

SOCIALISM IN CHURCH HISTORY

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649706976

Socialism in Church History by Conrad Noel

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Cover @ 2017

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The question which ought to hold a pre-eminent place in the interests of Churchmen is, how we are to return to a condition of things nearer to the intention of Christ—if it may be, without violence or revolution; but if not, then anyhow to return."—Dr. Gosw, Bishop of Birmingham. Barrow-in-Furness Church Congress Sermon, 1906

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

THE YOUNG CHURCHMAN CO.,
MILWAUKEE, WIS.,
1911

TO
MY WIFE

215023

THE ARGUMENT

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 co-operatively for the good of all. Such public ownership they regard as urgent, and as a necessary deduction from the teachings of the Church. They are not communists but socialists. Far from seeking the abolition of private property or the curtailment of personal freedom, they desire such an industrial rearrangement of society as shall not only increase the national output but shall secure to the majority the wealth they produce and the liberty they have hitherto been denied.

The Christian Faith cannot be summed up in the word socialism, nor should it be finally identified with any political or economic system. For all this, Churchmen are convinced that the principles which underlie socialism are, so far as they go, the principles of the Christian religion as applied to political, commercial, and industrial problems.

Orthodox Church folk recognise the statement that the Church should have nothing to do with politics or with material life as a deadly and soul-destroying

heresy, contradicting the Christian doctrines of *breath*ion, *Incarnation*, and of the *Resurrection* of the body.

The kingdom of heaven, a kingdom not "of" this world, but "in" this world, is thrust like leaven into the ages, until every avenue of human activity is leavened. The Church, established by God, as the mouthpiece of the kingdom, must seize every opportunity of interfering with the world, until it has transformed its evil, warring, factious kingdoms into the international commonwealth of God and of His Christ.

To this end it must neither neglect nor confine itself to the political sphere. It must be as ready to make temporary alliances with political parties as it is determined to entangle itself inextricably with no political party soever.

The object of the present work is to justify the foregoing position by an appeal to Christian history, and to suggest that economic socialism provides the practical and scientific form for our own day and in one important human sphere for the realisation of those very objects which the Church has always had at heart.

It is not my purpose to identify Jewish legislation, primitive Christian practice, Church law, with the proposals of economic socialism, but rather to point out that the eternal purposes of Holy Church, expressed from age to age in various more or less ineffectual efforts, must now be expressed in the eminently effectual system of socialism.

Socialism is no fixed and final scheme of perfection, but we claim it as the solution for our day of a

multitude of evils. In the centuries to come socialism will give place to some other system more applicable to the needs of a now undreamt-of future.

Churchmen sometimes argue that, although economic socialism does not necessarily involve "rationalist" positions, so many of its supporters are unorthodox that they consider it dangerous to identify themselves with the movement. But it is precisely because the Church of to-day has so largely failed us, that the construction of a socialist philosophy has fallen into the hands of persons alienated from the traditions of Christendom. All the more necessary is it for that handful of Churchmen who value not the dead letter but the living spirit of tradition to come forward and make their own intellectual contribution to the building of the international commonwealth.

Previous writers have dealt with parts of the subject. Amongst the authors to whom I am chiefly indebted are Messrs Ashley, Rauschenbusch, A. J. Carlyle, R. W. Carlyle, Stewart D. Headlam, Thomas Hancock, and Charles Marson. So far as I know, no existing work covers the whole ground, and I am conscious how imperfectly what is a very large subject is dealt with here. My hope in writing will be realised if someone more competent than myself should be tempted to deal with the subject at greater length, and if meanwhile the present work directs attention to a vital aspect of Church thought too often neglected.

CONRAD NOEL.

Advent, 1909.

