God it would! The Charter is not bad; if the men who use it are not bad! But will the Charter make you free? Will it free you from the slavery to ten-pound bribes? Slavery to gin and beer? Slavery to every spouter who flatters your self-conceit, and stirs up bitterness and headlong rage in you? That, I guess, is real slavery; to be a slave to one's own stomach, one's own pocket, one's own temper. Will the Charter cure that? Friends you want more than acts of Parliament can give.

"Englishmen! Saxons! Workers of the great, cool-headed, strong-handed nation of England, the workshop of the world, the leaders of freedom for 700 years, men say you have common sense! Then do not humbug yourselves into meaning 'license' when you cry for 'liberty.' Who would dare refuse you freedom? For the Almighty God, and Jesus Christ, the poor man who died for poor men, will bring it about for you, though all the Mammonites of the earth were against you. A nobler day is dawning for England, a day of freedom, science, industry! But there will be no true freedom without virtue, no true science without religion, no true industry without the fear of God, and love to your fellow citizens.

"Workers of England, be wise, and then you must be free, for you will be fit to be free.

"A Working Parson."

(2)—Kingsley's Life and Letters, p. 62.