

**Troublesome Priests: Christianity and Marxism  
in the Church of England, 1906-1969**

A thesis submitted to The University of Manchester for the degree of  
Master of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities

2014

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The total word count for this thesis is 48,575.

## Abbreviations

Alan Ecclestone Papers, Sheffield Archives	AEP
Christian Social Union	CSU
Church Socialist League	CSL
Conrad Noel Papers, Hull History Centre	CNP
Guild of St. Matthew	GSM
Hewlett Johnson Papers, University of Kent at Canterbury	HJP
Independent Labour Party	ILP
Labour History Archive and Study Centre, People's History Museum	LHA
Lambeth Palace Library	LPL
Tameside Local Studies and Archives	TLSA
Working Class Movement Library	WCML

## **Abstract**

This thesis argues that the relationship between Anglican Christianity and Marxism in Britain between 1906 and 1969 has been far more complex than is commonly understood. It is often assumed that the relationship between religious organisations and Marxism has often been acrimonious, the latter famously rejecting religion as the ‘opium of the people’, and religion resisting the revolutionary nature of Marxism.

Taking a biographical approach, examining four Church of England clergymen, Robert Cummings, Conrad Noel, Hewlett Johnson and Alan Ecclestone, this thesis shows that some Anglicans saw a philosophical connection between Christianity and Marxism. For these individuals, and others like them, Marxism constituted a strategy to achieve political and economic change, but also a mechanism to actualise the foundation of the Kingdom of God on Earth. Additionally, this thesis considers these clergymen in light of their position as Church of England clergy. Between 1906 and 1969, each of them held livings as vicars of various parishes, with Johnson becoming Dean of first Manchester and then Canterbury. This affords the opportunity to consider the responses of the Church and the nature of the Church of England in tolerating radical priests.

The commitments that these clergymen made to Marxism grew from their Christian beliefs, and these commitments differentiate these individuals from previous and contemporaneous generations of Christian Socialists. Christian Marxism represented a distinct branch of Anglican theology and defined the theology and political philosophy of the group examined herein, influenced their ministry and their social and theological work.

This thesis provides a new perspective on the interaction between radical politics and the Church of England in the twentieth century, and demonstrates the new character of the theology and political outlook of the individuals concerned. It also exploits new avenues for research at the intersection between the relevant areas of study. It is based on evidence taken from personal papers, published and unpublished material, official documents and interviews conducted specifically for this study.

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## **Introduction: The Church of England and Marxism**

Religion and Marxism are often seen as irreconcilable, and the relationship between them has often been one of antipathy, in no small part due to the professed atheism of communism. However, communism has also been presented as a secular religion and commentators on Soviet and British communism have identified similarities between the hierarchies of communist and church organisations, the requirement for training for new members, and practices of each side.<sup>1</sup> This hyperbole discounts both communist atheism and the fact that not all followers of religion are messianic fanatics,<sup>2</sup> but belies the ways in which Christians made an accommodation between Christianity and Marxism. This thesis argues that, despite Marxist atheism, an important minority of Anglican clergymen, specifically Robert Cummings, Conrad Noel, Hewlett Johnson and Alan Ecclestone, reconciled their Christianity and Marxism, both as ideology and practice. This thesis demonstrates that this accommodation was made in a range of political and Church contexts between 1906 and 1969, the period in which each of these four clergymen held livings as vicars or deans of the Church of England. This thesis examines the responses of congregations, colleagues, Church and secular authorities to the interpretation of faith and politics of this group. Often, these individuals were subject to attacks from those opposed to their reconciliation between Christianity and Marxism. Church authorities were pressed to discipline them, but this persecution often strengthened their beliefs, and it appears that little could be done to silence them. This thesis

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<sup>1</sup> Marcin Kula, 'Communism as Religion', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religion* 6 (3) (December 2005): 371-381; Alexander Wicksteed, *Life Under the Soviets* (London, 1928); Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism* (London, 2006); Thomas Linehan, *Communism in Britain 1920-39: From the Cradle to the Grave* (Manchester, 2007); Bertrand Russell, *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (London, 1920).

<sup>2</sup> Gidon Cohen, 'Political Religion and British Communism'; *Twentieth Century Communism: A Journal of International History* 2, 'Communism and Political Violence' (May 2010): 197-214.

examines this issue to determine why these clergy had so few sanctions placed on them.

This thesis demonstrates that these clergymen represented a movement within the Church of England that, while a minority in terms of numbers, identified commonalities between Christianity and Marxism that had important implications for the practical application of both. They found a common point of reference in the rise of international socialism, the Russian Revolutions and the formation of the Soviet Union, but must be seen as more than mere fellow travellers, supporters of the Soviet Union who did not join the Communist Party.<sup>3</sup> They also drew upon nineteenth century traditions of Christian Socialism and the radical religious movements of the seventeenth century, but they were distinct from these earlier generations. This group was therefore a distinct movement within the twentieth century Church of England that provided a catalyst around which debate on the interaction between Marxism and Christianity could coalesce, even if much of this debate was vitriolic. In addition to contributing to the historiography of communism in Britain, this thesis also contributes to the wider history of the Church of England in Britain, examining the Church as an organisation with authority over practical and theological matters, and which functioned as part of the political establishment.

The first section of this introduction discusses historiographical debates on the interaction between religion and politics, specifically the relationship between Christianity and Marxism in a British context. Historians have identified Johnson, Ecclestone and Noel as clerical socialists, but have failed to consider whether these

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<sup>3</sup> David Caute, *The Fellow-Travellers: Intellectual Friends of Communism* (revised edition) (London, 1988).

individuals regarded themselves as part of a collective, representative of a movement within the Church of England. Additionally, historians of British communism have often overlooked the context of the Church of England on these clergy. This thesis explains how these clergymen accommodated religion and politics, how they saw the practical implications of this, and the responses they encountered as a result. We then discuss source material and the methodological approaches used in this thesis.

### **Historiographical Debates**

British Marxism owes a good deal to a religious inheritance, particularly from nonconformist traditions, notably Methodism, and comparisons have been made between early socialist movements and the primitive Christian Church.<sup>4</sup> Raphael Samuel identified the analogous relationship between Christianity and British Marxism, encompassing millennial belief in impending social change and in the structure and outlook of political organisations, particularly the Communist Party of Great Britain. In Samuel's view, political parties of the twentieth century were "monolithic, exclusive in the loyalties that they demanded, fervent in the support they were able to muster, unquestioned – at least by their followers – in moral authority and organisational imperatives."<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, he describes the commitment of Communists to 'missionary' work, the efficacy of which was variable, and the dedication of Communists to the Party which quashed ant

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<sup>4</sup> Raphael Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians, 1880-1980: Part One', *New Left Review* 120 (March-April 1980): 21-96; Friedrich Engels, 'On the History of Early Christianity', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion* (New York, 2008), pp. 316-347.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel, *Lost World*, p. 10.

temptation to dissent. In these ways communism became a “crusading order,” and “put forward a complete scheme of social salvation.”<sup>6</sup>

However, the CPGB was a much more open organisation than other European Communist Parties. Morgan, Cohen and Flinn’s *Communists and British Society* provides a comprehensive history of the CPGB and its place in British society between 1920 and 1991, and elucidates the more complex relationship between the Party and supporters outside the Party structure. They demonstrate that while the CPGB was seen as a threat to British political stability it was a much less conformist, less dangerous version of its counterparts abroad.<sup>7</sup> The upper echelons of the Party were certainly less monolithic, and Dmitri Manuilsky, the Ukrainian Communist leader and Comintern functionary, complained that the CPGB represented a ‘society of great friends’ rather than a revolutionary cadre, which presented problems when the ideological purity of the Party was questioned and a Stalinist-style purge was necessitated in 1929, though many purged members continued to work closely with the Party.<sup>8</sup>

Despite its religious inheritance, the CPGB was established as an officially atheist party in 1920 and for the remainder of that decade it was, in Samuel’s words, “violently anti-Christian.” However, the Party’s attitude to religion warmed slightly in the Popular Front era of the 1930s, and the moral dimension of Marxism was

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<sup>6</sup> Samuel, *Lost World*, p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British Society, 1920-1991* (London, 2007), pp. 11-55.

<sup>8</sup> Morgan, Cohen and Flinn, *Communists and British Society*, pp. 56-97; pp. 214-215; Henry Pelling, ‘The Early History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-9’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fifth Series, 8 (1958): 41-57; Samuel, *Lost World*, pp. 41-43.

raised in discussions on the relationship between Christianity and Marxism.<sup>9</sup> As will be seen in later chapters, this thaw in the attitude of the CPGB to religion continued after the Second World War, creating an environment in which Ecclestone could formally join the Party, and in which a coherent Christian-Marxist Dialogue could begin in the 1960s.<sup>10</sup>

The Church of England is likewise a complex organisation that, by the beginning of our period of study already had a long history of accommodating diverse theological traditions. Christians had not overlooked the rise of socialism in the nineteenth century, and a significant number of clergymen had emerged as Christian Socialists, comfortably accommodating Christianity with a reformist interpretation of socialism. Christian socialists sought to engage with social, economic and political problems not only as a way of demonstrating the Church's ongoing relevance in modern industrial society and draw new working-class congregations into regular worship, but also because of a moral imperative to do so. Nineteenth century Christian Socialists sought to re-orientate the Church towards serving the large working-class populations of new urban and industrial parishes, and believed that their movement had recalled the Church to a sense of missionary work, both in Britain and abroad, and though no denomination appears to have drawn significant numbers of new communicants into regular worship, Christians were taking a much more proactive role in social work.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians', pp. 50-51.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Hebblethwaite, *The Christian-Marxist Dialogue: Beginnings, Present Status and Beyond* (London, 1977); Roger Garaudy and Quentin Lauer, *A Christian-Communist Dialogue* (New York, 1968).

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (London, 1964), p. 118; Gilbert Clive Binyon, *The Christian Socialist Movement in England: An Introduction to the Study of its History* (London, 1931), p. 220; Hugh McLeod, 'Scholars, Slums and Socialists', in Henry Chadwick (ed.), *Not Angels, But Anglicans: A History of Christianity in the British Isles* (Norwich,

The attitude of the Church of England to Christian Socialist clergy is ambiguous. The missionary activities of socialist clergy were generally supported by Church authorities who recognised the necessity of engaging with the working classes to maintain the vitality of the Church. However, Christian Socialist organisations, particularly the Church Socialist League (1906-1923), were regarded with suspicion, and its members in many cases found preferment barred to them.<sup>12</sup> The Church of England's status as an established church however afforded it the luxury of tolerating some dissent. Throughout our period of study, the Church remained a wealthy and secure institution in terms of its position in the British state. Christian Socialists of the radical left could therefore be tolerated as they were never a serious threat to the place of the Church within British society, and their accommodation of Christianity and socialism has occasionally been dismissed as "isolated" by historians of the Church.<sup>13</sup> However, far from being isolated, our group sought to demonstrate the relationship between Christianity and Marxist socialism, break the complacency of the Church and pioneer an engagement on the part of clergymen with social and economic issues.

It is however important not to overstate the strength of the Church which, during our period, experienced a number of crises. The First World War created a sense of moral failure on the part of the Church, and efforts were made to evangelise to the working classes and demonstrate the relevance of Christianity to the lives of working

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2001), pp. 223-232; Jeffrey Cox, *The British Missionary Enterprise since 1700* (Abingdon, 2008), p. 171.

<sup>12</sup> Ian Goodfellow, *The Church Socialist League 1906-1923: Origins, Development and Disintegration*, unpublished PhD Thesis (Durham, 1983), p. 119.

<sup>13</sup> Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity, 1920-2000* (London, 2001), pp. 172-174; pp. 319-320.

people.<sup>14</sup> These activities were particularly driven by anxiety caused by the rise of radical politics,<sup>15</sup> and in many cases these endeavours overlapped with those of emerging socialist organisations.<sup>16</sup> In the 1930s, the Church was split between liberals such as William Temple and Cosmo Lang who sought closer cooperation with the Labour movement, and traditionalists, mostly parish priests, who resisted the political left. Only in the Church's condemnation of the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany were disputes put aside.<sup>17</sup> In order to appeal to the working classes, liturgy and elements of doctrine were simplified to make worship less arduous for congregations.<sup>18</sup> It has been argued that the Church of England began to decline at the beginning of the twentieth century,<sup>19</sup> but while falling congregation sizes give some credence to this view, Callum Brown makes a convincing case that religious feeling "penetrated deeply into the lives of the people" until the radical individualism of the 1960s precipitated Christianity's decline, as well as a fracturing of allegiance to political parties.<sup>20</sup>

After the Second World War, the Church became an important bulwark of the cultural Cold War, and Christianity was presented as a defining feature of Western civilisation, particularly of the United States and Britain, in the battle against godless communism. In this context, the pro-Soviet views of Johnson and Ecclestone's membership of the CPGB were seen by many traditional churchmen, for example

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<sup>14</sup> John Moorman, *A History of the Church in England* (London, 1980), pp. 416-417; Callum Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth Century Britain* (Harlow, 2006), pp. 116-117.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, *Religion and Society*, pp. 153-161.

<sup>16</sup> Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes*, p. 118.

<sup>17</sup> Brown, *Religion and Society*, pp. 145-150; Tom Lawson, 'The Anglican Understanding of Nazism 1933-1945: Placing the Church of England's Response to the Holocaust in Context', *Twentieth Century British History* 14 (2) (2003): 112-137.

<sup>18</sup> Brown, *Religion and Society*, pp. 139-145.

<sup>19</sup> Hugh McLeod, *Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City* (London, 1974); Alan Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain: A History of Secularisation of Modern Society* (London, 1980).

<sup>20</sup> Brown, *Religion and Society*, pp. 25-39; Samuel, *Lost World*, pp. 7-8.

Cyril Garbett, Archbishop of York between 1942 and 1955, as anathema, and though liberal churchmen continued to occupy senior posts in the Anglican hierarchy, Johnson's position especially created political difficulties for the Church.<sup>21</sup>

One problem that historians have encountered in studying clerical supporters of communism and the Soviet Union is that of categorisation. Usually, individuals such as Johnson have fallen into the broad category of 'fellow travellers', foreign supporters of the Soviet Union who did not join the Communist Party of their native countries. The fellow travellers' reasons for not doing so have varied greatly, and been subject to changing national and international political contexts. However, besides their non-membership, there is little commonality between the individuals who have been thus categorised. Even amongst clerical fellow travellers a wide variety of political outlooks and enthusiasms can be found.<sup>22</sup> Fellow travellers were sometimes embraced by the Soviet Union, but it was not uncommon for Soviet authorities to be wary of the commitment of such supporters to the Soviet cause. Trotsky once complained that "as regards a 'fellow traveller' the question always comes up – how far will he go?"<sup>23</sup>

A further categorisation that has been applied is that of crypto-communism, though the definition of this is anything but clear. In 1948, George Orwell played a role in identifying crypto-communists in Britain and abroad when he was asked by the

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<sup>21</sup> Dianne Kirby, 'Divinely Sanctioned: The Anglo-American Cold War Alliance and the Defence of Western Civilisation and Christianity, 1945-48', *Journal of Contemporary History* 35 (3) (July, 2000): 385-412; Dianne Kirby, 'Harry Truman's Religious Legacy: The Holy Alliance, Containment and the Cold War' in Dianne Kirby (ed.), *Religion and the Cold War* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2003), pp. 77-102; Dianne Kirby, *Church State and Propaganda: The Archbishop of York and International Relations, A Political Study of Cyril Forster Garbett, 1942-1955* (Hull, 1999); Brown, *Religion and Society*, pp. 161-168; pp. 177-179.

<sup>22</sup> Cate, *The Fellow-Travellers* (revised edition), pp. 256-263.

<sup>23</sup> Cate, *The Fellow-Travellers* (revised edition), p. 1.

Foreign Office's Information Research Department to provide a list of individuals that would be unsuitable as writers for the IRD because of their sympathy for the Soviet Union and communism.<sup>24</sup> The list did not include members of the CPGB, as their enthusiasm for the Soviet Union was obvious by the fact of their Party membership. Orwell had, by this time, become disenchanted with the Soviet Union, and though he remained a socialist and a supporter of the Labour Party, he was critical of Stalinism and its followers. A crypto-communist therefore appears to be defined by close support of the Soviet Union and of its policies, as expressed through national Communist Parties, but support which was not publicised, perhaps for political reasons.<sup>25</sup>

However, if crypto-communists and fellow travellers are defined by their non-membership of a Communist Party, how are we to categorise Alan Ecclestone, who joined the CPGB in 1948? Also, we must consider that there were a number of formal and informal barriers that will be explored in this thesis that prevented Cummings, Noel and Johnson from joining the Party. It is insufficient to categorise Ecclestone separately from the others as it is clear that there were commonalities in their outlook, and their positions as clergymen of the Church of England but there are also problems with labelling them Christian Socialists because that set of ideas encompassed a wide spectrum of policies and sympathies, in which our group were at the radical edge. It is the proposal of this thesis that it is more appropriate to discuss these clergymen as Christian Marxists as they all accommodated Marxism with their Christian faith. This categorisation does not necessitate membership of a

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<sup>24</sup> Andrew Defty, *Britain, America and Anti-Communist Propaganda 1945-53: The Information Research Department* (London, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, 'Orwell's List' *New York Review of Books*, 25 September 2003.

Communist Party but recognises that these clergymen supported communism and the Soviet Union from within and without the CPGB.

It is important also to consider both the international dimension and the specificity of the Anglican case. Another reason for the exclusive focus in this thesis on the Church of England is that the Anglican Church has received comparatively little attention where studies of the Soviet Union's relationship with churches and religious organisations are concerned. Anglicanism and the Church of England are all but omitted from Pons and Service's *Dictionary of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Communism*, while Roman Catholicism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Islam are all included.<sup>26</sup> The failure to detail especially Johnson's engagement with communism seems all the more odd since the *Dictionary* itself indicates no other priest of any other denomination with the long-standing public profile of Johnson who was in this respect unique. This suggests also a uniqueness of the Church of England in that it, unlike other churches, did not expel clergy that supported communism. The Vatican regarded communism as a significant threat and throughout our period of study European churches generally opposed the Soviet Union and communism.<sup>27</sup>

The international dimension is also important in that a number of our group, most particularly Johnson but also Cummings and Ecclestone, can be situated within research into the travels of westerners to the Soviet Union. Historians have

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<sup>26</sup> Silvio Pons and Robert Service (eds.), *A Dictionary of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Communism* (Oxford, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Dianne Kirby, 'Christian Anti-Communism', *Twentieth Century Communism* (forthcoming, 2014); Stéphanie Roulin, 'A Martyr Factory? Roman Catholic Crusade, Protestant Missions, and Anti-Communist Propaganda against Soviet Anti-Religious Policies, 1929-37', *Twentieth Century Communism* (forthcoming, 2014); H. M. Waddams, 'Communism and the Churches', *International Affairs* 25 (3) (July 1949): 295-306; Elisa A. Carrillo, 'The Italian Catholic Church and Communism, 1943-1963', *The Catholic Historical Review* 77 (4) (October 1991): 644-657; Edward Roslof, *Red Priests: Renovationism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Revolution, 1905-1946* (Bloomington, 2002).

examined the cultivation of western intellectuals and cultural figures as propagandists for the Soviet cause. The All-Union Society of Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) identified key western cultural figures across Europe and the USA that were sympathetic to the Soviet Union and to communism and used two key strategies to maximise their propaganda value. These individuals were invited on managed tours of the Soviet Union where they would witness all the triumphs of Soviet civilisation, while being denied access to anything that the authorities wished to keep concealed, the objective being that upon their return to their native lands they would publicise what they had seen. The second strategy was to supply statistical data and other material that these propagandists could then use in their official capacities as intellectuals, politicians, or indeed clergymen. Johnson was carefully cultivated by VOKS and was even awarded the Stalin Peace Prize, ostensibly for his role in the post-war peace movement but it should be seen as part reward and part incentive to continue propagandising for the Soviet Union. Johnson was more than willing to be convinced, and fully played the role required of him.<sup>28</sup> By contrast, Cummings was only a parish priest and apparently not deemed worthy of cultivation, leading to a rather different reaction when he visited the Soviet Union in 1938. Cummings returned home absolutely dejected.<sup>29</sup> Foreign travellers to the USSR such as Johnson have been widely criticised for accepting so readily what they were told by the Soviet authorities, even as evidence of Soviet repression became more widely known in the west.<sup>30</sup> Undoubtedly some of this criticism is

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<sup>28</sup> Ludmila Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920-40: From Red Square to the Left Bank* (Abingdon, 2007), pp. 142-174; John Butler, *The Red Dean of Canterbury: The Public and Private Faces of Hewlett Johnson* (London, 2011), pp. 190-192.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Susan Cummings and Michael Cummings, 16 July 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society* (London, 1997), p. 117; Paul Hollander, 'Political Pilgrimages: Their Meaning, Aftermath, and Linkages', *History of Communism in Europe* 1 (2010): 21-34; Michael Burleigh, *Sacred Causes: Religion and Politics from the European Dictators to Al Qaeda* (London, 2007), pp. 342-343.

warranted, but it has often prevented a more balanced analysis of the political outlook of the individuals in question,<sup>31</sup> as they have been dismissed before a reasonable investigation into their thought has been attempted. This thesis remedies this failing.

Although it is insufficient to categorise these clergymen as Christian Socialists per se, it is important to recognise their intellectual and theological inheritance, including that from nineteenth century Christian Socialism. The Christian Socialist revival would, in contrast to secular histories of the Labour Party,<sup>31</sup> inform the environment in which the Labour Party was formed, and Cummings and Noel in particular used the language of socialism to express their ideas.<sup>32</sup> However, our group also drew on a lineage of radical thought that encompassed Early Church Fathers and the teachings of Jesus,<sup>33</sup> a utopian interpretation of medieval society,<sup>34</sup> and the radical religious sects of the English Civil War.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, Cummings was using the seventeenth century as a point of reference in his thought prior to the broader turn to the seventeenth century that would occur during the 1930s.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Andrew Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party* (Basingstoke, 1997).

<sup>32</sup> Peter d'Alroy Jones, *The Christian Socialist Revival 1877-1914: Religion, Class, and Social Conscience in Late-Victorian Britain* (Princeton, 1968); Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians', pp. 42-49; Harold Wilson, *The Relevance of British Socialism* (London, 1964), p. 1; Tony Benn, *Arguments for Socialism* (Harmondsworth, 1980), p. 24, p. 33; Alan Wilkinson, *Christian Socialism: Scott Holland to Tony Blair* (London, 1998), pp xi-xiv, pp. 28-29.

<sup>33</sup> Kenneth Leech, 'Some Light from the Noel Archives', in Kenneth Leech (ed.), *Conrad Noel and the Catholic Crusade: A Critical Evaluation* (Croydon, 1993), pp. 43-55; Conrad Noel, *The Life of Jesus* (London, 1937).

<sup>34</sup> Garth Turner, 'Conrad Noel and Medieval English Martyrs of the People: Thomas Becket and John Ball', in Leech (ed.), *Conrad Noel and the Catholic Crusade*, pp. 57-70; Janet Batsleer, 'Nationalism, Violence, Identity and the Catholic Crusade', in Leech (ed.), *Conrad Noel and the Catholic Crusade*, pp. 71-83.

<sup>35</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London, 1972), pp. 86-120; Christopher Hill, 'The English Revolution and the Brotherhood of Man', in Christopher Hill (ed.), *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies and Interpretation of the English Revolution of the Seventeenth Century* (London, 2001), pp. 112-138.

<sup>36</sup> Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians', pp. 26-28.

Our group also participated directly in debates throughout our period of study on the philosophical and theological relationship between Christianity and Marxism. We are prevented from a full exploration of these debates by the limited scope of the present thesis, but certain contributions deserve attention for the influence they had on our group and the ways in which they framed the discussion. The 1935 volume *Christianity and the Social Revolution* included contributions from clergymen and philosophers that examined historical examples of radical socialism within religious movements, the attitude of communism to religion, and the role of the religion in future socialist society.<sup>37</sup> To the first objective, Noel contributed an essay on Jesus in which he discussed the building of the Kingdom of God on Earth which he argued was at the centre of Christ's ministry. Other essays discussed the presence of socialism in the primitive church, the middle ages, and interestingly Joseph Needham, the Chemist, contributed an essay on the levellers, much of which would form the basis for his pseudonymous *The Levellers and the English Revolution* in 1939.<sup>38</sup>

Another notable contributor to the volume was John Macmurray, who would later tour Republican Spain with Johnson and inspire much of Ecclestone's thinking. Macmurray achieved a certain prominence for his "provocative attempt to reconcile these historically incompatible streams of thought [Christianity and communism]",<sup>39</sup> but his Christianity was based on an interpretation of the religion of Jesus that shared much in common with that of Noel. Like Noel, Macmurray saw Jesus as a social revolutionary who sought the building of the Kingdom of the God on Earth. He

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<sup>37</sup> John Lewis, Karl Polanyi and Donald K. Kitchin (eds.), *Christianity and the Social Revolution* (London, 1935).

<sup>38</sup> Needham published the book under the pseudonym Henry Holorensaw.

<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth P. Lam, 'Does Macmurray Understand Marx?', *The Journal of Religion* 20 (1) (Jan., 1940), pp. 47-65, p. 47.

placed emphasis on practical activity over philosophising, and the importance of collective action for social improvement, and on the relational nature of human beings to one another. In this he drew upon the tradition of Kant and Marx, but he also acknowledged the influence of Christianity upon his thinking. However, he concluded that the established Church had lost touch with real Christianity in 1917, after receiving a hostile response to a sermon he preached on the need for reconciliation with Germany. He thereafter determined to remain a Christian without being a member of any church.<sup>40</sup>

In providing a conclusion to *Christianity and the Social Revolution*, Macmurray hoped to forge a synthesis of Christianity and communism, and argued that Christianity and communism must both be taken seriously as powerful social forces and that if individuals on both sides recognised the commonalities that each set of ideas shared, then a tremendous power could be harnessed to achieve radical social change. This he argued, drawing on Marx's emphasis on praxis,<sup>41</sup> could only come about with determined action, and if the reactionary elements within Christianity were to reform to become a force for revolutionary social change.<sup>42</sup>

In summary, this review demonstrates that there were important organisational similarities between religious organisations and political parties during our period of study, and that there were serious attempts made during the early twentieth century to understand the relationship between Christianity and Marxist socialism. We have

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<sup>40</sup> John Macmurray, *Creative Society: A Study of the Relation of Christianity to Communism* (London, 1935), pp. 88-89; John Macmurray, *The Form of the Personal*, Vol. 1: *The Self as Agent*; Vol. 2: *Persons in Relation* (London, 1957); John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion* (London, 1965).

<sup>41</sup> Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach' (1845) in Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, pp. 69-72.

<sup>42</sup> John Macmurray, 'Christianity and Communism: Towards a Synthesis' in Lewis, Polanyi and Kitchin (eds.), *Christianity and the Social Revolution*, pp. 505-526.

also seen that there has been a lack of engagement with the international dimension of the Church of England, for example in Pons and Service's *Dictionary*. We have also ascertained that there is a difficulty in defining these individuals as a collective group, since none of the conventional descriptive terms, fellow traveller, crypto-communist, or Christian Socialist, both encapsulates the common theological and philosophical outlook of our group of clergymen, and takes account of the differing political contexts in which they ministered, which allowed Ecclestone to join the CPGB and Johnson to travel widely and propagandise for the Soviet Union while Cummings and Noel largely remained in their parishes, supporters of communism but outside of the CPGB structure. This thesis will demonstrate that there were significant commonalities in the outlook of our group, and that therefore a more useful categorisation might be Christian Marxists.

### **Sources, Methodology and Structure**

A vital task of political biography is to place its subject within the differing milieu. This has been convincingly argued by Ben Pimlott, whose somewhat pessimistic conclusions on the prospects of biographical history in 1990 also included the injunction to select subjects discriminately.<sup>43</sup> He argued that less obvious, less prominent subjects might reveal more about their political contexts than those who simply achieved high office in their chosen career, and so a key task of the biographer is to identify such unobvious subjects for study. Our subjects have therefore been selected on a number of criteria, including the availability of source material, and the commonalities that exist in our group in terms of adherence to the

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<sup>43</sup> Ben Pimlott, 'The Future of Political Biography', *Political Quarterly* 61 (2) (1990), pp. 214-224.

Church of England, the accommodation of Christian faith with Marxist political views, and a common enthusiasm for the Soviet Union. With the exception of Johnson, all rose only to the level of parish priest.

This thesis draws on the collective biographical approach adopted by Gary Werskey's *The Visible College* which examines the lives and politics of five socialist scientists, the ways in which they accommodated socialism into their scientific work, as well as the commonalities in the approaches of each member of this group.<sup>44</sup> He finds that they effectively compartmentalised their politics and scientific work, and that this was supported by the CPGB, which encouraged its intellectual members to do 'good' scientific work. This thesis takes a similar approach, considering a range of issues through the lives and professional work of a defined group within a common trade, though our subjects lived and ministered in changing contexts over time in contrast to Werskey's cohort approach.

Sandra Stanley Holton has also utilised a collective biographical approach to enrich the study of the women's suffrage movement in Britain.<sup>45</sup> In discussing her approach, Holton suggests that the study of less prominent individuals allows us to develop a fuller picture of the activities of the organisations and individuals with which we are concerned. A biographical approach also allows us to fill gaps and inconsistencies in existing histories, both in terms of examining individuals that might otherwise be overlooked in histories of organisations, and in the failure to

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<sup>44</sup> Gary Werskey, *The Visible College: A Collective Biography of British Scientists and Socialists of the 1930s* (London, 1988).

<sup>45</sup> Sandra Stanley Holton, *Suffrage Days: Stories from the Women's Suffrage Movement* (London, 1996).

utilise source material from obscure provenances. A biographical approach allows us to address these problems.<sup>46</sup>

The form of this thesis is reminiscent of another collection of biographies of radical clergymen. Biographies of four prominent radical Anglicans, Thomas Hancock (1823-1903), Stewart Headlam (1847-1924), Charles Marson (1859-1914), and Conrad Noel, were included in a collection edited by Maurice Reckitt.<sup>47</sup>

Collectively, these biographies offer examples of priests that espoused radical interpretations of Christian scripture and adopted unconventional methods in order to undertake political activity, though the specifics of each man's activity varied. However, this volume constitutes a collection of biographies rather than a collective biography, as there is no attempt to offer a synthesis of the essays, each of which is written by a different author. The volume also regards its subjects as Christian Socialists, and none of the essays attempt to problematize that classification. This thesis distinguishes Noel from Hancock, Headlam and Marson both because he was more radical in his politics and because of the international context in which he ministered, specifically, the formation and entrenchment of the Soviet Union.

In constructing our biographies of Cummings, Noel, Johnson and Ecclestone, we draw upon life writings, letters, newspapers and interviews. A range of approaches have been used to supplement the available primary material. For example, in Cummings' case very few personal papers survive, as his family destroyed many papers in the early 1950s for fear of being found in possession of material that, being related to the Communist Party of Great Britain, could be construed as seditious in

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<sup>46</sup> Holton, *Suffrage Days*, pp. 244-249.

<sup>47</sup> Maurice B. Reckitt (ed.), *For Christ and the People: Studies of Four Socialist Priests and Prophets of the Church of England between 1870 and 1930* (London, 1968).

the atmosphere of the early Cold War. However, Cummings' activities were often reported in the local press, and in using such sources, attention has been paid to both leading articles and to correspondence columns, from which it has been possible to gauge public opinion and responses to his activities.

Where there is a shortage of personal papers, as in the cases of Cummings and Ecclestone, oral history methodologies have been used. Cummings' grandson and great-granddaughter have been interviewed, and testimonies from Ecclestone's former parishioners have been collected. In collecting these testimonies, a 'funnel' approach had been employed, beginning with general discussion on the activities of the clergymen concerned before moving to the specific details of certain issues. Following the collection of these testimonies, efforts have been made to verify the information collected by seeking confirmation from oral and documentary sources. By contrast, in Johnson and Noel's cases, sizeable collections of personal papers remain. Attention has been paid to notes and correspondence, which cast light on their views on communism, theology, and the campaigns they were involved with. Lack of source material has been the primary reason for discounting other possible figures, such as William Bryn Thomas (1899-unknown), F. H. Amphlett Micklewright (1908-1992), and Etienne Watts (1889-1965). These individuals also combined Anglican priesthood and Marxism, but it has been impossible to collect sufficient material to construct detailed biographies. However, where their activity overlaps that of our group, they will feature in the present thesis.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> William Bryn Thomas, *Between Two Civilisations* (Pembroke Dock, 1969); Gillian Hawtin, *F. H. Amphlett Micklewright: A Memoir* (London, 1999). No published work exists on Watts.

In addition, we draw on two biographies of Johnson, as well as his own autobiography, Noel's autobiography and Tim Gorrings's biography of Alan Ecclestone.<sup>49</sup> These works provide narrative detail, but are lacking in some respects, such as the scarcity of detail Noel provides on his political activities. Collectively, though these life writings are sympathetic and sometimes defensive of their subjects, they contribute important narrative details as well as insights on how their subjects understood the relationship between Christianity and communism, and their activities that followed from this understanding. They also make reference to the Church context in which these men ministered, but often do not fully interrogate their political contexts, or what their activities indicate about the nature of the Church of England as an organisation. Building on these and other sources, this thesis does so, ultimately concluding that our group and other like-minded clergy represented a distinct movement of clergy within the Church of England that not only sought to but succeeded in accommodating their faith and their politics.

This thesis deliberately does not examine clergymen of other Christian denominations. Firstly, this is in order to ensure that the thesis can address questions such as the Church's attitude towards both radical socialism and to priests who espoused radical socialism in light of the fact that the Church of England was and is an established Church and as such plays a role within the governing apparatus of Britain. This thesis, being concerned with the ways in which priests reconciled faith and socialism, addresses these issues within the context of the established Church. Secondly, the narrow focus on Church of England clergy is to ensure that the thesis

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<sup>49</sup> Robert Hughes, *The Red Dean: The Life and Riddle of Dr. Hewlett Johnson, born 1874, died 1966, Dean of Canterbury 1931 to 1963* (Worthing, 1987); Butler, *The Red Dean*; Hewlett Johnson, *Searching For Light* (London, 1968); Conrad Noel, *An Autobiography* (London, 1946); Tim Gorrings, *Alan Ecclestone: Priest as Revolutionary* (Sheffield, 1994).

is not distracted with discussions of the widely differing structures and organisation of other Christian denominations.

It should of course be noted that the Church of England was not the only Church to engage with Marxism. In many cases, Christians reacted with hostility to communism. The Roman Catholic Church in particular has been highlighted for its hostility towards communism and the Soviet Union. However, it is also true that many Roman Catholics were involved in the Christian-Marxist Dialogue of the 1960s, which, at an informal, grassroots level, worked to find areas of common interest and mutual agreement between Christians and Marxists.<sup>50</sup> Many nonconformists also accepted Marxism, for example John Lewis, the former Unitarian minister and local groups organiser for the Left Book Club between 1936 and 1940, joined the CPGB in 1939,<sup>51</sup> and Thomas Evan Nicholas, the Welsh Congregationalist who joined the CPGB in 1920.<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately, as nonconformists such men lie beyond the scope of our study.

The language used to express such ideas was subject to change during the period of study. For instance, Cummings and Noel both described themselves as ‘socialists’ before the Russian Revolution, though for both their socialism was distinctly Marxist in character. Therefore, this thesis generally describes our group’s views in their own terms, elucidating these where necessary. However, in general terms, Marxism may be understood as the political programme for the establishment of a communist society characterised by for example common ownership, cooperative production,

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<sup>50</sup> David McLellan, ‘Christian-Marxist Dialogue’, *New Blackfriars* 49 (577) (June 1968): 462-467.

<sup>51</sup> Morgan, Cohen and Flinn, *Communists and British Society*, p. 264.

<sup>52</sup> Meic Stephens, ‘Nicholas, Thomas Evan (1879-1971)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004) online edition, accessed 3 May 2010.

distribution according to need and the abolition of private property and waged work.

The uppercase 'Communist' denotes membership of a Communist Party.

The remainder of this thesis comprises four biographical chapters, examining each of our group in turn, and a short conclusion. Following this introduction, we examine Robert William Cummings, who has received little attention due to a dearth of source material.<sup>53</sup> He was ordained in 1896 and served several curacies in working-class districts in the Midlands before being granted the living of Owthorne, near Hull, in 1906, and the living of St. John's, Hurst, in 1914, where he remained until his death in 1938. He was a member of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) as early as 1903, standing unsuccessfully for election in 1904. He was drawn to Marxism as a result of experiencing the poverty that existed in the working-class parishes he ministered to, and he came to see Marxism as the practical means to achieve Christian ends.

We then consider Conrad Noel, the 'Red Vicar' of Thaxted from 1910 until his death in 1942. Having previously been a member of the ILP, in 1911 he joined the British Socialist Party, which went on to become the CPGB, though he resigned in 1912. However, he remained a close supporter of the CPGB and of the Soviet Union, and it is probable that had the Party's rules not barred clergymen at this time, he would have remained a member. Known for his tendency to use shocking language and imagery, Noel argued that the Church of England should be a 'red army' fighting for God and Christ, and in 1922 stirred controversy by hanging the flag of Sinn Fein and the Red Flag alongside the Union Flag in Thaxted Church. This led to

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<sup>53</sup> The only study of Cummings to date is Alice Lock, 'Robert W. Cummings, the 'Communist' Vicar of Hurst', in Chris Ford, Michael Powell and Terry Wyke (eds.), *The Church in Cottonopolis: Essays to Mark the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Diocese of Manchester* (Manchester, 1997).

demonstrations and even death threats against Noel, who defended his actions in the pamphlet 'The Battle of the Flags'.<sup>54</sup>

Both Cummings and Noel were established clergymen by the time of the Russian Revolution and both saw the establishment of the Soviet Union as evidence of the impending realisation of a society that would be built on Christian principles. This same view would be expressed most publicly by Hewlett Johnson, Dean of Canterbury between 1931 and 1963, the subject of our fourth chapter. Johnson, as Dean of Canterbury, was the most senior in the Church of England hierarchy of our group. He was also an effective self-publicist who travelled extensively to the Soviet Union, China and elsewhere, and who was cultivated by the Soviet authorities as a useful propagandist. Johnson was believed that the Soviet Union was establishing a new world order, founded on principles that Johnson argued were fundamentally Christian. Johnson's prominence in the Church of England hierarchy allows us to investigate the permissiveness or otherwise of the Church of England to clergy that held views such as Johnson's. We will examine what efforts were made to silence Johnson, and why they were apparently unsuccessful. Was this because the Church was too weak to impose discipline on clergy on matters other than dogma and liturgy, or secure enough that he could safely be ignored?

Our final substantive chapter examines the only clergyman in our group to have joined the CPGB. Alan Ecclestone's politics and faith were influenced by Conrad Noel's Catholic Crusade, though it dissolved in 1936 as Ecclestone took up his first living in Frizington, Cumbria. He began a Parish Meeting, inviting members of the

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<sup>54</sup> Conrad Noel, *The Battle of the Flags: A Study in Christian Politics* (London, 1922).

parish to meet and discuss religion, faith and politics, drawing the attention of Leslie Hunter, the Bishop of Sheffield, who persuaded Ecclestone to take the living of Darnall in Sheffield in 1942. Ecclestone supported the Attlee government in 1945, but quickly concluded that it had ceased to be 'socialist' in both means and ends. As a result, he joined the CPGB in 1948, believing that it was the only party that would seek to establish socialism. He was closely involved in Party activities at a local and national level, from selling the Daily Worker on the streets of Sheffield, to bringing the second World Peace Congress to Sheffield in 1950 before it was forced to relocate to Warsaw. Ecclestone stood unsuccessfully as a CPGB candidate in Sheffield Council elections on five occasions in the 1960s, and played a role in the local Christian-Marxist Dialogue, at that time taking place across Europe, but which in many ways represented an evolution of the kind of topics discussed at Parish Meetings he had chaired since the 1930s. Ecclestone's membership of the CPGB allows us to examine how his Christianity could be reconciled with Party membership, and the impact of this on his ministry.

## **“Proud Socialist Parson”<sup>1</sup>: Robert William Cummings**

The revival of Christian Socialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to renewed debates on the involvement of priests in politics, and the relationship between Christianity and radical socialism. Clergymen were encouraged to engage with social issues in their ministry, but those that adopted radical positions often found themselves subject to hostility and animosity.<sup>2</sup> The career of Robert William Cummings demonstrates the ways in which clergy of the radical left at this time accommodated their faith and politics, and attracted negative attention for parading their political views. He was ordained in 1896 and served several curacies in working-class districts, before becoming Vicar of Owthorne, Withernsea, near Hull, in 1906. He came to see Marxism as the practical application of Christian faith, and he was at times drawn to party politics, first the Independent and then mainstream Labour parties and later the Communist Party of Great Britain, though membership of the latter was impossible.

Cummings’ ideas on religion and politics developed while serving curacies in Birmingham and Norwich, and the poverty he saw the congregations endure led him to publicly declare while vicar of Owthorne that he subscribed to a Marxist doctrine of Christian Socialism. Although this commitment appears to have diminished in his last years at Owthorne, it was after Cummings had made this accommodation between Christianity and socialism that he was granted the living of Hurst, Ashton-under-Lyne, and in this post, which he held until his death in 1938, Cummings

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<sup>1</sup> Cummings’ description of himself, *Ashton Reporter*, 4 May 1917.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Mayor, *Churches and the Labour Movement* (London, 1967), p. 198; Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Modern State* (London, 1935); Wilkinson, *Christian Socialism*; Peter d’Alroy Jones, *The Christian Socialist Revival, 1877-1914*.

regularly engaged in political activity, though as we shall see, his enthusiasm waxed and waned during his ministry.

This chapter first examines Cummings' early influences, including the Christian Socialist environment, his Church posts, and his early political involvements, culminating in his accommodation of Marxism and Christianity. We then examine the ways in which this set of ideas informed Cummings' ministry and political activities during his time as Vicar of Hurst, considering his engagement in local politics, especially his Social Crusades (1908-1912, 1917-1923, 1932) and his decision to stand as a Labour candidate in the 1919 municipal election. We also consider his reaction to the Russian Revolutions of 1917, his views on the Soviet Union, and his relationship with the CPGB, as well as the responses of the congregation and his superiors in the Church hierarchy.

This investigation utilises source material from the collections of Tameside Local Studies and Archives, the Working Class Movement Library, and the Cummings family.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, in the early 1950s, Cummings' family destroyed most of his personal papers for fear of being discovered with a quantity of material that could be construed as seditious in the atmosphere of the early Cold War. It appears that the opposition that Hewlett Johnson was attracting at that time was a motivating factor.<sup>4</sup> However, we draw on work published by Alice Lock, including an interview with Cummings' daughter-in-law, Ethel, and a chapter published in 1997.<sup>5</sup> We have also

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<sup>3</sup> TLSA DD94 Papers of the Local History Group of Ashton-under-Lyne Civic Society; WCML uncatalogued file Christianity/Box 1.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Susan Cummings and Michael Cummings, 16 July 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Alice Lock, 'Robert W. Cummings, the 'Communist' Vicar of Hurst' in Ford, Powell and Wyke (eds.), *The Church in Cottonopolis*; Alice Lock interview with Ethel Cummings, 4 July 1994, TLSA Oral History Tape 178.

the local press, and it has been possible to conduct new interviews with Michael and Susan Cummings, Cummings' grandson and great-granddaughter respectively.

### **Influences and Developing Ideas**

Little is known about Cummings' family background. He was born in Liverpool in 1868 and his birth certificate reveals that neither of his parents could write, and he relied on a Church Scholarship for his education at the London College of Divinity from 1895 to 1896.<sup>6</sup> He was ordained in 1896 and held several curacies in working-class districts in Birmingham and Norwich.<sup>7</sup> Here he was exposed to socialist ideas and in 1903 he was involved in ILP meetings and announced his intention to vote for the Labour candidate in the 1904 by-election, a decision that appears to have generated a little controversy, not because of the Party Cummings supported, but because he, a priest, was involving himself in politics.<sup>8</sup> Both his childhood and postings in working-class districts allowed him to see the poverty endured by the workers and unemployed, and this drew him into membership of the British Socialist Party shortly after its foundation in 1911, though he left in 1912 to concentrate on his clerical work after finding the working classes of Owthorne apathetic towards the establishment of socialism.<sup>9</sup>

The resurgence of Christian Socialism 1890s and 1910s also had an influence.

Groups such as the Christian Social Union had become both vocal and influential,

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Susan Cummings, 16 July 2010; Lock, 'Robert W. Cummings, the 'Communist' Vicar of Hurst', p. 248.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Ethel Cummings by Alice Lock, 4 July 1994; Interview with Susan Cummings, 16 July 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Susan Cummings, 16 July 2010; *Manchester Guardian*, 4 January 1904.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Susan Cummings, 16 July 2010; *Sunday Chronicle*, 8 December 1912.

and stressed the social implications of Christianity, calling on clergy to engage with social issues for moral reasons and as a strategy of maintaining the relevance of churches to the emerging industrial and urban working classes. Concern with social, economic and political issues had become an integral part of the clergyman's role,<sup>10</sup> but this did not necessarily mean an inevitable drift to socialism in terms of party membership in all cases. Many clergy, indeed possibly the majority, rejected doctrinal socialism and socialist political parties while taking a greater interest in local social issues.<sup>11</sup>

We know little more about Cummings' ministry and politics until 1906, when he became vicar of Owthorne, by which time his understanding of socialism provided for him a practical basis for the application of a very real, but otherwise mystical, Christian faith. Faith, vital though it was, provided no practicable and feasible framework for the work of a clergyman:

The preaching of the bliss of heaven amid the sordid brutalities and squalid abomination of our modern capitalistic hell always seemed to me to ring of insincerity. The doctrine of the Kingdom of God, which was the central doctrine of the teaching of Jesus, interpreted only in a mystical and spiritual sense, failed to satisfy my conscience.<sup>12</sup>

Put simply, socialism provided for Cummings at this time a social, political and economic interpretation of the doctrine of the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>10</sup> Peter d'Alroy Jones, *The Christian Socialist Revival, 1877-1914*; Stephen Mayor, *Churches and the Labour Movement*; p. 198.

<sup>11</sup> Lock, 'Robert W. Cummings, The 'Communist Vicar of Hurst'', p. 270, pp. 274-275; Mayor, *Churches and the Labour Movement*, p. 346.

<sup>12</sup> *Sunday Chronicle*, 8 December 1912.

Such was his conviction in the doctrine of socialism that he was a signatory, with over one hundred other Christian ministers, including Conrad Noel, to a manifesto on Socialism and its role within the Christian faith. The document read:

We, the undersigned ministers of Christian Churches of various denominations, desire to make this declaration in view of the widely circulated suggestion, which has been made in the Press and elsewhere, that the Socialism we believe in differs fundamentally from the Socialism advocated by the recognised Socialist Organisations.

We declare that the Socialism we believe in (sometimes called ‘Christian Socialism’) involves the public ownership and management of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and is therefore essentially the same Socialism as that which is held by Socialists throughout the world.

Our Socialism is not less earnest nor less complete because it is inspired by our Christianity. The central teaching of Socialism is a matter of economics, and may therefore be advocated by all men, whether they be Christians or unbelievers; yet we feel, as ministers of the Christian faith, that this economic doctrine is in perfect harmony with our faith, and we believe that its advocacy is sanctioned and indeed required of us, by the implications of our religion.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Socialism: Manifesto by Christian Ministers’ (n.d., [1908]), WCML, Christianity/Box 1. The “widely circulated suggestion...that the socialism we believe in differs fundamentally from the Socialism advocated by the recognised Socialist Organisations” refers to claims being made in the early twentieth century that radical socialism of the type expressed by organisations such as the ILP was incompatible with the Christian faith. For example, in response to the publication of this Manifesto, one observer wrote that “the modern tendency to bind Christianity to the Socialist scheme

The influence of the revival of Christian Socialism and the emphasis this placed on social work, as well as Cummings' interest in finding a practical strategy for building the Kingdom of God led to his first experiment in political activity, his first 'Social Crusade' (1908-1912). The Crusade combined religious zeal and socialist fervour and was established to "advance to the destruction of the mammon-god" and to preach a "message of industrial redemption". The Crusaders hired a hall in which to hold meetings, lectures and readings in order to spread the message of socialism to the working people of Hull, and work for local reform of the capitalist economic system into a socialist system in which all resources and means of production would be owned and administered in common.<sup>14</sup>

However, Cummings' efforts to establish local Marxism would be disappointed. Met with apathy on the part of many working people and by hostility from some, Cummings and the Crusaders were forced to realise that many of the people they wished to mobilise to the cause of building the Kingdom of God had no interest in participating and often exploited the faith and work of the Crusaders themselves. Cummings himself wrote:

The affirmation of the Socialist is not one proposition, but two...Not only that to establish socialism would be good; but that we are good enough to establish it...Yet after years of very close, very sustained and very intimate acquaintance with the comrades

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is not only profoundly irrational in itself, but threatens to bring grave discredit on religion". Another highlighted the atheism of radical socialists, arguing that this alone made the two philosophies incompatible. See *The Times*, 22 January 1908.

<sup>14</sup> *Sunday Chronicle*, 8 December 1912.

of this great [working class] movement, I will dare to express my profoundest scepticism as to the truth of the second proposition.<sup>15</sup>

Thoroughly disappointed, Cummings left the BSP in 1912 in order “the better to cooperate with that Divine Power by Whose help alone the Cooperative Commonwealth of the Socialist, which is the basis of the Christian Kingdom of God on Earth, can be built up”. Cummings did not believe that socialism was a lost cause, only that the working people that he sought to help were not ready to work towards it. For this reason, he vowed to rededicate himself to his clerical and ministerial work in the service of God as a way of preparing himself and the world for the time when the socialist Kingdom of God might be built.<sup>16</sup> The similarity between Cummings’ language here and that of the radical religious sects that developed during the period of the English Civil War is deliberate. Cummings was familiar with the histories of the Levellers and the Diggers, and in his efforts to mobilise his parishioners in his Social Crusade in Owthorne, and later in Hurst, he took on the role of a latter day Winstanley, providing spiritual guidance in what he hoped would become a Christian communist community.<sup>17</sup> Cummings’ interest in emulating Winstanley is of further interest as it pre-dates the turn to the seventeenth century of many British Marxists who would, in the 1930s, draw inspiration for their own movement from their seventeenth century ancestors.<sup>18</sup> The Civil War sects remained a point of reference for Cummings in his later efforts to build the Kingdom of God on Earth.

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<sup>15</sup> *Sunday Chronicle*, 8 December 1912.

<sup>16</sup> *Sunday Chronicle*, 8 December 1912.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Susan Cummings, 16 July 2010; David Petegorsky, *Left-Wing Democracy in the English Civil War* (London, 1940); Henry Holorenshaw, *The Levellers and the English Revolution* (London, 1939).

<sup>18</sup> Samuel, ‘British Marxist Historians’, pp. 26-28.

## The Marxist Vicar of Hurst

Unsurprisingly, Cummings acquired a reputation as a radical during his time at Owthorne, resulting in opposition to his preferment to St. John's, Hurst, in 1914. The living was alternately the gift of the Bishop of Manchester and the Crown, and the previous incumbent, Thomas Butterworth, had been appointed by the Bishop, so upon his retirement, the new vicar was to be selected by the Crown.<sup>19</sup> Some parishioners reacted angrily that Cummings, a radical outsider, might be given the living, and sent a petition of 3000 signatures in favour of W. H. Cooper, curate of St. John's under Butterworth, to the Prime Minister, Herbert Henry Asquith, but this unsuccessful and Cummings was appointed.

The evangelical Bishop of Manchester, Edmund Arbuthnott Knox, was another potential source of opposition. Although Knox was president of the Manchester branch of the CSU he did not fully agree with the movement's leaders, and socialist clergy in the diocese were often doubtful of their Bishop's support.<sup>20</sup> To forestall potential opposition, Cummings wrote to the local newspaper, the *Ashton Reporter*, describing himself as a "definite evangelical churchman", and pledged that "in my future ministry (as in my present) while not depreciating the social side of the Church's activities, my chief interest will be in its spiritual mission." On the subject of his socialism and the Social Crusade he closed his letter with a postscript: "My adventure into socialism came to an end about three years ago."<sup>21</sup> It is possible that

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<sup>19</sup> Lock, 'Robert W. Cummings, the 'Communist' Vicar of Hurst', p. 249.

<sup>20</sup> *The Scotsman*, 18 January 1937; Lock, 'Robert W. Cummings, the 'Communist' Vicar of Hurst', p. 249; Arthur Dobb, *Like A Mighty Tortoise: History of the Diocese of Manchester* (Manchester, 1978).

<sup>21</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 13 June 1914.

these undertakings mollified potential critics, and reassured Downing Street that his radical activities at Owthorne had been a short-lived phase. The critics were calmed, and the *Ashton Reporter* commented that attendance had been high at Cummings' first sermons at St. John's and that the congregations had been impressed by the "eloquence and sincerity." The article concluded that "Hurst will gain by Mr Cummings' ministrations."<sup>22</sup>

However, his first years at Hurst did see some controversy. Cummings' disillusionment at Owthorne had been the result of the poor reception his social mission had received, but the outbreak of war shortly after his arrival in Hurst prompted him to re-engage with social issues. Cummings believed that the war indicated the need for a spiritual revival and that hostilities would not be brought to a successful conclusion until Britain overthrew its capitalist economic model and founded a new socialist system based on moral principles.<sup>23</sup> Cummings did not turn to pacifism as many socialists did at the outbreak of war, instead arguing that Britain was justified in curtailing the aggression of an expansionist Germany.<sup>24</sup> He did not however use his sermons to condemn Germany absolutely, attracting the criticism of W. A. Parry, vicar of the neighbouring parish of St. James', Ashton. Parry castigated Cummings as "the Hurst Germanophile Mandarin"<sup>25</sup> and criticised his social preaching:

In these days when men with no sense of responsibility and no capacity for leadership, but whose gift is that they can spout out

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<sup>22</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 1 August 1914. The same article noted that W. H. Cooper, the former curate of St. John's, had been granted the living of Owthorne, Cummings' former parish.

<sup>23</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 5 August 1916.

<sup>24</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 5 May 1917.

<sup>25</sup> *St. James' Parish Magazine*, June 1918; Lock, 'Robert W. Cummings, the 'Communist' Vicar of Hurst', p. 253.

their nauseating poison in roaring torrents, and whose delight is to set class against class...<sup>26</sup>

Cummings' conviction that the war demonstrated the need for a spiritual revival reignited his interest in social work. For Cummings, the Russian Revolutions of 1917 were indicative of a spiritual revival in Russia, and so in late 1917, believing that many working people were at best apathetic towards religion and at worst hostile to it because of the forms it had taken in the organised church, Cummings launched a new Social Crusade (1917-1923).<sup>27</sup> On the origins of this Crusade, he explained that "the war changed the world beyond our wildest dreams and has brought the possibility of the establishment of socialism at least a century nearer," and on its socialism, he continued:

I was a socialist before I joined any party and I remain a socialist after I have left. To me socialism is not a party but a spiritual ideal...Nor do I regard socialism as politics. Socialism is the strategy of economic reconstruction; politics are its tactics. Socialism is a long range ideal, and has more affinity with religion than with politics.<sup>28</sup>

This conception of socialism as analogous with religion is an important concept. For Cummings, the socialism he advocated was not attached to any political party, but a strategy for the achievement of a spiritual goal, the establishment of a moral society based on communal production and distribution according to need. This Marxist interpretation of socialism clearly puts his views in line with those of the Communist

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<sup>26</sup> *St James' Parish Magazine*, March 1918.

<sup>27</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 6 October 1917.

<sup>28</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 11 May 1918.

Party, though his assertion that socialism was not affixed to any party is one explanation for his non-membership of the CPGB.

Little is known about the identity and profile of Cummings' followers in this Social Crusade, officially known as the Guild of Civic Service. Initial membership was given by the *Ashton Reporter* as 57, comprised mainly of socialists in the regular congregation, but Social Crusade services at St. John's attracted several hundred working-class parishioners to St. John's who were not regular churchgoers. One Guild member identified by the *Reporter* was Lewis Watson, a bricklayer who was also a trade unionist and a member of the ILP.<sup>29</sup> The Guild was primarily concerned with housing and rents, and with battling the "organised campaign of robbery" by private landlords in Hurst.<sup>30</sup> The Crusaders sought to persuade Hurst District Council to begin a large-scale house building programme to alleviate the dual problems of poor quality and under-provision of housing, and under pressure from the Guild, the Council did resolve to build 200 new homes but seemed uninterested and lackadaisical where the specifics of planning the scheme were concerned, despite the widely-accepted assumption that it would mitigate social unrest in the town.<sup>31</sup> Cummings proposed new homes be built on the edge of town and provided with good transport links to places of work, but the Council procrastinated when it came to locating a suitable site for building.<sup>32</sup>

While the Council dragged their feet, Cummings criticised their resistance and the greed of pernicious landlords and landowners, who had a vested interest in

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<sup>29</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 3 November 1917; Lock, 'Robert W. Cummings, the 'Communist' Vicar of Hurst', p. 274.

<sup>30</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 27 October 1917.

<sup>31</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 16 March 1918; 27 October 1917.

<sup>32</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 2 November 1918.

restricting the availability of homes in Hurst and Ashton.<sup>33</sup> As the campaign became more prominent, so did opposition both to the Guild and to Cummings personally. At one meeting, Cummings tried to explain that the Guild recognised not all landlords were pernicious, and that they only sought to combat a small number of exploitative landlords. But even as he said this, he was forced to leave the stage to speak with a heckler, who called him “a disgrace to the Church.” Cummings replied, “is a churchman only to be the champion of the property owners?” which drew, according to the *Ashton Reporter*, “loud applause”. Despite this support, the opposition was extreme. The *Reporter* even indicated, though did not elaborate, that there had existed in November 1917 a plot to kidnap Cummings to prevent the Guild from beginning, though whether there was a serious plot or merely a farcical rumour is unclear.<sup>34</sup>

Opposition to the Guild came not only from the middle classes and property owners, though theirs was usually more vocal and visible, but also from working people. In January 1918, a letter in the *Ashton Reporter* argued that there was an element of danger in Cummings’ political activity and preaching. This letter was coloured by the context of the First World War, as the writer suggested that Cummings’ “preaching anything likely to create class hatred” was dangerous during a war that had “consumed not only men from the humble cottage, but also the aristocracy from mansions.”<sup>35</sup>

A great deal of criticism was raised at the annual vestry meeting in April 1918, the first after the foundation of the Guild. Such was the attendance that the meeting

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<sup>33</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 19 October 1918; 26 October 1918.

<sup>34</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 3 November 1917.

<sup>35</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 26 January 1918.

could not be held in the vestry and had to be moved to the Sunday School classroom. Many members of the congregation that had attended St. John's before Cummings' arrival objected to his changes. In particular, they sought a return to conservative, evangelical practices and services. Objections were raised against the personnel Cummings had installed in posts such as Church Warden, and against the preaching of socialism in services as well as the Guild for Civic Service itself. Tensions ran so high at the meetings that one woman was witnessed attempting to attack Cummings with her umbrella.<sup>36</sup> These scenes were repeated later that month when a large crowd gathered outside the Sunday School demanding that the teachers that Cummings had appointed and replaced by candidates chosen by the congregation. Cummings was unable to contain the disturbance and was compelled to call on the police.<sup>37</sup> This prompted further criticism of Cummings in the press, one critic writing:

Fetch the police, fetch the police! No this is not the urgent demand of a resenting conservatism to drive off the onslaught of the Red Guard; it is the cry of a revolutionary Bolshevik ecclesiastic to turn out his men and women's class on a peaceful (or what should have been a peaceful) Sunday afternoon.<sup>38</sup>

Cummings' support for the Soviet Union, examined in greater detail below, clearly informed this criticism, but Cummings chose to cast such controversy in a positive

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<sup>36</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 6 April 1918. Similar trouble was expected at the vestry meeting in April 1919, but there was no trouble. The meeting concluded that the members of St. John's were happy with their progress as a socialist church, a position that was affirmed in the press report. See *Ashton Reporter*, 3 May 1919.

<sup>37</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 20 April 1918.

<sup>38</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 4 May 1918.

light, as a demonstration that the Church in Hurst was forcing the local population to engage with social and economic debates.<sup>39</sup>

The public prominence of Cummings' Crusade led to a renewed feud with Parry.<sup>40</sup> Parry was a traditional Tory who had spoken often since October 1917 on the dangers of Bolshevism and warning that such a political doctrine would spell disaster for Britain. Cummings was critical of clergymen who defended social inequality and as a manifestation of the will of God,<sup>41</sup> and Parry thus became a target for Cummings' criticism. Parry took particular offence to Cummings' description of him as a "well-fed ecclesiastic" and defended himself by telling the *Ashton Reporter* that he ate less than his ration book allowed.<sup>42</sup> He complained that the Guild of Civic Service had been established as a distraction from the war and from the sons of Hurst who were fighting in the trenches.<sup>43</sup> This claim may have rung hollow to those that knew Cummings however, as at the time his eldest son, Leslie, was a member of the 'Young Soldiers', an organisation designed to lead young people to volunteer. Indeed, in Leslie's case it was successful.<sup>44</sup>

Parry called on dissatisfied members of the St. John's congregation to instead attend services at St. James', where they could be sure of hearing a "message of peace".

Parry also invited parents to transfer their children from the St. John's Sunday

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<sup>39</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 4 May 1918.

<sup>40</sup> The parish of St. James', like St. John's, was home to a large working-class population, many of whom were dependant on the Whittaker family mills, and was governed by a Tory-dominated District Council.

<sup>41</sup> Lock, 'Robert W. Cummings, the 'Communist' Vicar of Hurst', pp. 270-271; *Ashton Reporter*, 29 October 1921.

<sup>42</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 6 April 1918.

<sup>43</sup> *St. James' Parish Magazine*, April 1918.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Susan Cummings, 16 July 2010.

School to that of St. James', if only temporarily, "until this tyranny be overpast".<sup>45</sup> This appeal was made in the *Ashton Reporter* and Parry argued that Cummings' politics were incompatible with his Christianity and perhaps expected, in writing "until this tyranny be overpast", that such views would lead to Cummings' dismissal in the near future. Cummings published a reply a week later, explaining that, notwithstanding his statement of June 1914, he had never completely renounced socialism as a doctrine in the years between 1912 and 1917 but that he had found few opportunities to pursue it as a practical programme in the environment in which he ministered. The conjunction of the Russian Revolution and the outbreak of war however had persuaded him to renew his political preaching.<sup>46</sup>

It is possible that many people did leave the congregation of St. John's at this time, but it is equally possible that many people, who had not previously attended church services at St. John's or elsewhere, were drawn in to form a new congregation.

During the Industrial Revolution, many new Anglican and nonconformist parishes had been created throughout the North West. These new churches had to compete with existing churches to form congregations, and this often meant building them from nothing. In this context, many new churches naturally focused on the rapidly increasing urban and industrial populations to fill their pews. Cummings' Social Crusade was successful in generating working-class support for and participation in Church life.<sup>47</sup> These working people were welcomed into Cummings' congregation and for their part many such working-class churchgoers were glad to have found a

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<sup>45</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 4 May 1918.

<sup>46</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 11 May 1918.

<sup>47</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 11 May 1918.

church that they felt was relevant to their everyday lives, and gave them a practical way of incorporating spirituality into their lives.<sup>48</sup>

Conversely, Cummings found himself the recipient of animosity from industrialists, including John and Oldham Whittaker, who owned two mills in Ashton-under-Lyne. Hurst itself had largely been the creation of the Whittaker family, who provided jobs and housing for much of the population and had come to dictate social, political and religious life in Hurst. Oldham Whittaker, an Anglican, had part financed the construction of St. John's and had been the first Vicar's Warden. Both brothers were Liberals, and resented the preaching of socialism in the parish.<sup>49</sup> One of their employees, Robert Craig, the manager at Whittaker's Mill, orchestrated militant opposition to Cummings in June 1918 when he urged dissatisfied members of the St. John's congregation not to transfer to St. James' but to show their disapproval of Cummings by walking out of the church during the service. This call was however made in advance in the *Ashton Reporter*,<sup>50</sup> and, having sought legal advice on whether to admit Craig to the service, the church wardens prevented Craig from entering and requested an assurance that he would not so disturb the service. In the subsequent argument, Cummings was forced to call the police in order to prevent further disruption. While Craig was detained outside, Cummings continued with the service, but many communicants persisted with Craig's plan, the *Ashton Reporter* commenting that many of those who walked out did so while making "offensive gestures".<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Lock, 'Robert W. Cummings, the 'Communist' Vicar of Hurst', p. 256.

<sup>49</sup> Lock, 'Robert W. Cummings, the 'Communist' Vicar of Hurst', p. 250.

<sup>50</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 1 June 1918.

<sup>51</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 8 June 1918.

The dispute between Craig and Cummings forced Bishop Knox to intervene. It seems that Knox, despite being a traditional churchman, had been until this time unwilling to sanction Cummings perhaps because he saw some value in Cummings' appeal to large local working-class congregations, even if he personally disapproved of his politics.<sup>52</sup> Craig complained to Knox that Cummings' ministrations were not appropriate for church services, and Knox, forced to act as mediator, sat uneasily on the fence between the two men. At the "animated meeting" that followed, Knox called both Craig's and Cummings' actions "ill-advised", and suggested that Craig attend another church and pleaded with Cummings to cease political preaching likely to arouse hatred.<sup>53</sup> Cummings' supporters however organised a demonstration at which they asserted their support for the preaching of politics at St. John's and pledged to oppose any attempt by Church authorities to sanction Cummings.<sup>54</sup>

As part of the Crusade, and struggling to influence the District Council from without, Cummings decided to stand for election to the Council in 1919. Having left the BSP in 1912, and believing that a Labour programme would lead to the establishment of socialism, Cummings had joined the Labour Party, though it is unclear when he joined. April 1919 was the first occasion that Labour candidates stood in both East and West wards of the district of Hurst,<sup>55</sup> but, while proud to be a Labour candidate, Cummings deplored the fact that amongst the Labour candidates, none was an industrial wage-earner. Cummings argued that this was because:

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<sup>52</sup> The *Ashton Reporter* reported that in March 1922 for example Cummings confirmed over forty socialists and communists into the Church of England. *Ashton Reporter*, 18 March 1922; 29 April 1922.

<sup>53</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 6 July 1918; *The Manchester Guardian*, 3 July 1918.

<sup>54</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 15 July 1918.

<sup>55</sup> Cummings' fellow Labour candidate in the West Ward was James Edwards, a Yeast Merchant, and their counterparts in the East Ward were Lewis Watson, a trade union secretary, and Herbert Booth, a licensed Victualler. See *Ashton Reporter*, 22 March 1919.

In this district there was a state of terrorism and they [industrial workers] were too terrified to take any step whatever for their political emancipation... There were scores and hundreds of men who dared not do anything for fear of being victimised... By law they were citizens; but in fact they were simply terrified slaves of the masters' cause.<sup>56</sup>

In Cummings' estimation, the industrial workers of Hurst, most of whom were employed at the Whittaker family mills, were too afraid to stand for election as to do so would jeopardise their jobs and livelihoods. Similarly, the Secretary of the Ashton Weavers Association, S. T. Goggins, argued that the workers of the Whittaker mills were too frightened to become involved in local politics.<sup>57</sup>

In his campaign, and in concert with the aims of the Crusade, Cummings identified housing as his priority. When it was put to him that the Tory-dominated Council had made progress on this, Cummings responded that the fruits of seven years could be examined in one morning before breakfast. His other priorities included the application of the Public Health Acts and the provision of cheap coal to householders in winter.<sup>58</sup> On the housing issue the Conservatives responded that the war had resulted in shortages and that prior to Cummings' arrival Hurst had been a veritable "Garden of Eden".<sup>59</sup> Personal attacks were launched against Cummings in the

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<sup>56</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 22 March 1919. Cummings here appears to suggest not that the workers were unprepared to take a political stand but were afraid of victimisation if they did. This is a departure from his previous complaints that working people simply seemed incapable of decided political action. However, as discussed below, Cummings returned a few years later to the argument that the working classes in Hurst were unable to recognise the opportunity to vote for Labour candidates, one of whom was himself, who would work for their political and social emancipation.

<sup>57</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 29 March 1919.

<sup>58</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 5 April 1919; 22 March 1919; 29 March 1919.

<sup>59</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 5 April 1919.

press,<sup>60</sup> and the Conservatives appear to have sent a ‘spy’ to a public meeting at which the Labour candidates spoke.<sup>61</sup> Such was the consternation of the Liberal and Conservative parties that the Liberal candidates agreed not to stand in 1919 so that the vote against Labour would not be split.<sup>62</sup> However, despite this collusion, the results were close, Cummings and his fellow Labour Candidate in the West ward, James Edwards, polling 457 and 412 votes respectively, against the Conservatives 491 and 486. In the East ward, one Labour candidate was elected.<sup>63</sup> Despite the loss, Cummings was not disappointed and indicated his willingness to stand again. He did so the following year, though the campaign was much less eventful. Fewer crowds gathered to hear the Labour candidates speak, and the novelty of a clergyman standing for election seems to have lessened. The election returned Liberal and Conservative Councillors in both wards, and none of the Labour candidates were elected.<sup>64</sup> The 1919 election however left a bitter aftertaste, and Cummings soon faced the animosity of the new Council. According to tradition, Councillors would attend a service at the parish church, St. John’s, on the first Sunday of the municipal year. However, as a snub to Cummings, the majority of the Council instead attended St. James’ to hear Parry preach on the subject of democracy. Some Councillors, either because they were less antagonistic or more traditional, did attend St. John’s and Cummings used the opportunity to preach on the subject of disunity, lamenting that politics had been put before religion in this split in the Council.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 29 March 1919.

<sup>61</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 22 March 1919.

<sup>62</sup> Lock, ‘Robert W. Cummings, the ‘Communist’ Vicar of Hurst’, p. 262.

<sup>63</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 12 April 1919.

<sup>64</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 20 March 1920; 27 March 1920; 3 April 1920.

<sup>65</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 3 May 1919.

Cummings sought, through the Social Crusade, and his ministry in general, to educate the working people of Hurst. In addition to delivering lectures on political issues at open air meetings in Ashton and the surrounding area, Cummings preached on politics and economics from the pulpit of St. John's itself, although after a time he was instructed, apparently by Knox, that if he wished to speak about politics inside the church then he must do so not the pulpit as this would give the impression that he was speaking for the whole Church of England. Instead, he was instructed that if he were to speak on political matters he must do so from the front of the nave.<sup>66</sup>

Cummings also introduced political topics into the Sunday School programme, and hung a banner which read 'Socialism the Hope of the World' on the schoolroom wall. He gave lessons on the socialism in Christ's teaching and the immoral basis of capitalism, and, unsurprisingly, complaints were made. Parents of many of the pupils directed their grievances to the County authorities, responsible for education programmes in all schools, but they declined to intervene on the issue. Cummings defended his educational programme in the *Ashton Reporter*, and it appears that the curriculum broke no rules, as one member of the Education Committee complained "I wish we could do something with the man, but we can't".<sup>67</sup>

It is further possible that the Church authorities in Manchester were less willing to intervene, as in 1921, the clerical environment of the diocese shifted following the appointment of William Temple, later Archbishop of York and of Canterbury, to the Bishopric. Temple looked with sympathy upon the labour movement and though not

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<sup>66</sup> Interview with Susan Cummings, 16 July 2010.

<sup>67</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 4 February 1922; 11 February 1922; 18 February 1922.

a radical, was supportive on clerical efforts to engage with the working classes. As will be seen, Temple was influential in Johnson becoming Dean of Manchester in 1924 and then Dean of Canterbury in 1931, and would call for the Church to engage with working people throughout his Church career, although he would be criticised by clergy such as Ecclestone for not providing specific guidance or strong leadership on the issue. Even as Bishop of Manchester, Temple's sympathy for the labour movement appears to have led to little practical change in the diocese.<sup>68</sup> In any case, Cummings himself was less politically active after 1923, though he did support Ellen Wilkinson's unsuccessful election campaign of that year.<sup>69</sup> No evidence remains of any activity on Cummings's part during the General Strike of 1926, or the Ashton by-election of 1928 which returned the first ever Labour MP for the town.<sup>70</sup>

The interruption of Cummings' political activities was due to weariness with the apparent apathy of the working classes to the advancement of the labour movement, and splits within the movement itself. Cummings had supported the Labour Party for many years because its programme would, he felt, lead ultimately to the establishment of a socialist society. He had also been a member of the BSP.

Formed in 1911 with a revolutionary Marxist programme, the BSP with other radical organisations were unified to form the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920.<sup>71</sup>

In the 1919 and 1920 District Council elections, Cummings stood as a Labour candidate as that Party presented the most viable route for the realisation of his goals. Had the BSP been able to support his candidature, it is possible that

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<sup>68</sup> Lock, 'Robert W. Cummings, the 'Communist' Vicar of Hurst', p. 266; Dobb, *Like A Mighty Tortoise*, pp. 276-282.

<sup>69</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 24 November 1923.

<sup>70</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 22 May 1928.

<sup>71</sup> James Klugmann, *History of the Communist party of Great Britain, Vol. 1: Formation and Early Years, 1919-1924* (London, 1968), p. 17.

Cummings would have stood on a Socialist ticket. When the newly formed CPGB however proposed an affiliation with the Labour Party, Cummings hoped for a positive outcome. The Labour Party's refusal led many, including Cummings, to break from Labour. There followed an influx of new members to the Labour Party from trade unions who had been hesitant of associating with an "extreme element,"<sup>72</sup> while many radicals joined the CPGB. Cummings however was unable to do so in 1920 because, despite having previously been a member of the BSP, his position as a clergyman of the established Church was incompatible with the rules of membership of the Party and of the Communist International.<sup>73</sup> Instead, it seems that he tried to establish a broad-ranging Socialist Labour Party in Hurst, but without much success.<sup>74</sup>

Nevertheless, as Cummings had explained in 1918, "to me socialism is not a party but a spiritual ideal,"<sup>75</sup> so non-membership of the CPGB did not prevent him from supporting the Party's programme from outside the Party structure, or from leading his first Crusade, although the vestry meeting of 1921 did conclude that the split with Labour had hindered St. John's progress and as a socialist church. Even so, Cummings still had faith in the eventual success of socialism, telling the meeting "we have weathered another year; there has been sunshine and storm, but since our last vestry meeting nothing is more certain than that capitalism is nearer its end."<sup>76</sup> However, it did disappoint Cummings that the working classes of Hurst continued to

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<sup>72</sup> Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Vol. 1*, pp. 44-48; *Ashton Reporter*, 4 December 1920; 20 November 1920.

<sup>73</sup> See for example 'Conditions of Admission to the Communist International approved by the Second Comintern Congress,' 1920 in Jane Degras (ed.), *The Communist International 1919-1943: Documents, Vol. 1, 1919-1922* (London, 1956), pp. 166-172.

<sup>74</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 11 December 1920.

<sup>75</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 11 May 1918.

<sup>76</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 9 April 1921.

elect district and national representatives that had, in Cummings' view, a vested interest in maintaining the repression of the working classes. Perhaps influenced by his own electoral defeats, he wrote of these voters, "such men one feels have the mentality of hens – nay, an intelligent hen would have more sense than that."<sup>77</sup> This suggests that Cummings was beginning to apportion blame to the workers themselves for failing to take the opportunity, when presented, to elect a Labour candidate that would work for their emancipation. The failure of the working classes to elect Ellen Wilkinson in 1923 further compounded this impression, and Cummings withdrew from Party politics and ceased his own Crusade.

However, in 1932 Cummings was drawn back into political activity by a new crisis. The depression precipitated by economic collapse in the USA had led to massive unemployment, the collapse of heavy industry and a crisis of confidence in sterling. Hurst did not escape hardship, as both Whittaker brothers' mills, which had provided employment for most of the workers of the town, closed in 1931.<sup>78</sup> The Labour cabinet split over the issue of how to respond to the economic crisis, and the government resigned, leaving the Labour leader and Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald to form a national government with Liberals and Conservatives. In the subsequent general election in May 1931, MacDonald was returned as Prime Minister of a Conservative-dominated national government, the much reduced number of Labour and Liberal MPs going into opposition. Cummings joined many socialists in regarding MacDonald's actions as a betrayal of the Labour Party, the

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<sup>77</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 29 April 1922.

<sup>78</sup> Lock, 'Robert W. Cummings, The 'Communist' Vicar of Hurst', p. 272; Alan Booth and Melvyn Pack, *Employment, Capital and Economic Policy: Great Britain, 1918-1939* (Oxford, 1985); Roy Hattersley, *Borrowed Time: The Story of Britain between the Wars* (London, 2007); John Stevenson, *Social Conditions between the Wars* (London, 1977).

working classes, and of the cause of socialism, and hoped to demonstrate to the working classes of Hurst the reality of their situation:

I doubted MacDonald's sincerity, honesty and Socialism. I thought he would be a traitor to the working class and have lived to see the day when he became the greatest traitor that history has ever recorded in the working class...MacDonaldism has turned the Labour Party into a nest of corruption, treachery and careerism. A bunch of men who care only for their positions...I want to stir up your indignation at the wrongs you are suffering...you are members of an oppressed class.<sup>79</sup>

In order to stir the working classes, Cummings launched his second Social Crusade (1932), with education as its central issue.<sup>80</sup> Cummings believed in the emancipatory power of political education and the crisis of the early 1930s demonstrated for him the urgency of educating working people. At the first meeting of the new Crusade, which was attended by approximately six hundred people, Cummings spoke on the Marxist theory of history, depicting primitive communism as the natural state for mankind, and comparing this to the Garden of Eden. Cummings argued that both scripture and Marxism demonstrated that concepts of private ownership of land or economic production were incompatible with humanity. He concluded by arguing that the current crises, including the emergence of fascism in Europe, indicated the imminent collapse of capitalism and the establishment of socialism.<sup>81</sup> Cummings' aim of providing a political education for the working

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<sup>79</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 9 January 1932.

<sup>80</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 16 January 1932.

<sup>81</sup> Alice Lock interview with Ethel Cummings, 4 July 1994; Interview with Susan Cummings, 16 July 2010.

classes was one of several efforts made in the 1930s to use education to mobilise support for the labour movement. The Left Book Club, established in 1936, for example, provided for subscribers cheap editions of new books on political and economic matters. The LBC was closely linked to the CPGB until 1940, when Gollancz criticised the CPGB's policy on the Second World War.<sup>82</sup>

In 1932, Cummings' began speaking at public meetings in Ashton, and to children in the Sunday School. The topics of his lectures were often the relationship between Cristian scripture and Marxist theory, such as the similarities between primitive communism and the Garden of Eden, as well as international matters, especially the programme of the Soviet Union. He also criticised the efforts of Conservative and Liberal-dominated Councils to stifle political discussion. Speaking to the Stalybridge branch of the National Unemployed Workers' Union he criticised the Council who had provided a room for the meeting provided that politics was not discussed. For Cummings, this made a mockery of democracy, and was nothing less than an attempt to suppress the political awareness of the working classes.<sup>83</sup>

However, the second Crusade generated far less attention in the press than the first. While attendance at the inaugural meeting was high, attendance at subsequent meetings fell quickly, and the only reply in the press on the announcement of the new Social Crusade was a somewhat confused letter asking whether Cummings' criticism of MacDonald was targeted at Angus MacDonald, the author of 'Cumming(s) through the Rye'.<sup>84</sup> By February 1932 even Cummings' own interest

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<sup>82</sup> John Lewis, *The Left Book Club: An Historical Record* (London, 1970); Victor Gollancz, *Where Are You going? An Open Letter to Communists* (London, 1940).

<sup>83</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 23 January 1932.

<sup>84</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 16 January 1932.

appeared to be declining.<sup>85</sup> It is unknown whether any further meetings took place, but certainly none were reported in the *Ashton Reporter*, which had previously reported fully on the activities of Cummings' Crusade. Cummings continued to speak in St. John's on political and economic matters, but throughout the 1930s church attendance continued to fall. By the late 1930s attendance appears to have fallen to nine or ten people, a dramatic decline from the numbers that Social Crusade Services once commanded.<sup>86</sup>

Throughout the 1930s though, Cummings continued to take an active interest in international politics, in particular the Soviet Union. Cummings' support for the USSR and Marxism led him to publicly welcome the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, and to protest Britain's intervention in the Russian Civil War. In 1920 he had been elected Chairman of the Ashton Council of Action, which publicised the risk of war and promoted friendly relations with the Soviet Union.<sup>87</sup> In November the same year he hosted at St. John's a lecture and concert to celebrate the third anniversary of the revolution.<sup>88</sup> A similar event in 1922 celebrated the Revolution's fifth anniversary, and Cummings produced a souvenir pamphlet for the attendees.<sup>89</sup>

Cummings enthusiastic support for the Soviet Union generated controversy. The period between 1917 and 1922 saw a good deal of fear in Britain of a 'red threat' of

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<sup>85</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 13 February 1932.

<sup>86</sup> *Hurst Parish Church: Centenary of the Consecration, 19 February 1949* (Ashton, 1949), p. 5; Alice Lock interview with Ethel Cummings, 4 July 1994.

<sup>87</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 9 October 1920.

<sup>88</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 13 November 1920.

<sup>89</sup> TLSA DD94/1, Russian Revolution fifth anniversary souvenir pamphlet, 1922.

Bolshevism,<sup>90</sup> and it was fear such as this that led one critic to describe Cummings as a “Bolshevik ecclesiastic” after the Sunday School disturbance in May 1918.<sup>91</sup> Similar fears of subversion also appear to have been behind Cummings’ abrupt dismissal from the chaplaincy of Ladysmith Barracks in the St. John’s parish. His replacement, the Rector of Ashton, was a more traditional churchman. However, though Cummings resented the dismissal, he came to appreciate the greater independence this gave him to oppose militarism,<sup>92</sup> and his supporters purchased for him a typewriter so that he might recoup some of his lost earnings by writing.<sup>93</sup> In 1921 Cummings established a committee for the organisation of famine relief in Soviet Russia, which appears to have produced less controversy because of the essentially humanitarian nature of the campaign, and despite the recent rupture between the Labour Party and CPGB, both Labour supporters and communists were involved in the relief campaign in Hurst.<sup>94</sup> In 1924 however, Cummings left no doubt as to his support for the Soviet Union and its ideology when he organised a memorial service, including a sermon on the Christian nature of Marxism, at St. John’s for Lenin.<sup>95</sup>

Cummings became increasingly concerned, as did many socialists and communists in the 1930s that the world was again slipping towards war. Marxist clergy identified the rise of fascism as a threat to Christian civilisation and to the construction of the new moral society in the USSR.<sup>96</sup> Aged 70, and eager to see if the reality of Soviet civilisation had lived up to his hopes, Cummings learned

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<sup>90</sup> Beatrice Webb, ‘Introduction’ in Wicksteed, *Life Under the Soviets*, pp. vii-xvi.

<sup>91</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 4 May 1918.

<sup>92</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 24 January 1920; 31 January 1920; 24 April 1920.

<sup>93</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 21 February 1920.

<sup>94</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 4 February 1921.

<sup>95</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 2 February 1924.

<sup>96</sup> Etienne Watts, *Fascism Menaces the Church*, (Manchester, 1934).

Russian and in 1938 he and a friend travelled to Odessa and Sevastopol, but did not visit Moscow or Leningrad. It is unclear why they chose these destinations, but it is possible that restrictions were placed on where they, as foreign travellers, could visit.<sup>97</sup>

Foreign travellers to the Soviet Union from the 1920s onwards were subject to strict rules. In many cases, foreign intellectuals were courted by the All-Union Society of Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS), an organisation designed to identify and cultivate westerners as propagandists for the Soviet Union.<sup>98</sup> VOKS was particularly interested in cultivating westerners with a high public profile, explaining the esteem Johnson was shown during his visits to the USSR. By contrast, Cummings was the vicar of a small parish without a nationwide profile and with no affiliations to recognised political organisation, and VOKS therefore overlooked him or deemed him unworthy of cultivating. In addition, and again in contrast to Johnson, Cummings spoke Russian. These combined factors meant that on his tour of southern Russia, Cummings was able to learn from ordinary Soviet citizens about the realities of Soviet society outside Moscow, Leningrad and the new industrial centres. No substantive papers remain relating to the tour, but it is conspicuous that in his letters home, Cummings refrained from praising the Soviet project.<sup>99</sup> Upon his return, disillusionment had set in. Cummings had had high hopes for socialism in Russia at the time of the Revolution, but it now seemed that the Revolution had descended into dictatorship and tyranny. War in Europe seemed all but inevitable, and the cause of socialism in Britain was, it seemed, no further

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<sup>97</sup> Interview with Susan Cummings and Michael Cummings, 16 July 2010; David Caute, *The Fellow-Travellers* (revised edition) pp. 60-131.

<sup>98</sup> Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920-40*, pp. 142-174.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Susan Cummings and Michael Cummings, 16 July 2010.

forward than in 1914. The friend that he had travelled to the Soviet Union with committed suicide shortly after their return<sup>100</sup> and Cummings himself would only live a few months longer.

## **Conclusion**

Cummings suffered a stroke and died shortly after his return from Russia. At his funeral, his friend Etienne Watts, vicar of All Saints, Manchester, praised him for remaining resolute in his politics in the face of hostility.<sup>101</sup> It is difficult to assess Cummings' success at St. John's. Only eleven years after his death a history of the church stated that many members of the original congregation "took exception to the vicar's introduction of politics" and that this had resulted in declining congregations.<sup>102</sup> Even thirty years after his death former parishioners resented Cummings' political ministry.<sup>103</sup> However, particularly through his Social Crusade services he brought a large number of working people into Church worship and demonstrated the relevance of the Church to their political and economic realities.

Cummings subscribed to a Marxist conception of socialism, and looked forward to the establishment of a Marxist society. Importantly though, his Marxism grew from his Christian faith and in his view, Marxism was a spiritual ideal, its aim the establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth. His Social Crusades were designed to achieve, even if only at a local level, this spiritual ideal. He saw the Bolshevik Revolution in a millenarian light, as indicative of a spiritual revival in Russia, and

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<sup>100</sup> Interview with Susan Cummings and Michael Cummings, 16 July 2010.

<sup>101</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 2 December 1938; 18 November 1938.

<sup>102</sup> *Hurst Parish Church: Centenary of the Consecration*.

<sup>103</sup> TLSA, DD94/1, Memories of parishioners recorded by the Local History Group, Ashton-Under-Lyne Civic Society, 1968.

his involvements in party politics were motivated by a desire to see the actualisation of a similarly revolutionary programme in Britain. He gravitated towards political parties that he felt would pursue this objective at a national level, including membership at different times of the ILP, BSP and Labour Party, and support for the CPGB. As we will see, Cummings was not alone in participating in party politics as part of a practical strategy to achieve a theological goal.

His political activity and his involvement in party politics waxed and waned over the course of his ministry, although there is no evidence that he ever privately repudiated his political outlook, notwithstanding his letter in the *Ashton Reporter* of June 1914. He became frustrated with the slow progress of the labour movement, and the apparent apathy of the working classes towards ending their own exploitation. When external national or international factors indicated opportunities for political activity, Cummings took such opportunities, launching his Social Crusades, running for election, or travelling to the Soviet Union. However, during his tour of the USSR in 1938, Cummings' faith in the Soviet project collapsed. Cummings never spoke publicly about his tour, and this appears to be indicative of his disillusionment. It seems that the collectivisation of agriculture which saw millions of kulaks killed or disinherited, and the political purge of the CPSU in the wake of the Stalin-Trotsky split both forced Cummings to realise that the reality of the Soviet Union fell far short of his expectations.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Interview with Susan Cummings and Michael Cummings, 16 July 2010.

## Catholic Crusader: Conrad Noel

Conrad Noel has received greater attention in histories of the Church than Cummings, but these accounts have typically been either glowing or damning. Hastings characterised Noel as isolated in the “slightly batty wilderness of the far left”, and painted Thaxted as an equally isolated centre of social reform. Jones was less strident in his criticism that Noel’s unwillingness to negotiate stymied the Catholic Crusade and prevented it from becoming an influential movement.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, Reg Groves celebrated Noel’s activities, and Jack Putterill described him as no less than a prophet.<sup>2</sup> This is perhaps unsurprising. Both knew Noel personally, and Putterill was Noel’s son-in-law. More balanced views can be found in a collection of essays edited by Kenneth Leech, and the recent research of Arthur Burns.<sup>3</sup> Burns in particular examines Noel’s ministry not as an isolated case, but as part of a longer tradition of political religion that was sustained in Thaxted after his death. However, Burns is concerned specifically with locating Noel within a parish approach, concentrating specifically on Noel’s activities and legacy in Thaxted, and does not examine his engagement with party politics or with the Soviet Union.

This chapter first examines Noel’s theology and ministry, considering his influences, his orientation towards the Church Fathers and the paradigm of medievalist utopianism. We briefly consider also Noel’s involvement with Stewart Headlam’s Guild of St. Matthew, and his attraction to the use of ceremonial in worship, which

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<sup>1</sup> Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, p. 174, p. 319; Jones, *The Christian Socialist Revival, 1877-1914*, pp. 300-301.

<sup>2</sup> Reg Groves, *Conrad Noel and the Thaxted Movement: An Adventure in Christian Socialism* (London, 1967); Jack Putterill, *Conrad Noel: Prophet and Priest 1869-1942* (London, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Leech (ed.), *Conrad Noel and the Catholic Crusade*; Arthur Burns, ‘Beyond the ‘Red Vicar’: Community and Christian Socialism in Thaxted, Essex, 1910-84’, *History Workshop Journal* 75 (1): 101-124.

became a feature of his ministry in Thaxted. We then turn to his involvement with the Church Socialist League, and finally his own Catholic Crusade, through which his political theology found its fullest expression. We examine the origin, structure and theology of the Catholic Crusade, as well as some of the activities that it undertook in order to advance its cause. We also consider Noel's relationship with party politics, including his membership of both the Independent Labour Party and the British Socialist Party, which in 1920 was folded into the Communist Party of Great Britain. Though never a CPGB member, Noel celebrated the Soviet Union and remained close to the Party, and the Catholic Crusade would be implicated in the expulsion of Trotskyists in the late 1930s.

In making these investigations, we draw upon a range of source material, including Noel's own writings, his autobiography, and the contributions of Leech, Groves, and Putterill. We also utilise the collection of Noel's papers now held at Hull History Centre. This collection includes a great deal of correspondence, as well as pamphlets and other material relating to the Catholic Crusade. Noel's notes for sermons, articles, and reflections on some of his activities are also preserved.

### **Theology and Ministry: Rebellious Aristocrat**

Unlike Cummings, Noel was born into a socially well-connected family. His father, Roden Noel, was Groom of the Privy Chamber, and his grandmother, Lady Gainsborough, a lady-in-waiting to Queen Victoria. His father's radical political views were unpopular at court, but Roden and Alice Noel had great respect for the Queen, though Noel later wrote that "as a boy I was dogged with stories of her

‘goodness’ until her virtues seemed to me almost as unpleasant as the vices of her predecessors.”<sup>4</sup> Both Noel’s parents were active Anglicans, though as a child Noel rejected his mother’s Calvinism and accompanied his father to more liberal ‘Romish’ services.<sup>5</sup> These services kept at bay the bouts of atheism brought about by the bullying he experienced at public school. He later castigated ‘public’ schools as run neither for the public nor in the public interest, and for the lack of democracy that tended to lead to fascism.<sup>6</sup> He also came to reject the aristocracy, finding most of the titled friends of his aunt Lady Gainsborough to be “airheads and cads.”<sup>7</sup>

After a rebellious phase at Cambridge, as a result of which he never completed his degree, Noel determined on a career in the Church of England, and began preparing for theological training. Noel already believed in the redeeming power of Christianity, and felt that Christian religious practice must be inclusive and democratic if it were to remain relevant to society at large rather than just the upper echelons of the social hierarchy. This emphasis on catholicity and democracy led him while at Chichester Theological College to examine the lives of the Early Church Fathers who, he argued, were not “state-appointed bishops of the comfortable classes but...men democratically chosen on the universal suffrage of the whole Church.” This, and the fact that these Church Fathers had codified what it meant to be a Christian, meant that for Noel, they represented an ‘authentic’ Christian faith, and in theological debates with his fellows at Chichester, and in years to come with the public and senior clergy, he would call upon his knowledge of the early Church Fathers to support his case. In particular, Noel was fond of St.

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<sup>4</sup> Noel, *Autobiography*, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Noel, *Autobiography*, pp.4-5.

<sup>6</sup> Noel, *Autobiography*, pp. 12-17.

<sup>7</sup> Noel, *Autobiography*, p. 10.

Ambrose of Milan's pronouncements on property: "the land was made for all; why do ye rich men claim it as your private property?" and "property is robbery." Noel argued that the Early Fathers had seen economic and social matters as indistinguishable from matters of faith and he consequently felt justified in involving himself in such matters during his ministry.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to his studies of the Early Fathers, Noel's theology owed a great deal to Stewart Headlam, whose theology was characterised by a fusion of politics, faith and particularly theatricality. He argued that performance was in itself a sacrament and that through performance God's divine grace could be revealed. Headlam saw a great deal of similarity between Church and stage, and challenged clergy to 'perform' Christianity at a time when the Church was hostile to stage performers and dancers in particular.<sup>9</sup> Headlam's GSM, founded in 1877, in many ways presaged Noel's own Catholic Crusade. It was a catholic organisation in that it was inclusive of a broad range of interests and liberal in outlook while building on an orthodox Christianity, arguing that the Church's overriding goal should be the building of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth through revolutionary economic and social change. Politically, the Guild was primarily interested in land nationalisation and redistribution, and though Noel later criticised the GSM for being too narrow in its aims, it would be unfair to say that the GSM's aims began and ended at land reform. Rather, Headlam identified land as the "point at which the attack must be begun."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Noel, *Autobiography*, pp. 27-31.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Yeandle, 'Politics, Theology and Theatricality: Christian Socialism and the Performing Arts in Late-Victorian London', paper presented to the North West Long Nineteenth Century Seminar Series, 3 April 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Leech, 'Stewart Headlam, 1847-1924, and the Guild of St. Matthew' in Reckitt (ed.) *For Christ and the People*, pp. 61-88; Noel, *Autobiography*, p. 60.

By 1893, as a result of these influences, Noel defined his theology as ‘Liberal Catholic.’ The term is difficult to interpret, but can be understood as a theology that looks to the orthodox teaching of the Christian Church, that of Jesus and the Early Fathers, combined with a democratic approach to churchmanship and the active participation of the congregation in worship. In that year, he was invited to take up the vacant curacy of All Saints, Plymouth, by Father Charles Chase. Noel, while recognising that Chase’s theology was not altogether in line with his own, felt that it closely resembled his interpretation of Christianity and accepted. However, on the morning he was due to be ordained, he was called to a meeting with Bishop Bickersteth, a traditional churchman whose elevation to the episcopate in 1895 may have been to counterbalance the elevation of the liberal Edward King to the see of Lincoln in the same year.<sup>11</sup> Bickersteth told Noel that his theological beliefs made his ordination impossible. Bickersteth’s grounds for refusing ordination were Noel’s belief in the presence of God in nature, in man and the Blessed Sacrament of Holy Communion, which Bickersteth regarded as heretical pantheism; Noel’s apparent preference for the style of Roman Catholic services over those of the Anglican Church; and that All Saint’s, Plymouth, was particularly undesirable as many of the congregation had converted to Roman Catholicism.<sup>12</sup> This last objection, Noel acknowledged later, perhaps had some grounds as Chase later converted. Noel attempted to defend his views by calling on his knowledge of the Early Fathers to demonstrate that what Bickersteth called pantheism was in fact orthodox Church teaching. His indignation was such that, in his autobiography, he devoted

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen Gregory, ‘Bickersteth, Edward Henry (1825-1906)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), online edition, accessed 23 April 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Noel, *Autobiography*, p. 36; CNP U DNO/3/1 correspondence with Bishop Bickersteth, 1893.

significantly more space to this incident than to the Russian Revolution, which in his own words “altered the face of Europe”.<sup>13</sup>

However, after a brief interlude living in the slums of London where, despite his attempts to assimilate he was described as ‘the broken-down aristocrat’,<sup>14</sup> Noel was finally ordained in 1894 by the Bishop of Chester, Francis Jayne, and granted a curacy in Flowery Field, Cheshire. Noel began giving lectures on Catholic Socialism which were boycotted by the ordinary congregation but which, like Cummings’ Social Crusades, were successful in drawing in large numbers of working people who had never attended Church. The indignant Church Wardens referred the matter to Bishop Jayne, resulting in an acrimonious interview between Curate and Bishop. Jayne accused Noel of having no respect for the long-standing congregation, and of irreverence by encouraging attendees to ask questions about Christianity in Church. Noel reminded Jayne of Jesus’ invitation to ‘all and sundry’, but Jayne dismissed the argument. When Noel refused to make himself ‘acceptable’ to the congregation, Jayne dismissed him.<sup>15</sup>

Noel continued to preach in the North West without an official Church platform, and found himself able to reach much larger working-class audiences at public meetings, including at Boggart Hole Clough, outside Manchester, which played host to many controversial working-class meetings, at which Emmeline Pankhurst and Keir Hardie often spoke. While in the wilderness, Noel held a number of curacies and often moved around the country to take up a new post only to have to move on because of disputes with superiors or congregations over his politics or theology, or often

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<sup>13</sup> Noel, *Autobiography*, pp. 33-39, pp. 107-109.

<sup>14</sup> Noel, *Autobiography*, p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> Noel, *Autobiography*, p. 45.

both.<sup>16</sup> He benefitted at this time from the contacts he had cultivated with other socialist clergy, and at one time, Charles Gore, Canon of Westminster Abbey and co-founder of the Christian Social Union, secured for Noel a curacy at St. Philip's, Salford. Gore believed that it was part of a clergyman's duty to work for the amelioration of social evils, and co-established the CSU in 1889 to examine social problems and identify strategies for the resolution of such problems.<sup>17</sup> He saw Noel's dedication to this cause and intervened to secure him a Church post.<sup>18</sup> Throughout these appointments, Noel's preaching drew on political themes, and he oriented his sermons within the lessons of the Early Church Fathers, which provided rich material. He was convinced of the necessity of engaging with social, economic and political matters, and the purpose of a clergyman, in his view, was not only to preach faith in a mystical God, but also to work for the establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth.<sup>19</sup>

### **Church Socialist and Catholic Crusader**

This was the objective of all Noel's political activity and in 1906 he joined the Church Socialist League in order to further this goal. The CSL was formed in 1906, and was a much more radical body than the GSM or CSU. Many clergy, dissatisfied with the inadequate stance of the Church of England on social issues, and lacking an organisation for the mobilisation of socialist clergy, responded to Keir Hardie's challenge to engage with social matters. The inaugural leader of the Labour Party, itself formed in 1906, warned clergy that: "If you will do none of these things, and

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<sup>16</sup> Noel, *Autobiography*, p. 50; pp. 54-55.

<sup>17</sup> Alan Wilkinson, 'Gore, Charles (1853-1932)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), online edition, accessed 23 April 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Noel, *Autobiography*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>19</sup> Putterill, *Conrad Noel: Prophet and Priest 1869-1942*.

have nothing else to suggest then you need not be surprised if the world, which is after all a practical place for practical people, goes on its way forgetful even of your existence.”<sup>20</sup> As a result, many socialist clergy publicly supported ILP and other socialist candidates in the 1906 General Election. Noel and Cummings were part of this widespread trend, and Ramsay MacDonald publicly acknowledged the assistance of churchmen to the Labour movement.<sup>21</sup> Subsequent calls were made for a Church socialist organisation, and the CSL came into being at a conference at Morecambe in June 1906.<sup>22</sup>

Noel’s autobiography erroneously states that he co-organised the conference at Morecambe, but the error is understandable due to the posthumous editing of the work. Similar inconsistencies arise regarding the formation of the Catholic Crusade itself.<sup>23</sup> However, Noel is frustratingly brief on his activities within the CSL, stating simply “for many years the Church Socialist League was the political sphere in which I found an outlet for my enthusiasm for social justice, and was the spearhead of the Christian Socialist movement.”<sup>24</sup> In fact, Noel was Organising Secretary of the CSL between 1908 and 1910, and held an honorary post until 1916, and so played a central role in the delivery and coordination of events that included lectures, debates, and sermons nationwide. He also contributed directly to these events. In 1906 he contributed five sermons to the collection ‘Churchmanship and Labour’ in which he called on Christians to recognise the socialism within Christianity and

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<sup>20</sup> *Labour Leader*, 23 June 1905.

<sup>21</sup> *The Clarion*, 16 March 1906; GSM ‘Occasional Paper’ 34, February 1906.

<sup>22</sup> Ian Goodfellow, *The Church Socialist League 1906-1923*, unpublished PhD Thesis.

<sup>23</sup> Goodfellow, *The Church Socialist League 1906-1923*, p. 34n; Robert Woodfield, ‘Conrad Noel, 1869-1942: Catholic Crusader’ in Maurice B. Reckitt (ed.), *For Christ and the People*, pp. 135-180, p. 144.

<sup>24</sup> Noel, *Autobiography*, p. 60.

support the Labour Party.<sup>25</sup> He also delivered a course of lectures on the relationship between socialism and Christianity in which he outlined the economic basis of socialism, and strategies for the achievement of socialism in society. He described, using examples from the Early Church Fathers and the life of Jesus, the moral basis of socialism and its relationship with Christianity, before specifying the aims and objectives of the CSL itself.<sup>26</sup> It should be noted again here that while Noel used the term ‘socialism’, it was a Marxist programme he espoused, and it was during his time as CSL Organising Secretary that he publicly declared his commitment to “public ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange”, in the same Manifesto discussed in the previous chapter.<sup>27</sup> Noel’s enthusiastic advocacy for the Labour Party in 1906 could accurately be described as an early fellow traveller relationship, though this was not unique to Noel. The whole CSL advocated for Labour in 1906, just as socialists such as Lansbury and Keir Hardie supported the churches.<sup>28</sup>

The rise of socialism in the late nineteenth century had prompted the Church of England to engage to an extent with social and economic issues, and the Lambeth Conference, the decennial assembly of Anglican Bishops, had tentatively considered the position of the Church relating to socialism. The third conference, in 1888, called on Christians to study the “excessive inequality in the distribution of this world’s goods”, and examine strategies for the redress of this inequality, but rejected revolutionary and violent means of doing so. The Conference accepted the recommendation that the working classes should be encouraged to work for the

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<sup>25</sup> Goodfellow, *The Church Socialist League 1906-1923*, p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Church Socialist League flyer, CNP U DNO/5/2.

<sup>27</sup> WCML Christianity/Box 1 ‘Socialism: Manifesto by Christian Ministers’ (n.d., 1908).

<sup>28</sup> *The Clarion*, 16 March 1906.

acquisition of property and local cooperation in trade and agriculture, rather than the state intervening to direct economic activity and ownership. Clergy were permitted to engage with socialists, but no definite strategy for the whole Church was put in place.<sup>29</sup>

In 1908, the Report of a committee of the fifth Lambeth Conference, considering the relation of the Church to social and economic questions had acknowledged ongoing social and economic inequalities, but again failed to provide a strategy for the amelioration of such inequalities. On this occasion, no reference was made to socialist organisations or wider socialist politics. Instead, the committee implored the Church to reform itself to become more democratic in an attempt to broaden its appeal to working people, without alienating employers and property owners.<sup>30</sup>

The Convocation of Canterbury and York in February 1912 again failed to provide leadership on economic issues. At the meeting, Henry Wakefield, the Bishop of Birmingham and CSL member, presented a CSL petition calling on the Church leadership to act on a principle established by the Convocation of 1907 and Lambeth Conference of 1908 that the first charge upon industry should be the fair payment of it workers.<sup>31</sup> The petition was not voted upon, and the only response of the Convocation to the labour unrest of the day, particularly the miners' strike then taking place was the unanimous acceptance of the proposal of George Eden, Bishop of Wakefield, that the Convocation call upon Christians to pray that "the present

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<sup>29</sup> 'Encyclical Letter issued by the Bishops attending the Third Lambeth Conference, July 1888', 'Resolutions Formally Adopted by the Conference of 1888', 'Reports of Committees, 1888, No. 6, Socialism', in Randall Davidson (ed.) *The Five Lambeth Conferences, 1867-1908* (London, 1920), pp. 106-124; pp. 130-141.

<sup>30</sup> 'Reports of Committees, No. 9, 1908', in Davidson, *The Five Lambeth Conferences*, pp. 409-415.

<sup>31</sup> *Church Socialist*, March 1912; *The Times*, 16 February 1912.

deplorable methods of industrial warfare may be superseded by a better system of settling disputes inspired by good will and mutual consideration, and based upon a recognition of the community of interests, the just claims, and the solemn responsibilities of both capital and labour.”<sup>32</sup>

In the CSL’s view, this was an anaemic and inadequate stance, and so in April, Noel chaired a demonstration in London to protest the failure of the Church leadership to satisfactorily engage with social and economic issues. The meeting, attended by George Lansbury, who had been elected to parliament for Labour in 1910 but resigned in 1912, and who would become leader of the small group of opposition Labour MPs that refused to follow Ramsay MacDonald into the National Government in 1931, and the socialist Countess of Warwick, Noel’s patron at Thaxted who had joined the Social Democratic Federation, the forerunner of the BSP, in 1904,<sup>33</sup> unanimously agreed a resolution deploring the “grossly unequal distribution of wealth” and “exploitation” of the working classes. There followed a procession to Lambeth Palace where Noel delivered this remonstrance to the Archbishop’s chaplain. Davidson himself was absent at the time.<sup>34</sup> The demonstration drew some criticism in the press, *The Daily Telegraph* highlighting the incongruous mix of “top-hatted delegates” in contrast with those who wore soft felt hats, or who “preferred to go bareheaded.” In particular, the *Telegraph* drew attention to the presence of Lansbury and the Countess of Warwick and while eschewing vitriolic language, nevertheless summarised the march: “If the Church

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<sup>32</sup> *The Times*, 17 February 1912.

<sup>33</sup> John Shepherd, ‘Lansbury, George (1859-1940)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), online edition, accessed 11 July 2011; K. D. Reynolds, ‘Graville, Frances Evelyn, Countess of Warwick (1861-1983)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), online edition, accessed 7 June 2013.

<sup>34</sup> CNP U DNO/5/3 Church Socialist League flyer (n.d.).

Socialist League had wished to convey the impression that Socialism was dead...it could not have adopted a more realistic method than it did last night.”<sup>35</sup>

Noel hoped for the CSL to achieve widespread geographical and numerical expansion, even calling for a rule in the League’s Constitution that obliged every lay member to recruit one, and every ordained member to recruit three new members each year. Any member failing in this obligation would be required to explain their failure to the annual conference.<sup>36</sup> This proposal was not adopted, but Noel’s drive to expand the CSL was significant in that it demonstrates the commitment he demanded of his fellows, and gave him experience of coordinating and managing an organisation spread over a wide geographical area. This would be invaluable when he established the Catholic Crusade in 1918. Certainly, Noel was a successful organiser, and Percy Widdrington, one time Chairman of the CSL, later reflected that “the early success of the League was due to its first Organising Secretary, Conrad Noel. No priest in the country could claim so wide and intimate a knowledge of the Labour Movement.”<sup>37</sup> Noel travelled widely, visiting the various branches of the CSL to coordinate activity and maintain good communication between branches and centre.

Unsurprisingly, Noel lauded the CSL in his writings during his time as Organising Secretary. His *Socialism in Church History* (1910) does not mention the CSL until the final two pages, his purpose being to discuss Church history rather than Church present, but this late inclusion did not diminish the praise which Noel heaped upon the CSL, portraying it as the sole inheritor of all that went before: “The Church

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<sup>35</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 13 April 1912.

<sup>36</sup> *Church Times*, 14 June 1907.

<sup>37</sup> *Commonwealth*, April 1927.

Socialist League is the most vigorous champion of catholic democracy that has yet taken the field. Its power is already out of all proportion to its numbers; its growth has been phenomenal; its activities were numberless. It alone has the unreserved confidence of the secular movement. A colossal work lies before it. If the League has the energy and the wisdom, it may act like leaven upon the sluggish conscience of the age. It may be the God is raising up its members for the revival of the national religion of Jesus Christ, and the kingdoms of this world into the Kingdom of Heaven.”<sup>38</sup> In this passage, the term catholic democracy, a favourite of Noel’s, refers to the concept of establishing a religious society with a wide ranging democratic base. For Noel, this concept was epitomised by the election of bishops in the primitive Christian church, who were not appointed by the state but elected on the universal suffrage of the Church.<sup>39</sup>

Ultimately, the early successes of the CSL would not be sustained, and it would fail in this aim, though Noel’s triumphant tone is unsurprising due to the rapid growth and industry of the League between 1906 and 1912. However, the end of 1912 saw the beginnings of debates that would eventually lead to its gradual dissolution.<sup>40</sup>

Noel played a role in bringing these divisions into the open. He argued in the League’s newspaper, the *Church Socialist*, that the CSL should be theologically catholic, that is accepting of a broad range of Christian theologies, and that this democratic catholicism was the only reasonable theological basis from which to build socialism.<sup>41</sup> Responding, Egerton Swann, a leading member of the League, insisted that the CSL should emphasise its “common churchmanship”, and

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<sup>38</sup> Conrad Noel, *Socialism in Church History* (London, 1910), pp. 283-284.

<sup>39</sup> Noel, *Autobiography*, pp. 27-31.

<sup>40</sup> Goodfellow, *The Church Socialist League 1906-1923*, p. 278.

<sup>41</sup> *Church Socialist*, September 1912.

specifically criticised Noel, arguing that “Noel and his supporters are forcing things a great deal too much; such aggressiveness...is calculated to split the League to fragments.”<sup>42</sup> Swann promoted a more gradual, organic development of the League’s outlook, while Noel, typically, sought immediate specificity of principles. The debate continued into 1913, but the League failed to resolve the issue of its theological and political positions before the outbreak of the First World War.

The war put immense pressure on the CSL administratively and theologically as clergy became divided over the moral response to the war. Noel probably exacerbated matters by raising the issue of the League’s political and theological basis again at its annual conference in 1916. Noel’s argument was so definite that negotiation was impossible. The conference had to either accept his position or reject it in its entirety. In a close vote, it was rejected and so, believing that the League would ultimately fail without such a foundation, Noel resigned.<sup>43</sup> However, it would be incorrect to lay the blame for all the CSL’s wrangling over outlook and strategy solely at Noel’s door. In fact, these debates persisted until finally the League split in 1923 into two new organisations, the Anglo-Catholic League of the Kingdom of God, which habitually avoided any mention of socialism or common ownership, and the Society of Socialist Christians, an inter-denominational organisation that became affiliated to the Labour Party.<sup>44</sup>

Noel had relinquished the position of Organising Secretary of the CSL, though he remained an Honorary Secretary, when he had been granted the living of Thaxted in

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<sup>42</sup> *Church Socialist*, October 1912.

<sup>43</sup> Goodfellow, *The Church Socialist League 1906-1923*, pp. 324-325.

<sup>44</sup> Wilkinson, *Christian Socialism*, pp. 142-143; Bruce Wollenberg, *Christian Social Thought in Great Britain between the Wars* (London, 1997), p. 44.

Essex. The patron was the socialist Countess of Warwick, who encouraged the spread of Church socialism by proffering socialist priests to the three livings in her gift. E. G. Maxted had been appointed to Tilty in 1908, followed by Noel to Thaxted in 1910 and Percy Widdrington to Great Easton in 1918. All three were members, at one time, of the CSL, and all attempted to introduce socialism to their parishes. This led to some difficulties, and some opposition locally and from the national press,<sup>45</sup> and they were fortunate in their patron as the CSL by 1908 came to be regarded as a subversive organisation, and that its members were fortunate to receive preferment.<sup>46</sup> Fortunately, Noel perhaps never expected nor desired a senior appointment in the Church of England, and preferred the role of a rebel.<sup>47</sup>

At Thaxted though, Noel was able to use the fact of his appointment by a socialist patron to justify his preaching of socialism. As we shall see, Johnson used a similar rationalisation (his appointment by Ramsay MacDonald) to justify his preaching of communism from the pulpit of Canterbury Cathedral. However, as in Cummings' case, Noel's reputation for socialism was well-known in Thaxted, and he felt it was necessary to write to his new parishioners and reassure them that he did not "intend to advocate the solution of our evils which is called socialism from the pulpit of Thaxted parish church." However, he was careful not to say that he had renounced socialism, or that he would not undertake political activity in other ways. In any case, he was forced just two years later to write again to his parishioners to defend his preaching and claim that he had kept his promise to keep socialism out of the pulpit.<sup>48</sup> Despite this, his preaching in Thaxted made this a difficult claim to sustain.

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<sup>45</sup> CNP U DNO/6/8 E. G. Maxted, *The Trials and Troubles of a Socialist Vicar* (1909).

<sup>46</sup> Goodfellow, *The Church Socialist League 1906-1923*, p. 119.

<sup>47</sup> Sidney Dark, 'Foreword' in Noel, *Autobiography*, pp. vii-xi.

<sup>48</sup> Noel, *Autobiography*, p. 88; *The Country Town*, June 1912.

Noel's involvement in the CSL gave him significant experience of coordinating geographically disparate political activities, and the opportunity to make contact with like-minded clergy nationwide, but also left him with a lingering sense that an organisation based on firm catholic socialist principles was required. He was inspired to form this new organisation, the Catholic Crusade, by the environment of the First World War, and by the Russian Revolutions of 1917. Noel saw the Revolutions, first the February Revolution which overthrew Tsarist autocracy and established democracy, and then the October Revolution which brought the Bolsheviks to power, as evidence of a spiritual revival in Russia. He hosted a public meeting in London to welcome the February Revolution, and was certainly not alone in celebrating the establishment of democracy in Russia. The Revolution was regarded as an anti-German uprising, and the overthrow of autocracy was widely seen as evidence that Russia had joined the ranks of modern democratic nations.<sup>49</sup>

There is some confusion in Noel's autobiography regarding his response to the October Revolution, again perhaps due to the posthumous editing of the book. He appears to have attended another meeting to celebrate the Bolshevik Revolution, and this meeting was also attended by Ivy Litvinov, the British-born wife of Soviet Ambassador Maxim Litvinov, who expressed to Noel surprise that a clergyman would celebrate the Bolsheviks despite their professed atheism. Noel responded that "dialectical materialism gave no true inspiration for the revolution, and that it was in spite of Marxist philosophy, rather than because of it, that those changes had taken place." In his autobiography, Noel elaborated, "I believe that the mystical element in

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<sup>49</sup> *New York Times*, 16 March 1917; Noel, *Autobiography*, pp. 107-109.

the Russian people was much more the inspiration of the Russian Revolution than the appeal to the Marxian dialectic.”<sup>50</sup> This is perhaps an example of wilful self-deception, but Noel was not alone in identifying a mystical element in the Russian Revolutions.<sup>51</sup> Noel’s continued support for the Soviet Union, and for the CPGB, will be examined further below, but it is worth noting that in his autobiography, Noel stresses that he celebrated the Revolutions prior to the formation of the CPGB. He seems to wish to convey that he was a supporter of communism and was eager to see similar revolution in Britain before this programme was adopted by any British political party, and present himself as ahead of the curve.

The Catholic Crusade was a movement that infused Noel’s politics into religious practice and was designed to demonstrate to its followers the essentially Christian nature of socialism. As we have seen, the socialism that Noel subscribed to was Marxist in character, even though his politics owed more to Christian Socialist traditions than to Marx’s thought. For Noel, a Marxist society would herald the establishment of the Kingdom of God in which all means of production and exchange would be held and administered in common. In its literature, the Crusade invited Christians who shared this view to join, but again demonstrating the commitment that Noel demanded, explicitly instructed Christians concerned only with the hereafter that they were not needed and not welcome in the Crusade.<sup>52</sup> The Crusade continued a tradition of political socialism in Church organisation, following the CSU, GSM and CSL. However, in Noel’s view, these organisations had lacked the necessary specificity of principles and aims to succeed. However,

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<sup>50</sup> Noel, *Autobiography*, pp. 108.

<sup>51</sup> Wicksteed, *Life Under the Soviets*, pp. 139-157; George Lansbury, *What I Saw in Russia* (London, 1920), pp. 42-52.

<sup>52</sup> CNP U DNO/7/4 ‘The Catholic Crusade: A Brief Statement of Principles’, c. 1933.

while Noel's Crusade embraced specific goals, his refusal to negotiate had negative consequences for the Crusade.

The Catholic Crusade propagandised widely, publishing a regular newsletter, entitled *New World* between 1928 and 1930, when the No More War movement claimed this title for their own publication, at which time a new journal, the *Catholic Crusader*, began.<sup>53</sup> In addition, the Catholic Crusade published frequent pamphlets, written by Noel and others, on matters such as economic inequality, international politics, and the social teachings of Christianity.<sup>54</sup> In particular, these drew on the teachings of Jesus and the examples of the Early Church Fathers. Jesus was portrayed as a political revolutionary, resisting the might of imperial Rome, an example Noel used to demonstrate the necessity for Christians to defend oppressed peoples around the world against imperialism, and as a religious revolutionary, evidenced by His exaltation of the poor and the meek in His Sermon on the Mount, the internationalism of His teaching, and His preaching to the workers of the day.<sup>55</sup>

These publications were a factor in sustaining the Catholic Crusade as a nationwide movement. Noel had cultivated working relationships with many clergymen during his involvement with the CSL, and a number of these contacts, sharing Noel's theology, joined the Catholic Crusade. *The New World*, and the *Catholic Crusader* regularly published lists of existing Crusade churches, which reveal that the movement was geographically disparate though the number of Crusade churches never rose above ten. These publications, editing of which was devolved from

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<sup>53</sup> CNP U DNO/6/4 *The New World*, 1928-1930; CNP U DNO/6/2 *Catholic Crusader*, 1930-1933.

<sup>54</sup> For example, CNP U DNO/2/25 'The Meaning of Imperialism' (1928); CNP U DNO/6/11 'Creative Democracy and Natural Leadership' (1920); CNP U DNO/6/36 'Render unto Caesar' (1933).

<sup>55</sup> CNP U DNO/6/32 Catholic Crusade Pamphlet 'Is Jesus the Revolutionary Leader?' (n.d.).

Thaxted to other Crusade churches, most notably Holy Trinity, Sneyd, may have helped these churches identify with the movement and perpetuate Noel's Crusade. Devolving some responsibilities for editing and publishing gave leading Crusade churches a stake in the movement and provided an organisational apparatus that removed some of the responsibilities from Noel.

That being said, Noel ensured that the theological basis of the Crusade would be his own catholic socialist ideology, precisely the outlook that the CSL had rejected in 1916. Noel, for all his democratic rhetoric, has been identified as an autocrat, and as the spiritual and administrative leader of the Catholic Crusade, he exercised control over the organisation and outlook of the movement.<sup>56</sup> The Constitution and Rules of the Crusade for example established clear regulations for the administration of the movement, and while the Secretary was supposed to be selected by an annual ballot of members, it does not appear that Noel's position as Secretary was ever seriously challenged. The Central Committee, chaired by the Secretary, was bound to maintain communications with local Crusade groups, and encourage local activism. However, in the same passage, the local groups are instructed to give their obedience to the Central Committee, which would have the power to "suspend offending members".<sup>57</sup> Such rules were not unique to the Catholic Crusade, indeed similar rules existed in many political organisations, not least the CPGB, but they demonstrate the extent to which Noel was concerned with maintaining control of the body. Such central control however would have contributed to the success of the Crusade as a movement. It ensured consistency of policy and seems to have prevented the kinds of internal squabbles and controversies that Noel felt had

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<sup>56</sup> Wilkinson, *Christian Socialism*, pp. 164-165.

<sup>57</sup> CNP U DNO/7/4 *The Catholic Crusade: Constitution and Rules*, c. 1933.

afflicted the CSL. Though the Crusaders did not use the term, the organisational structures and elitist leadership element of the Catholic Crusade bore a strong resemblance to the democratic centralism that, it has been argued, characterised other radical British political movements such as the Women's Social and Political Union.<sup>58</sup>

Significantly, the Crusade was also wrapped in rituals that marked it as a profoundly religious movement, and simultaneously promoted a sense of belonging on the part of its members and allowed the Central Committee to exercise control over the ministry and activity of those members. Full membership of the Catholic Crusade was denied to prospective members until they had completed an initiation process that included instruction in Crusade theology and social principles, a period as a novice during which the candidate was obliged to attend Crusade meetings and services, and contribute to the activities of the Crusade for a period of at least one year before the reward of full membership was granted by the Central Committee. Before admission to the novitiate, candidates were tasked with familiarising themselves with the principles of the Crusade and naturally their complete adherence to these principles was a prerequisite for progression. These principles began with faith in God as the Creator of man and earth, and the "God's purpose for the world is perfection...living life at its fullest, having 'life more abundantly' as Jesus said – in complete cooperation, comradeship, love and justice – the Kingdom of Heaven."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Michael Waller, *Democratic Centralism: An Historical Commentary* (Manchester, 1981), pp. 1-20; pp. 117-132. The debate concerning elitist nature of the WPSU continues. See June Purvis, 'A "Pair of...Infernal Queens?" A Reassessment of the Dominant Representations of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, First Wave Feminists in Edwardian Britain', *Women's History Review* 5 (2) (1996): 259-280.

<sup>59</sup> CNP U DNO/7/4 *The Catholic Crusade: A Brief Statement of Principles*, c. 1933.

From this guiding principle, the Crusade argued that the social, economic and political apparatus of the modern world were in direct opposition to the intentions of God. In particular, the economic exploitation of the working classes by the wealthy, and the economic exploitation of smaller nations by wealthier countries were highlighted as particular evils. In order to establish God's Kingdom on Earth therefore, the "sources of material wealth shall be in the hands of all...and shall be used in cooperation for the common good." This belief was grounded in the lessons of Jesus and the Early Church Fathers, especially Christ's feeding of the poor, denunciation of riches and imperialism, and of false religion. Candidates for the novitiate were instructed to understand and accept these principles and study their implications for politics and theology. Upon completing this instruction, candidates were issued with a certificate by the chairman or leader of their local group, which was sent to the Central Committee. Novices were expected to continue to study Crusade theology and the implications for politics and economics, and contribute to the activities of the local group including publicising the views of the Crusade, agitating in local campaigns and assisting in the management of the group.<sup>60</sup>

Novices and full members were expected to play an active role in Church services, and were instructed to make confession at least three times a year, preferably to a Crusade priest. Importantly, the Crusade designed a series of Church services that incorporated political and economic themes into liturgy. The Rules of the Catholic Crusade instructed all members and novices to recite the 'Crusader's Prayer', which called upon God to sustain them in "withstanding the Empires of this world" and to

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<sup>60</sup> Groves, *Conrad Noel and the Thaxted Movement*, p. 294.

guide them in the building of the Kingdom at least once daily.<sup>61</sup> In addition to this prayer, the Crusade issued instructions for a ‘Red Mass’ communion service that included all aspects of the traditional Church of England communion service as set out in the Book of Common Prayer, but modified it to include additional clauses reflecting the political implications the Crusade’s theology. For example, in offering the bread, the priest was instructed to say to the congregation “As this bread was once scattered upon the mountains and being gathered together became one, so shall the nations be gathered together from the ends of the world into Thy Kingdom.” Furthermore, the priest could begin the service with a socialist prayer “that all the workers of the world may be emancipated from the dominion of Mammon and that all labour and craftsmanship may be established in justice and become a work of ministry in Thy Kingdom of grace.”<sup>62</sup> These examples demonstrate Noel’s views on the relationship between Christianity and political and economic matters. For Noel, faith was inextricably linked to politics, and we see in these examples not only what Noel saw as the political implications of Christian faith, but also the emphasis on agitation for the establishment of socialism. It was not enough to pray for a better world; the duty of true Christians was to work for its establishment.

The Red Mass was a unique feature of the Catholic Crusade. Though Cummings and Johnson incorporated political themes into their sermons (Ecclestone avoided even this), they used the Book of Common Prayer for their liturgy, and made no alterations to the proscribed prayers, collects and blessings contained therein. By contrast, Noel’s new liturgy, while only making small changes to the liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer, is significant in that it demonstrates the emergence of the

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<sup>61</sup> CNP U DNO/7/4 *The Catholic Crusade: Constitution and Rules*, c. 1933.

<sup>62</sup> CNP U DNO/6/29 The ‘Red Mass’ in *The Catholic Crusade: Devotions* (n.d.).

Catholic Crusade as a church movement that demanded the commitment of its members to revolutionary social and economic change. Indeed, demonstrating this commitment was a prerequisite for novices wishing to progress to full membership.<sup>63</sup>

Once novices had demonstrated this commitment, they would be inducted into membership of the Crusade in a solemn Church ceremony during which they would vow to serve the Crusade's aims and accept the discipline of the movement. This vow was regarded as a promise before God and any member later wishing to relinquish membership was again obliged to follow a procedure proscribed in the Crusade's Constitution. After seeking the advice of a Crusade priest, the member had to apply for release from their local group. The consent of the Central Committee was then sought, before release could be ratified by the Crusade's annual Chapter meeting. There is little evidence that this procedure was followed rigorously on every occasion that a member wished to leave the Crusade, and it is probable that on those occasions, ratification by the Chapter was a formality. It is also possible that these occasions were rare, as members of the Crusade generally were dedicated to the movement. Besides, membership of the Crusade does not seem to have ever exceeded 200 members nationwide.<sup>64</sup>

The elaborate ceremonies and religious aspects of the Catholic Crusade simultaneously allowed the Central Committee, dominated by Noel, to exercise a certain control over the theological outlook of the Crusade, and had the effect of instilling a sense of loyalty and duty on the part of its members. This, combined

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<sup>63</sup> Groves, *Conrad Noel and the Thaxted Movement*, p. 294; p. 297.

<sup>64</sup> The *Catholic Crusader* listed 'some Crusade Churches' each month, but these lists were often conspicuously identical. CNP U DNO/6/4 *Catholic Crusader*, 1930-1933; Wilkinson, *Christian Socialism*, p. 164.

with the nationwide reach of the Crusade thanks to Noel's efforts in making contact with like-minded churchmen, and the regular publishing and propaganda work of the Crusade, helped sustain it as a movement, even if the radical theology of the Crusade failed to attract large numbers of clergy. Certainly, we can conclude that the Catholic Crusade was a more successful movement in terms of overall numbers, duration and geographical reach than Cummings' Social Crusades in Owthorne and Hurst.

However, while the relative successes of the Catholic Crusade as a movement were due to Noel's role as a leader, his influence also gave rise to a set of organisational weaknesses that limited the impact of the Crusade on the political and economic landscape. Noel's unwillingness to negotiate on the theological and political basis of the Crusade made it difficult to recruit in significant numbers, and though the Crusade welcomed 'friends' who supported the Crusade without the obligations of membership, the demands made upon members and supporters in terms of belief and participation dissuaded large numbers from joining.<sup>65</sup> Likewise, the rituals that the Catholic Crusade incorporated into its church services failed to appeal to large numbers of the rural working classes. Similarly, the ways in which Noel situated his ideas in a supposed tradition of Englishness dissuaded some. At Thaxted, Noel created a community that drew on imagined traditions of Englishness, for example forming a Morris dancing team and, inspired by what he saw as a utopian medieval tradition, encouraging a local arts and crafts movement, in which family groups and collectives would operate small cottage industries making homespun products. This

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<sup>65</sup> Kingsley Martin, 'As his Friends Knew Him' in Noel, *Autobiography*, pp. 125-128.

he saw as a remedy to industrial capitalism, but it demonstrates Noel's lack of economic understanding, and failed to appeal to the working classes.<sup>66</sup>

Noel also espoused a political millenarianism, consistently arguing that a major societal transformation was soon to arrive. He saw the Russian Revolutions of 1917 as an indication of impending change and remained a supporter of the Soviet Union for the rest of his life. This support expressed itself in his preaching and writing, and also through the most famous episode in Noel's career, the 'Battle of the Flags.' During the First World War, Noel displayed the flags of the Allies in Thaxted Church. After the Russian Revolutions, he added a plain red flag to represent the workers of the world, and by 1921, it hung with the cross of St. George and the Sinn Féin tricolour on the chancel arch, and on May Day that year it was paraded in the church. By the following morning it, and the tricolour, had been stolen by Cambridge University students, leading Noel to place a notice outside reading "Stolen! Two flags from Thaxted church and two universities (Oxford and Cambridge) from the people by the rich." On 24 May, Empire Day, some residents hung the churchyard with Union flags, which Noel then replaced with 'mutilated' versions in which St Patrick's cross had been removed. At a meeting at the Thaxted Guildhall, protestors demanded that Noel cease preaching political and seditious themes. A crowd gathered outside the Church, and fights broke out between them and former policemen defending the church. Noel's friends called on him to leave Thaxted for his own safety, but he refused. After a night of unrest, Noel wrote to his wife to describe the excitement of the evening, and to reassure her that "the flags of

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<sup>66</sup> Janet Batsleer, 'Nationalism, Violence, Identity and the Catholic Crusade' in Leech (ed.), *Conrad Noel and the Catholic Crusade*, pp. 71-83.

our religion are still flying.”<sup>67</sup> Further scuffles followed when protestors tried to remove a new flag on 20 June, and on 26 June when demonstrators successfully burnt the red flag and hung more Union flags in the church. In July the red flag was burnt again, but local moderates finally took control of the opposition to prevent further violence. In January 1922 a petition calling for the removal of the flags was sent to Chelmsford consistory court and Noel defended his right to fly the flags, but by July he was instructed to remove them, and complied.<sup>68</sup>

Burns reminds us of the importance of seeing the Battle of the Flags not as an isolated incident that could otherwise be dismissed as an amusing spectacle of a harmless country cleric.<sup>69</sup> It is important to consider the incident in its proper context. The Battle of the Flags was recognised by all sides as a defining moment in the development of Noel’s radical Thaxted parish tradition, but it can also be contextualised as part of the wider debate on the relationship between Christianity and communism, as the visible symbols of communism were displayed in an Anglican church and defended by an Anglican vicar.

These events drew the attention of MPs, as William Joynson-Hicks, Conservative member for Twickenham, questioned the Home Secretary in early June if there were any plans to prevent Noel from further seditious preaching, and received a reply in the negative. Later that month another Tory, Rupert Gwynne, asked if the government had received deputations from the people of Thaxted and what steps would be taken to stop Noel’s preaching of “sedition and disloyalty”. Responding

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<sup>67</sup> Conrad Noel to Miriam Noel 25 May 1921, Hull History Centre miscellaneous papers U DX/267/2.

<sup>68</sup> Noel, *The Battle of the Flags*; Burns, ‘Beyond the ‘Red Vicar’, pp. 101-124; Groves, *Conrad Noel and the Thaxted Movement*, pp. 254-293.

<sup>69</sup> Burns, ‘Beyond the ‘Red Vicar’, p. 106.

for the government, the Conservative Under Secretary of State John Baird replied that the government and the Prime Minister were sympathetic to the complaints of parishioners, but that the government could do nothing to stop Noel as his expressions had only been opinions, and there was no evidence that he had incited violence.<sup>70</sup> The authorities lacked the formal powers to intervene on Church affairs, and certainly had no power to censure opinion. Even the Consistory Court could not prevent Noel from preaching his personal theology, and only had the power to order the removal of the flags on the grounds that, as political symbols, they were inappropriate decoration for the church. Reflecting on the Battle of the Flags during the Second World War, Noel took a triumphalist tone, as he mused on the irony that the flag that had been so reviled by his parishioners was cheerfully displayed alongside the Union flag as Britain and the Soviet Union fought Nazi Germany. In his view, “the very people who opposed it are now grateful that the USSR is pulling our chestnuts out of the fire”.<sup>71</sup> He did not live to see anti-Soviet attitudes re-emerge after the Second World War.

Noel supported the Soviet Union from its formation until his death, but his relationship with the Communist Party of Great Britain appears to have been more problematic. Noel had always been interested in party politics, as a strategy for realising social and economic reform. In the early twentieth century he had joined the Independent Labour Party, though we know little of his activity as an ILP member, save that he resigned in 1911 in order to join the newly formed British Socialist Party. The BSP accepted a Marxist programme, and after 1917 became more radical and assumed a revolutionary strategy for the achievement of reform,

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<sup>70</sup> *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, 2 June 1921 Vol. 142, c.1274; 23 June 1921 Vol. 143, cc. 1574-1575.

<sup>71</sup> Noel, *Autobiography*, p. 119.

though prior to this the BSP advocated a parliamentary strategy. In December 1911, Noel was involved in discussions on the required outlook of the Party, describing it as a “crusade” and arguing for committed action to achieve firm goals and for agitation nationwide.<sup>72</sup> This put him at odds with the cautious approach of the Party’s leader, Henry Mayers Hyndman, but was in line with feeling across much of the Labour movement between 1910 and 1914.<sup>73</sup> It was perhaps frustration with the caution of the Party leadership that led Noel to resign after only one year, in 1912.

Noel never joined another political party, but he gave his support to the CPGB, both privately and through the mechanisms of the Catholic Crusade. Privately, he felt that the CPGB was the only party that would diligently work for the establishment of socialism, though he was dismayed by the hostile attitude the Party took to religion.<sup>74</sup> Through the *Catholic Crusader* Noel encouraged members to vote for Communists in local and national elections. This led to at least one clergyman, John Groser, to leave the Crusade in 1930.<sup>75</sup> That the Catholic Crusade offered support to Communists is perhaps not surprising in light of the fact that Communists made up some of the number of ‘friends’ of the Crusade who supported its activities without being full members. Two Trotskyites, Reg Groves and Stewart Purkis, both of whom were friends of Noel, participated in Crusade activities, and attempted to propagandise on Noel’s behalf to other Communists.<sup>76</sup> It appears that having some Communist support helped to sustain the Crusade, as when the CPGB expelled its

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<sup>72</sup> *The Clarion*, 7 December 1911; 22 December 1911.

<sup>73</sup> Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900-1921: The Origins of British Communism* (London, 1969), p. 26.

<sup>74</sup> Noel to Reginald Bridgeman, 9 June 1936, Hull History Centre, Reginald Bridgeman Papers U DBN/7/2.

<sup>75</sup> Wilkinson, *Christian Socialism*, pp. 165-166.

<sup>76</sup> John McIlroy, ‘Groves, Reginald Percy (1908-1988): Communist, Trotskyist, Christian Socialist, Labour Historian and Labour Parliamentary Candidate’ in Keith Gildart and David Howell (eds.), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, Vol. 12 (Basingstoke, 2005), pp. 106-119.

Trotskyite faction, the Crusade was weakened, and Groves' and Purkis' participation in the Catholic Crusade was given as a reason for their expulsion.<sup>77</sup> After the expulsion of the Trotskyists, Noel became more critical of Stalinism, but he appears to have seen the negative aspects of Stalinism as due to the particular idiosyncrasies of Stalin, and so his faith in the Soviet project as a whole was not shaken.<sup>78</sup> Groves remained a Christian Socialist and continued to work with Noel before the latter's death, after which Groves continued his political activities, and wrote his history of Noel's Thaxted Movement.<sup>79</sup>

However, official Communist atheism created distance between Noel and the CPGB, and this explains his non-membership of the Party despite his clear support for it.

While Noel saw the CPGB as the best possible route for the revolutionary change he desired, he was unable to accept the Party's atheism. In the face of CPGB attacks on religion, Noel and the Catholic Crusade defended their position by arguing that modern Christianity was only anti-communist because it had become disconnected from the true teachings of Jesus, and that the task of Christians was to reconnect religion to the people, and the task of Communists was to realise how much of their philosophy was essentially Christian in nature.<sup>80</sup> At the same time however, members of the Catholic Crusade were barred from joining any organisation, including the CPGB, that made atheism a part of its propaganda, as this would be incompatible with the Christian faith of the Crusade. It is also possible that Noel felt that membership of the CPGB would be irrelevant. In his view, Christianity and communism would eventually come together as a single movement, and establish the

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<sup>77</sup> *Daily Worker*, 23 August 1932.

<sup>78</sup> Putterill, *Conrad Noel: Prophet and Priest 1869-1942*.

<sup>79</sup> McIlroy, 'Groves, Reginald Percy (1908-1988)'.

<sup>80</sup> Servants of the Catholic Crusade, *The Truth About Jesus: An Answer to the Communist Attack* (Wolstanton, c. 1920).

Kingdom of God on Earth. Having established the Catholic Crusade, and as its spiritual and organisational leader, Noel had no need to join the CPGB as his movement would supersede it. After the collapse of the Catholic Crusade, Noel still did not join the CPGB as the matter of Communist atheism had not disappeared, and so Noel established the Order of the Church Militant, which acknowledged an inheritance from the Catholic Crusade, and which published a regular journal until after Noel's death, but which did not achieve the same level of activity.<sup>81</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Noel's theology drew on utopian medievalist traditions and his examinations of Early Church Fathers, and he identified many links between socialism and the origins of Christianity. He characterised Jesus as a rebel and a revolutionary, and tried to return to the Church a tradition that he felt it had lost. He argued that the Church had become irrelevant and that it needed to appeal to the working classes as well as agitating for social and economic reform if it was to survive. As we have seen, the reform Noel hoped to see was Marxist in character, and the objectives of Marxism were seen by him as indistinguishable from what should be, in his argument, the objectives of the Church. His experience in the Church Socialist League assisted him in the establishment of the Catholic Crusade, and though this movement has often been dismissed as isolated,<sup>82</sup> it is important to understand it within the context of a broader collective of Anglican clergy who adopted radical socialist traditions into their thought. It is also important to recognise that what Noel established at Thaxted became a tradition of its own, and perpetuated after his

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<sup>81</sup> CNP U DNO/7/5 *The Order of the Church Militant* (n.d.); CNP U DNO/2/13 *The Church Militant* (n.d.).

<sup>82</sup> Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, p. 174.

death.<sup>83</sup> The Catholic Crusade was small but dedicated and the organisational and ceremonial aspects that Noel instituted ensured that it functioned efficiently and that he was able to maintain a certain level of control over it.

His support for the Soviet Union and for communism drew criticism from parishioners, the press and politicians, but he continued to argue that the USSR was working towards the establishment of a society based on Christian principles. He was involved in party politics, as a member of the ILP and BSP, and later as a non-member supporter of the CPGB. His non-membership is explained by the issue of CPGB atheism, which was irreconcilable with his Christian faith. He was therefore able to support the Communist Party as a practical means to achieve his ends, but it failed to satisfy his need for a Christian theological element in his activity, and so it is probable that even had other informal barriers, such as the hostility of early Communists to clergy, not existed, that he still would not have joined. For Noel, the Christian element was the primary component of all his thought and activity, and any organisation that resisted this would not have attracted his membership, even it did attract his support. Noel's support for the Soviet Union persisted, despite growing awareness of the repression of Orthodox Christians, and during the period of the war time alliance, Noel's millenarian belief in a coming revelation inspired by the work being done in the Soviet Union persisted. He did not survive to see the end of the Second World War and the beginning of Cold War hostility, in which environment support for the Soviet Union became extremely controversial. In our following chapter, we consider the pro-Soviet views of Hewlett Johnson in the light of his

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<sup>83</sup> Burns, 'Beyond the 'Red Vicar'', pp. 120-121.

position of Dean of Canterbury, and we will see how the context of the early Cold War added to this controversy.

## The Red Dean: Hewlett Johnson

Cummings and Noel both accommodated Marxism and Christianity into a single philosophy, and celebrated the establishment of the Soviet Union as evidence of impending millenarian social and economic change. Their politics, and support for the Soviet Union caused controversy locally, and we now turn our attention to Hewlett Johnson, who achieved national and international fame and notoriety for his support of the Soviet Union, and for preaching communism from the pulpit of Canterbury Cathedral itself. We examine the ways in which Johnson reconciled his Christianity and communism, and consider his activities in light of his position in the Church of England. Johnson was very much a public figure from 1931, when he was appointed Dean of Canterbury, until his retirement in 1963, and in this post he was able to widely publicise his views, and was cultivated by the USSR for propaganda purposes. Johnson travelled several times to the Soviet Union and elsewhere, including China, Korea, Cuba and the USA, taking the opportunity to prophesy the fall of capitalism and the impending victory of communism.<sup>1</sup> It was much to the chagrin of Church and secular authorities that so senior a priest should be so outspoken on political matters, and we will examine their responses to Johnson's views, and how these were informed by Johnson's position as Dean.

We draw on biographies by Robert Hughes, who provides a great deal of narrative detail, and identifies the difficulty in reconciling apparently conflicting ideas, but who does not fully solve the riddle of Johnson's views,<sup>2</sup> and John Butler's work

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<sup>1</sup> It is impossible here to give a full account of Johnson's travels, but these can be found both in his autobiography and Butler's *The Red Dean*.

<sup>2</sup> Keith Robbins. 'Review of Robert Hughes, *The Red Dean: The Life and Riddle of Dr. Hewlett Johnson*', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 39 (2) (April 1988), p. 320.

which examines Johnson as a public and private figure and the controversy caused by his support for the Soviet Union, but which, beyond acknowledging that Johnson never joined the CPGB or the Labour Party, engages rarely with Johnson's political activities. Nevertheless, Butler contributes a detailed analysis of Johnson's theological views, and benefitted from the extensive collection Johnson's personal papers, also utilised here. This collection includes correspondence, speeches, press statements and sermons. Furthermore, this chapter draws on Johnson's own autobiography, *Searching for Light*, which provides a comprehensive narrative and in many cases reiterates arguments made prior to its publication, suggesting that after a period of reflection Johnson's views on communism and the Soviet Union were unchanged.<sup>3</sup> However, it fails to engage with some of the realities of Soviet repression that by the time of writing had become well-known, as Johnson tended to relegate the reprehensible actions of the Soviet Union below his portrayal of the USSR as a new society based on Christian ideals.

Johnson's controversial views on the Soviet Union have ensured the attention of historians of the British left. Paul Hollander has been critical of clerical supporters of communism and the Soviet Union, regarding their enthusiasm as paradoxical, but highlighted the appeal of the belief that the Soviet Union was establishing social justice in overcoming the issue of Communist atheism.<sup>4</sup> Cate has emphasised the ways in which the Kremlin used the enthusiasm of fellow travellers such as Johnson as propagandists,<sup>5</sup> and it was not uncommon for former associates to criticise Johnson's fervour. Victor Gollancz, for example, wrote of Johnson's "tragic defects,"

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<sup>3</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*.

<sup>4</sup> Hollander, *Political Pilgrims*, p. 117.

<sup>5</sup> Cate, *The Fellow-Travellers* (revised edition), pp. 259-263.

“intellectual arrogance,” and “vanity” after the two had parted ways.<sup>6</sup> Johnson has attracted less attention from historians of the Church of England except to acknowledge him as a controversial figure who failed to recognise the inconsistencies between his religion and political views, and who was guilty of blind adulation of the Soviet Union in spite of mounting evidence of Soviet repression. Butler suggests that this is due to the fact that Johnson’s name is not commonly associated with any school of theological thought,<sup>7</sup> but Hastings, critical of Christian Socialism generally, describes Johnson as a “now mostly forgotten oddity”,<sup>8</sup> and in describing foreign clerical supporters of the Soviet Union, including Johnson, the historian of political religion Michael Burleigh dismissed them as “useful idiots”.<sup>9</sup>

This chapter firstly examines Johnson’s understandings of the relationship between Christianity and communism, and how he came to see the Soviet Union as the practical application of Christian faith. In doing so, we consider the religious and political influences upon Johnson and study his own *Christians and Communism* (1956) in which he made his fullest contribution on the subject. Secondly, we consider Johnson as Dean of Canterbury, addressing how he used his position to propagate his outlook, how he was manipulated for propaganda purposes by Soviet Union, and how his position as Dean affected his political activity. We also examine what this suggests about the attitudes of the Church of England between 1931 and 1963. For instance, it is clear that Johnson’s political involvements generated hostility, and demands were made that he be removed from office, but he finally voluntarily retired from Canterbury at the age of 89. We therefore have an

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Hughes, *The Red Dean*, p. 203.

<sup>7</sup> Butler, *The Red Dean*, p. 244.

<sup>8</sup> Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, p. 289.

<sup>9</sup> Burleigh, *Sacred Causes*, pp. 342-343.

opportunity to discuss the ability of the Church to manage its clergy and the extent to which radical socialists and Marxists in prominent public roles were repressed or tolerated.

### *Christians and Communism*

*Christians and Communism* represents Johnson's most complete statement on the relationship between Christianity and communism. The book included fifteen sermons that Johnson had preached in Canterbury Cathedral and were based, Johnson claimed, on forty years of study of the Soviet Union, which he saw as the incarnation of communist ideology.<sup>10</sup> When the book was published, his views were already well known and the content surprised no one, but the book provides the clearest exemplification of his perspective on the bond between the political and the theological. Each sermon began with a quote from scripture, from which Johnson built a case for the 'communism' in Jesus' teachings on such subjects as freedom, justice and wealth and described the failures of western capitalism in adhering to these teachings, in contrast to the USSR which had begun building the Kingdom of God on Earth. Capitalism, by its very nature, neglected the building of the Kingdom, while communism, both as an ideology and as practiced in the Soviet Union, was the practical route to achieve it. From this premise, Johnson even explained to his own satisfaction, the atheism of communists:

So engrossing, and rightly engrossing, do many in the communist world find the building of the Kingdom here – and so fearful are they of the sidetracking of this building by the thought of a hereafter – that

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<sup>10</sup> Hewlett Johnson, *Christians and Communism* (London, 1956).

they neglect to consider, or even feel obliged to deny, the reality of any hereafter.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, Johnson overcame in a single sentence what for many was the greatest obstacle to reconciling Christianity and communism.

*Christians and Communism* identified the ‘points of contact’ between Christianity and communism, and Johnson called on Christians to engage with communism and overcome what he saw as the incorrect impression of the anti-Christian nature of communism. He suggested that even Marx’s arguments against religion had been a result of the failure of the churches of Marx’s day to fulfil their rightful social and political role, instead becoming pious bodies concerned only with the hereafter.<sup>12</sup>

Published in 1956, the book sold poorly in Britain due to the anti-Soviet feeling generated by the Soviet invasion of Hungary of that year, and though it does not appear that the book was published as a response to those events, Johnson hoped that it would balance some of the anti-Soviet propaganda.<sup>13</sup> However, it was translated into Russian and apparently sold well in the Soviet Union, though the publication details remain obscure. Johnson later claimed that he only discovered the book’s translation when he was presented with a Russian edition by Patriarch Alexei of Moscow, and he wrote with satisfaction in his autobiography, without citing a source, that the book sold well in the USSR and that it had received high praise from senior members of the Russian Orthodox Clergy.<sup>14</sup> It is possible that *Christians and Communism* was identified by VOKS, whose interest in Johnson will be further

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<sup>11</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*, p. 367.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Christianity and Communism’ in Johnson, *Christians and Communism*, pp. 13-21.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*, p. 368.

<sup>14</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*, pp. 367-368.

explored below, was responsible for the Russian edition of the book, though this is speculation.<sup>15</sup>

Johnson's arguments in *Christians and Communism* were the product of a number of political and religious influences. As a child, he was given a religious upbringing, and although afforded a privileged childhood due to the success of the family business, he was taught the importance of charity.<sup>16</sup> Johnson's faith was challenged during his time at Owen's College, Manchester (1890-1896), when a lecture by geologist and palaeontologist Sir William Dawkins convinced Johnson of the truth of evolution, which "made the story of Genesis and the Bible false."<sup>17</sup> He was finally reconciled by the Cambridge theologian Professor Mowle who advised him to see these truths as coexistent. Mowle told Johnson that "both lines of truth are real: they will ultimately join."<sup>18</sup> This concept of dual truths is significant, as it taught Johnson that two apparently irreconcilable standpoints could be reconciled. *Christians and Communism* demonstrated the ongoing influence of this concept.

Johnson's intention in the late 1890s was for a fairly conventional Church career, first as a missionary for the Church Missionary Society (CMS), and then as a priest in Britain. However, persuaded by his father to gain some practical industrial experience first, he began an apprenticeship at the Ashbury Railway Carriage Company in Openshaw, Manchester. Here he was first exposed to the realities of labour and industrial capitalism and first made contact with working people. Until this time, his ideas of social justice had been limited charity and gradual reform, but

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<sup>15</sup> Butler, *The Red Dean*, p. 106.

<sup>16</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*, p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*, p. 29-30; HJP UKC-JOH-COR.6173 Emily Johnson to Hewlett Johnson 7 October 1890.

at Ashbury he met two apprentices, whose names have been lost to history, who introduced him to socialism and labour history. He was quickly convinced that charity was insufficient, and that revolutionary change was needed to eliminate the exploitation of the working classes and to establish true economic justice.<sup>19</sup>

To be eligible for CMS service Johnson took an ordination course at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, where his faith in the Bible was tested by the methodology of literary criticism, as he adopted deliberately contrary positions in order to test the assertions of scripture. Remembering Mowle's advice though, he was able to reconcile these conflicts.<sup>20</sup> He then took a theology degree at Wadham College, Oxford, graduating in 1904. However, when Johnson offered himself for missionary service, the CMS rejected his application, and it is likely that Johnson's liberal churchmanship, radical theology, and growing socialism were the reasons for his rejection.<sup>21</sup> The CMS was at the zenith of its influence at the time, having accepted large numbers of volunteers in the 1880s and 1890s, a period of renewed interest in missionary activity in Britain, in part inspired by the expansion of British imperial power.<sup>22</sup> While there had always been liberal and conservative factions within the CMS, it had always preferred candidates of a 'respectable' social background and to be supportive of the evangelical teaching of the Church of England,<sup>23</sup> and in light of Johnson's developing socialism, the CMS exercised some of the selectiveness that the recent increase in volunteers afforded them and refused his candidature.

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<sup>19</sup> Hewlett Johnson, *The Socialist Sixth of the World*, (London, 1939), p. 18; Johnson, *Searching for Light*, p. 32.

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*, p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*, p. 36.

<sup>22</sup> Cox, *The British Missionary Enterprise since 1700*, p. 171.

<sup>23</sup> Cox, *The British Missionary Enterprise*, pp. 86, 186-187; Eugene Stock, *The History of the Church Missionary Society*, Vol. 4 (London, 1916), pp. 568-570.

Consequently, Johnson considered rejecting a church career and returning to engineering, but was persuaded by Bishop Jayne of Chester, who had ordained Noel, to accept a curacy at St. Margaret's, Altrincham, in 1906, where he became vicar in 1908. This wealthy parish was home to many businessmen and politicians, including mill owner Sir John Leigh, from 1922 a Conservative MP. Leigh and others, collectively referred to as the 'big men' by Johnson, were theologically conservative and opposed Johnson's socialism. By contrast, a large proportion of the congregation were at the bottom of the Edwardian social hierarchy. Symbolically for Johnson, the 'big men' resided on high ground while the poor lived in slums at the bottom of the hill.<sup>24</sup> Though his socialism drew some criticism, Johnson successfully navigated a delicate line in the stratified parish.<sup>25</sup>

As a result of his Christian Socialism, Johnson considered himself to be "ninety per cent pacifist" at the outbreak of war in 1914.<sup>26</sup> Despite rejecting war on moral grounds, he argued that war under some circumstances was justified, and offered his services as a priest to the Chaplain-General of the armed forces in the North West.<sup>27</sup> Many parishioners angrily disagreed with his pacifism, including his own brother-in-law, Arthur Taylor, who described him as a "crank" and warned him that "your influence is waning fast",<sup>28</sup> though Johnson's influence would increase in the following decades.

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<sup>24</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*, pp. 47-48; *The Socialist Sixth of the World*, p. 19.

<sup>25</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.6216 Samuel Proudfoot to Hewlett Johnson 1 January 1912; Johnson, *Searching for Light* p. 41.

<sup>26</sup> Johnson, *The Socialist Sixth of the World*, p. 20.

<sup>27</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.407 Hewlett Johnson to the Chaplain-General 8 August 1914.

<sup>28</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.398 Arthur Taylor to Hewlett Johnson 11 June 1917; HJP UKC-JOH-COR.397 Taylor to Johnson 18 June 1917.

Johnson welcomed the Russian Revolutions of 1917 while at St. Margaret's, and in June chaired a public meeting "congratulating the Russian People on their attainment of Civil Liberties, and [calling] upon the Government to grant similar liberties to the people of [Britain]." <sup>29</sup> Bertrand Russell, among others, spoke on the development of democracy since the abdication of the Tsar, though reports of the meeting do not elaborate on any proposals that were made. What is reported is the interruption of the meeting by military police, searching for deserters. The *Guardian* reported that the crowd gave the soldiers a hostile reception, but Johnson appealed to the audience to allow them to do their duty. Johnson later recalled that the rank and file soldiers had become interested in the speeches, and the officer ordered them to leave, lest socialism infect his men. <sup>30</sup>

This meeting was not unique. Similar meetings were organised by Cummings and Noel, but what is notable about the meeting chaired by Johnson is that during his time as Dean of Manchester (1924-1931), he attended a dinner also attended by the secretary to the Soviet Ambassador. The secretary remembered reports of Johnson's meeting, and when he later became Dean of Canterbury, Johnson enjoyed good relations with the Embassy. <sup>31</sup> When Johnson became Dean of Canterbury, his propaganda value increased dramatically, and he was used for propaganda purposes by Soviet authorities. Johnson later claimed to have recognised the Bolshevik Revolution "as the dawn of something new and better in the world's history," <sup>32</sup> but it is difficult to determine his immediate reaction. Save for a relief mission to Austria in 1920, he remained focussed on parish duties. The Foreign Office examined a

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<sup>29</sup> *Manchester Guardian* 11 June 1917.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>31</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>32</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*, p. 50.

report of the June 1917 meeting before granting permission for Johnson to travel in 1920, but there appears to have been no suspicion of him specifically, and he was granted permission to travel.<sup>33</sup>

Johnson often referred to the Soviet Union and communism in his preaching at Canterbury, but apart from isolated incidents such as the 1917 meeting, and his preaching in support of the General Strike of 1926,<sup>34</sup> he refrained from political references in his ministry at St. Margaret's and Manchester.<sup>35</sup> After he began to preach politics in Canterbury, one former parishioner is reported to have reflected "thank goodness he didn't preach politics when he was with us!"<sup>36</sup> It appears that Johnson's ministry and political activity became more radical and more public upon his appointment to Canterbury, which naturally prompts us to ask why, so we now turn our attention to Johnson as Dean of Canterbury, the political campaigns he was involved in, and his relationship with the Soviet Union.

### **The Red Dean**

As Dean of Canterbury Johnson propagated his views widely and preached on communism and the Soviet Union from the pulpit of the mother church of the Church of England. He was also a prominent public figure who guaranteed publicity. This made him a useful Soviet propagandist, much to the chagrin of Church and secular authorities in Britain. As an established church the Church of

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<sup>33</sup> National Archives, KV 2/2151, Anglo-Russian Cooperation Committee, 4 September 1920; KV 2/2151, Scotland House, 6 September 1920.

<sup>34</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*, p. 73; p. 120.

<sup>35</sup> The published farewell to Johnson in the annual Manchester Cathedral calendar for 1931-1932 makes no mention of political activities or interests. Chetham's Library, MANCATH/2/c/1/424b Manchester Cathedral calendar and blotter, 1931.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Michael Powell, 22 October 2010.

England was, and is, closely involved in the political workings of the state. It is in part due to this integration that the Church of England was viewed with suspicion by socialists in the early twentieth century, despite the Church's accommodation of diverse views, including a long-standing Christian Socialist tradition. Johnson's tenure as Dean, beginning at the start of the 'red decade' of the 1930s, and coming to an end amidst Cold War hostility in 1963, raises further questions about the Church of England as an organisation. For instance, how did the Church leadership react to Johnson's public espousal of communism and support for the Soviet Union? Does Johnson's persistence in the face of clerical and lay opposition suggest that the Church was unable to suppress Johnson, or does it suggest that the Church as an institution was powerful enough that it was able to safely ignore him? Alternatively, were certain Church leaders, such as William Temple, unwilling to silence Johnson because they recognised the importance of engaging with the issues he raised, but that these issues could not be embraced by the Church as a whole?

We also consider how Johnson's position as Dean of Canterbury informed his cultivation by Soviet authorities for propaganda purposes. Johnson used his position as Dean to great effect, and was often, when abroad, either mistaken for the Archbishop of Canterbury himself, or misconceptions about the role of the Dean in the Church of England hierarchy led many to conflate the two positions and assume that the Dean was authorised to speak for the Church on spiritual matters, leading several of Archbishops to issue statements correcting this misunderstanding. Johnson did not separate his position as Dean from his political activity. He preached communism in Canterbury Cathedral, and used his position to broadcast

his views. It was this conflation of politics with his position in the Church that earned Johnson the cognomen ‘Red Dean’.

Intended as a scornful term, Johnson however revelled in the moniker ‘Red Dean’, just as Noel and Ecclestone were each happy in their own times to be known as ‘Red Vicar’. The appellation has been attached to others, including Katherine Murray, the ‘Red Duchess’ of Atholl,<sup>37</sup> and more recently to the forenames of Ken Livingstone and Ed Miliband by the hostile press. Some have attempted to distance themselves from the label for fear that it would have a negative impact on the political careers of those it has been attached to, but Johnson, Noel and Ecclestone were pleased to be known by this sobriquet, and Johnson encouraged its usage.

The Deanery of Canterbury, like that of Manchester, is the gift of the Crown, and both were granted to Johnson on the recommendation of Ramsay MacDonald. In 1924, MacDonald was Prime Minister of the first Labour government, and William Temple, then Bishop of Manchester, strongly recommended Johnson for the Deanship.<sup>38</sup> In 1931, MacDonald was Prime Minister of the National Government, and Temple, then Archbishop of York, recommended him as a candidate for Canterbury. MacDonald endorsed Johnson for the position, writing that “I cannot better serve the interests of the Church than by offering you [Johnson] the succession to the Deanery”.<sup>39</sup> Johnson would later cite his appointment by a socialist Prime Minister as justification for preaching socialism in the Cathedral. Johnson’s capable management of Manchester Cathedral and his ability as a preacher however won him

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<sup>37</sup> Sheila Hetherington, *Katherine Atholl, 1874-1960: Against the Tide* (Aberdeen, 1989); Brian Masters, *The Dukes: The Origins, Ennoblement and History of Twenty-six Families* (London, 2001), pp. 249-251.

<sup>38</sup> Butler, *The Red Dean*, p. 45.

<sup>39</sup> Ramsay MacDonald to Hewlett Johnson, 30 March 1931 (unnumbered in archive).

the appointment. He was known to be sympathetic to the Soviet Union and to socialism, but there was no hint of controversial political entanglements, and his appointment was confirmed with no foreknowledge that in the context of the 1930s he would become a prominent supporter of the Soviet Union. His Christian Socialism perhaps appeared to be of the same brand as Temple's, who believed in the Church's role in ameliorating social and economic conditions not simply through philanthropic work but also by exercising influence on public policy.<sup>40</sup> For Temple, the involvement of the Church in politics had limits,<sup>41</sup> but Johnson's approach would later appear to be very different. His critics often cited the prominence that Johnson was accorded by holding the position of Dean as reason for him to temper his public utterances on political matters, but Johnson countered by claiming that it was his duty to use his position as Dean to advance Christian causes.

The appointment to Canterbury actually reduced Johnson's workload, as the Chapter was staffed by capable men and supported by several lay officers. Canterbury itself also appears to have offered Johnson fewer opportunities for civic engagement than he had found in Manchester, so he cast his sights on political matters beyond the confines of Canterbury, and into the national and international arenas.<sup>42</sup> Johnson's first peregrination, to China in 1932, was prompted by hearing news of the devastation caused by floods and famine in 1928, and he regarded it as a highly significant moment in his career.<sup>43</sup> It was an exciting experience, including surveying flood damage, being chased by bandits and the novelty of extended foreign travel. He returned to Britain via the United States, taking the opportunity to

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<sup>40</sup> Alan M Suggate, 'William Temple', in Peter Scott and William T Cavanaugh (eds.) *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 165-179.

<sup>41</sup> William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order* (London, 1976), pp. 31-32; pp. 96-97.

<sup>42</sup> Butler, *The Red Dean*, pp. 46-48.

<sup>43</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*, pp. 97-110; Butler, *The Red Dean*, pp. 50-54.

publicise the plight of China, and though very little of this was carried in the press, his prophesy of the fall of capitalism was accorded attention.<sup>44</sup> The experience contrasted sharply with his first task upon his return, when he was called upon to rule on the acceptability of cyclists wearing shorts in the Cathedral. He proposed an amendment to the Cathedral's statutes to remove such matters from the Dean's purview so he might be better able to "undertake matters of wider import connected with Church and Nation."<sup>45</sup> In Johnson's view this included political matters, and he felt justified in using his position as Dean of Canterbury in his subsequent political activities.

Johnson continued to have responsibilities in Canterbury after 1932, but being free of some of the bureaucratic minutiae of the Cathedral enabled him to travel and propagandise more widely. He began to preach on communism and fascism, and joined many Communists in regarding the Spanish Civil War as a conflict not only between two factions for control of a single nation, but between two fundamentally opposed ideologies for the organisation of the world. In March 1937 Johnson toured Republican Spain to investigate allegations that the Republicans had suppressed freedom of worship.<sup>46</sup> The Foreign Office initially refused permission for the tour, which included academics such as the philosopher John MacMurray, and churchmen such as E. O. Iredell, the vicar of Barnsbury, to go ahead, but once publicity had been given to this decision, the tour began.<sup>47</sup> The group found no evidence to substantiate the accusations, instead finding thriving protestant and Roman Catholic

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<sup>44</sup> *The American Guardian*, 15 July 1932.

<sup>45</sup> Patrick Collinson, Nigel Ramsay and Margaret Sparks (eds.), *A History of Canterbury Cathedral* (Oxford, 1995), p. 320.

<sup>46</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*, pp. 143; Brian Shelmerdine, *British Representations of the Spanish Civil War* (Manchester, 2006), pp. 90-91.

<sup>47</sup> Butler, *The Red Dean*, p. 69; HJP UKC-JOH-COR.194 Anthony Eden to Hewlett Johnson, March 1937.

churches.<sup>48</sup> The delegation also saw the plight of civilians and witnessed the bombing of Durango by the German Luftwaffe, and found it, in Johnson's words, "almost completely destroyed".<sup>49</sup> He was infuriated by Nationalist claims that the International Brigades were responsible for the destruction of the town, and commandeered a local radio station to broadcast his own account.<sup>50</sup>

It should be noted that Johnson's claims about the churches during the Spanish Civil War were by no means universal, and contrast sharply with the views of George Orwell, who in *Homage to Catalonia*, his reflections of his own tour of Spain, acknowledges the destruction of churches in Republican-held territory. This appears to have been part of a process of Sovietizing Republican areas, as cafés and shops were collectivised and the inhabitants addressed one another as 'comrade'.<sup>51</sup> Orwell suggests that the Roman Catholic Church in Spain prior to the Civil War had become a political racket and had drifted into the Nationalist sphere, and so at the outbreak of war, there was no lingering reverence for a religion that had no relevance for the communists and anarchists of the Republican side. Interestingly, Orwell proposes that Christianity in Catalonia had been replaced by anarchism, "which undoubtedly had a religious tinge", suggesting that even Orwell, who celebrated the destruction of the churches, recognised some similarities between far-left politics and religion. He also states that even the "moribund" Church of England would be unlikely to attract

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<sup>48</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.169, UKC-JOH-COR.185, UKC-JOH-COR.186 Johnson's notes during the tour, March-April 1937; *Report of a Recent Religious Delegation to Spain, April 1937* (London, 1937).

<sup>49</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*, p. 144.

<sup>50</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.171 text of Johnson's radio address.

<sup>51</sup> George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (London, 2000), pp. 2-3.

as much hatred as did the Roman Catholic Church if similar circumstances arose in Britain.<sup>52</sup>

After returning from Spain, Johnson organised a committee to raise funds to send a food-ship to Bilbao,<sup>53</sup> and publicly praised the Republicans while vilifying Nationalist Spain and Hitler's Germany. This foray into the political drew some opposition. Sir William Wayland, MP for Canterbury, bemoaned Johnson's actions,<sup>54</sup> and a vicar in Oxford, S. E. Cottam, informed Johnson that he would pray for the clergy killed by Johnson's "friends" in Spain.<sup>55</sup> Archbishop Lang, who supported the British government's policy of non-intervention,<sup>56</sup> expressed his disquiet that Johnson had thrown the weight of his position behind one side while the state remained impartial. Johnson had said of the Republicans, "It does not matter what people say with their lips, even if it means denying that there is a God, if they have religion in their hearts," and Lang pleaded with Johnson not to use phrases would inevitably cause misunderstanding.<sup>57</sup> The fact that Lang felt it necessary to write illustrates Johnson's growing public profile and his reply details what he saw as the moral failures of European Churches.<sup>58</sup>

Lang's reply did not respond to Johnson's specific criticisms, but instead concentrated on his position as Dean:

I cannot think that you would so wish to use the prestige and  
publicity given to the position of Dean of Canterbury as a means of

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<sup>52</sup> Orwell, *Homage*, pp. 58-60.

<sup>53</sup> Hewlett Johnson, *The Socialist Sixth of the World*, (London, 1939), pp. 382-384.

<sup>54</sup> *The Times*, 10 May 1937.

<sup>55</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.174 S. E. Cottam to Hewlett Johnson 10 June 1937.

<sup>56</sup> Tom Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 170.

<sup>57</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.6451 Cosmo Gordon Lang to Hewlett Johnson, 20 April 1937.

<sup>58</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.6437 Johnson to Lang, 24 April 1937.

propagating your own opinions on political and economic matters so as to involve in them, however unfairly, the special position of Canterbury Cathedral itself and of all that Canterbury means throughout the world. Of course you are entitled to your own convictions and to give the fullest expression to them as an individual. But it seems to me that this would be done more fitly if you were in the position of greater freedom and less responsibility.<sup>59</sup>

It is unclear whether Lang expected Johnson to choose between ceasing his political work or resigning his position, but Johnson had no intention of doing either. He did apologise for causing Lang distress, but this was the only concession made. Lang issued a statement distancing himself from Johnson's views, explaining to Johnson that he saw this as a reluctant necessity.<sup>60</sup> It was the only course available to Lang, who was otherwise unable to censure Johnson as he had not committed any act for which he could be dismissed. The Cathedral machinery still ran efficiently, despite Johnson's absence, and the Church had no mechanism to dictate the themes of his sermons. It is also possible that Lang was willing to make some allowances for Johnson, since he had been one of a small number of supporters during the First World War when Lang had been criticised for stressing the common nature of Britons and Germans as children of God.<sup>61</sup> However, Johnson's activity drew a good deal of criticism in the press, and there was a danger that by remaining silent, Lang might seem to endorse Johnson's views.<sup>62</sup> Lang's statement not only imposed distance between himself and Johnson, but anticipating, or possibly responding to

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<sup>59</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.6138 Lang to Johnson, 3 May 1937.

<sup>60</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.6143 Lang to Johnson, 23 June 1937; HJP UKC-JOH-COR.6142 Johnson to Lang, 25 June 1937.

<sup>61</sup> Alan Wilkinson, 'Lang, (William) Cosmo Gordon, Baron Lang of Lambeth (1864-1945)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), online edition, accessed 6 May 2013.

<sup>62</sup> *Evening Standard*, 7 July 1937.

some private calls for Johnson to be removed, Lang added that he had no power to remove Johnson from his office. He did not refer to his hints that Johnson could resign, but he did state his regret that Johnson had brought the Church of England generally, and Canterbury Cathedral specifically, into “the arena of acute political controversy”.<sup>63</sup>

Johnson’s enthusiastic support of the Soviet Union also brought the Church into controversy, and that this support continued despite emerging evidence of repression in the USSR compounded the irritation of Church authorities. From 1931 he was a welcome guest at the Soviet Embassy and the Ambassador, Ivan Maisky, became a good friend, and probably the main conduit through which Johnson was monitored by VOKS.<sup>64</sup> Though often portrayed as a purely diplomatic organisation, VOKS was intended to cultivate western intellectuals and cultural figures as propagandists for the Soviet Union.<sup>65</sup> Johnson fitted the bill perfectly. In order to achieve its aims, VOKS used two strategies. The first was to establish or co-opt societies in foreign countries to disseminate propaganda. The British Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR was thus co-opted, and Johnson, as an active member, spoke at several meetings throughout the 1930s. Lang was moved again to express his regret, in a private letter, that Johnson so willingly associated with the Society and the USSR while evidence of Soviet repression continued to become public knowledge.

Johnson did not reply, but his annotations on the letter indicate that he felt he had a

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<sup>63</sup> LPL Lang Papers Vol. 149, ff. 145-150 press statement.

<sup>64</sup> Butler, *The Red Dean*, p. 73. Maisky and Johnson remained in contact for many years, the last known correspondence between them coming in 1963 when Maisky asked Johnson, like so many others had over the years, how he had remained a Christian and yet had been able to support Stalin’s Russia, HJP UKC-JOH-COR.3441 Ivan Maisky to Hewlett Johnson, 8 March 1963; Johnson, *Searching for Light*, p. 85.

<sup>65</sup> Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920-40*, pp. 142-174; Butler, *The Red Dean*, pp. 75-76.

higher understanding of matters in the USSR than Lang.<sup>66</sup> The Society provided Johnson with material for his speeches and writings, and in several instances Johnson copied word for word documents prepared by VOKS and then disseminated through the Society.<sup>67</sup>

The second strategy VOKS employed to develop propagandists was to invite intellectuals and cultural figures on managed tours of the USSR, superficially as a showcase of Soviet achievements, but with the intention of having these individuals propagandise for the USSR upon their return home. It is probable that Johnson's first visit to the Soviet Union in 1937, about which little is known, was managed by VOKS. He appears to have been offered the opportunity to visit the USSR, and despite speaking no Russian and at short notice, he jumped at the chance.<sup>68</sup> VOKS organised Johnson's tours of 1945 and 1954, the former of which was ostensibly to recognise the efforts of the Joint Committee for Soviet Aid in providing aid to the Soviet war effort.<sup>69</sup>

Johnson's support for the Soviet Union remained constant throughout the tumultuous years of the Second World War. In the late 1930s, particularly following his visit to Spain in 1937, Johnson spoke out against fascism as a danger to Christian civilisation, but immediately accepted and defended the Nazi-Soviet Non-aggression Pact of 1939, arguing that for the Soviet Union the Pact was a regrettable but necessary expedient as Britain, France and the United States had rebuffed the

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<sup>66</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.6108 Lang to Johnson, 22 March 1933.

<sup>67</sup> This was particularly the case with Johnson's *The Socialist Sixth of the World* (1939). See Butler, *The Red Dean*, pp. 90-91; Johnson, *The Socialist Sixth of the World* (London, 1939), p. 14.

<sup>68</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.7624 Ivan Maisky to Hewlett Johnson, 15 September 1937; HJP UKC-JOH-COR.8869 Nowell Edwards to Hewlett Johnson, 14 September 1937; HJP UKC-JOH-COR.8838 Hewlett Johnson to Nowell Edwards, 20 September 1937.

<sup>69</sup> Hewlett Johnson, *Soviet Success* (London, 1947), p. 13.

USSR's friendly overtures. He went further, claiming that the Soviet-Finnish War of 1939-1940 was the result of the Finnish government, on the instruction of the British and French, rejecting a Soviet proposal for a renegotiated border that would have granted the Finns more territory.<sup>70</sup>

An upsurge of anti-Russian sentiments followed in Britain, and fearing that by remaining silent they may be assumed to agree with Johnson, the Canons of Canterbury Cathedral informed Archbishop Lang of their intention to publicly disassociate themselves from Johnson. Lang, recognising the potential damage a public quarrel could do, persuaded the Canons to wait until he had attempted to induce Johnson to temper his public utterances. Lang emphasised that for a man in Johnson's position, it was dangerous to publicise such controversial opinions lest they be interpreted as the views of the whole Church, and he suggested, again, that Johnson would have greater freedom to voice his political views as a private citizen than as a clergymen.<sup>71</sup> In an angry reply, Johnson refused to resign, arguing that politics and religion were inseparable entities, and that "the principles at stake lie at the very root of my Christian belief and touch upon fundamental moral aspects which I feel it is my duty to preach."<sup>72</sup> With Lang unsuccessful, the Canons published a letter in the *Times* stressing the incompatibility of Johnson's views with his position as Dean, and called upon him to consider his position.<sup>73</sup> Johnson refused, and the incident strained working relations for the remainder of the War

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<sup>70</sup> Johnson, *Socialist Sixth of the World*, pp. 382-384.

<sup>71</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.7153 Lang to Johnson, 27 February 1940.

<sup>72</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.7151 Johnson to Lang, 5 March 1940.

<sup>73</sup> *The Times*, 13 April 1940; *Daily Telegraph*, 14 March 1940.

years. In the end, it was actually the instigator of the incident that resigned, in 1945.<sup>74</sup>

In 1941, Johnson's view on war would apparently shift again, when after the German invasion of the Soviet Union he became an ardent supporter of the war effort and formed a Joint Committee for Soviet Aid to provide material resources to the Soviet war effort, and it was ostensibly as an acknowledgement of these efforts that Johnson was invited to visit the Soviet Union in 1945.<sup>75</sup> The esteem Johnson was shown during the tour suggests that VOKS was keenly aware of his propaganda value. Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexei of Moscow presented to him an elaborate pectoral cross that Johnson wore on all subsequent public appearances. In the Church of England, such badges are usually the preserve of bishops, and Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher pleaded with Johnson not to wear the cross in order to prevent his being mistaken for a bishop. Fisher suggested Johnson wear the cross in the Cathedral, but not beyond the precincts,<sup>76</sup> but Johnson disregarded this, suggesting that he enjoyed being mistaken for a bishop in his public appearances, and his efforts to correct this mistake were muted at best. In December 1947 Fisher issued a statement clarifying the positions of Dean and Archbishop to ensure that foreign audiences did not assume that Johnson had the authority to represent the Church on spiritual and political matters, and to distance himself from Johnson's views in particular. It was Johnson's position as Dean that made it important to issue the clarification and it irritated Fisher that Johnson's response was to reaffirm his right

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<sup>74</sup> Butler, *The Red Dean*, pp. 93-110.

<sup>75</sup> Johnson, *Soviet Success*, p. 13.

<sup>76</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.6744 Geoffrey Fisher to Hewlett Johnson, 8 August 1945.

to speak about socialism and Christianity because he had been appointed by a socialist Prime Minister.<sup>77</sup>

Indicating Johnson's perceived value as a propagandist, during his 1945 tour he was invited to an audience with Stalin himself. His activities demonstrated passionate enthusiasm for the Soviet Union, and his position as Dean ensured publicity.

Johnson saw the meeting with Stalin as an honour and a privilege, and we only have Johnson's published account as a record as neither Johnson nor Stalin, nor Molotov who was also present, recorded any minutes,<sup>78</sup> but it seems that Stalin had an agenda in inviting Johnson to the meeting, and had two messages he wished to convey to Johnson. The first was that after the defeat of Nazi Germany it would be difficult to avoid further conflict between east and west, but that the Soviet Union did not seek war with Britain. The second was that though the Bolshevik regime had been forced to defend itself against the reactionary Orthodox Church in 1917, Christians in the Soviet Union now enjoyed freedom of religion.<sup>79</sup> Johnson accepted both claims, and the need for peace and Soviet freedom of worship became common themes in his subsequent speeches and publications.

Johnson's support for the Soviet Union and attitude to the war between 1939 and 1945 closely mirrored the policies of the CPGB. The Party's stance on war and on Nazi Germany shifted rapidly from emphasising the threat of Nazi Germany to peace in the late 1930s, to a policy of non-aggression after the signing of the 1939 Pact, before finally strongly supporting the war against Germany after the invasion of

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<sup>77</sup> UKC-JOH-COR.6742, UKC-JOH-COR.6743 Geoffrey Fisher to Johnson, 10 December 1947; *Daily Telegraph*, 17 December 1947; HJP UKC-JOH-COR.6471 Fisher to Johnson, 27 December 1947.

<sup>78</sup> Butler, *The Red Dean*, p. 158.

<sup>79</sup> Johnson, *Soviet Success*, pp. 71-73; Butler, *The Red Dean*, pp. 160-161.

1941. This prompted criticism from non-communists, and created a split within the political left.<sup>80</sup> It was this issue which caused a schism to open between Johnson and Gollancz, and after an acrimonious disagreement about the allocation of resources to publish additional impressions of Johnson's *The Socialist Sixth of the World*, the two parted ways, and Gollancz would later describe his former collaborator in scathing terms.<sup>81</sup>

However, the period of the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union also led to the rehabilitation of Johnson's views. During this period, pro-Soviet views became more politically acceptable, and Johnson, as a prominent apologist for the Soviet Union, found his views to be in vogue. His rehabilitation was in part due to his efforts to defend Canterbury Cathedral from bomb damage, and his decision to open the crypt as a bomb shelter, and once the Soviet Union was an ally, his support for the war brought his views in line with public opinion. He hoped to use his contacts within the Soviet Union to develop further cooperation, and he continued to espouse the peaceful intentions of the Soviet Union and that the USSR would respond to trust and friendship. During the wartime alliance, there was a far bigger audience that was prepared to listen to these pronouncements. However, after the end of the Second World War, the hopes that had existed for continued cooperation faded quickly and Cold War hostility became the norm. It was perhaps frustrating for Johnson that though his views had not changed, they were once again out of favour,

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<sup>80</sup> Kevin Morgan, *Harry Pollitt* (Manchester, 1993), pp. 115-118; Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union*, pp. 158-162.

<sup>81</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.1284 Victor Gollancz to Hewlett Johnson, 25 October 1939; HJP UKC-JOH-COR.1325 Gollancz to Johnson, 4 October 1939; HJP UKC-JOH-COR.1332 Gollancz to Johnson, 8 December 1939; HJP UKC-JOH-COR.9224 Johnson to Gollancz, 30 April 1943; Hughes, *The Red Dean*, pp. 81-83.

but he continued to support the USSR, and other communist regimes, in his preaching and publishing.

Undeterred, Johnson responded to the growing international hostility of the late 1940s by continuing to travel and propagandise on behalf of the Soviet Union. He travelled twice, in 1946 and 1948, to the United States where he spoke at rallies in Madison Square Gardens on the need for peace. These meetings were attended by tens of thousands of people, indicating Johnson's popularity and effectiveness in attracting large crowds. In advertisements for the rallies, he was named as "the very reverend Hewlett Johnson, Dean of Canterbury", and it is probable that his position helped attract such large audiences. The use of his position in this way frustrated the Church and secular authorities in Britain, and delighted his observers in Moscow.<sup>82</sup> Johnson was in this respect unique amongst clerical supporters of communism and the Soviet Union. No other clergyman of any denomination is recorded as attracting such audiences. In 1950, he continued to participate in the peace campaign by joining many Communists and fellow travellers at the 1950 World Peace Congress. We will discuss this in greater detail in the following chapter, but it was ostensibly in recognition of his participation in the peace movement that in 1951, Johnson was awarded the Stalin Peace Prize.

Established as a Soviet alternative to the Nobel Prize, a number of winners were nevertheless also Nobel laureates. At the time, Johnson was under surveillance by the British security services, and the award drew attention to his finances, as there were concerns that the prize money would be used to fund subversive agencies in

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<sup>82</sup> Butler, *The Red Dean*, pp. 165-167; pp. 172-173.

Britain. However, how Johnson used these funds is unclear. Two instalments, amounting to a total of £10,000, were transferred from the Narodny Bank in Moscow to Johnson's account in Canterbury in 1951 and 1952, and MI5 regarded this as his prize money, though the total prize was probably larger than this sum. It is possible that the remainder was diverted to other causes. Johnson frequently donated large portions of his income to various organisations. For instance, the profits from the sales of his books in the USA were given to the Communist Party of the USA, and in East Germany his book sales funded university scholarships. The £10,000 Johnson received may have been used for nothing more than private expenses or in servicing maintenance costs on the properties that he owned in the early 1950s. At this time, Johnson owned four flats and three garages, a small café and shares in Johnson's Wire Works, and he was often described as a hypocrite for denouncing capitalism while deriving a private income from such investments. However, the properties were purchased primarily so that in the event of Johnson's death they could be sold to provide for his family. The intermittent income they provided was barely enough to cover their maintenance costs and the café ran at a loss.<sup>83</sup>

Johnson was well-known for donating large sums to various left wing organisations and causes, and the security services examined Johnson's finances in order to determine if he was funding or coordinating subversive activity. In the environment of the early 1950s, during the Korean War and when Cold War hostility was consequently high, the fact that Johnson had received a substantial fund from the Soviet Union gave MI5 an additional incentive to examine his finances. Referring to the Stalin Peace Prize, the MI5 paper on Johnson's finances stated "the Russian have

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<sup>83</sup> National Archives, KV 2/2152, Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet, Thursday 10 July 1952; Butler, *The Red Dean*, pp. 190-192.

obviously placed a high value on his services”, suggesting that the secret services saw the prize as a reward for Johnson’s propagandising, and it certainly appears to have been part of an ongoing charm offensive to cultivate him, but the paper concluded that “insofar as the Dean has acted quite openly, they cannot be regarded as sinister.” As a result, the security services ceased their investigations against Johnson. Whether Johnson saw the Prize as a reward for his “services” to Soviet propaganda and an incentive to further propagandising is unknown, and his autobiography is silent on this issue, detailing only the honour he was shown in the Soviet Union, and typically glowing descriptions of the post-war reconstruction of the Soviet Union.<sup>84</sup> However, Johnson soon returned to political controversy over the issue of the Korean War.

During a visit to China in 1952 Johnson was informed by Chinese clergy of their suspicions that US forces in North Korea had used bacteriological weapons.<sup>85</sup> Johnson investigated, and upon his return to Britain repeated these allegations, presenting evidence that more objective observers found questionable, including the confession of two US pilots shot down over North Korea January 1952. The language of the confession suggests that it was prepared for the airmen by their captors, but Johnson accepted it as genuine.<sup>86</sup> He published the pamphlet *I Appeal*<sup>87</sup> and he denounced the US from the pulpit of Canterbury Cathedral. Johnson was

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<sup>84</sup> National Archives, KV 2/2152, Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet, Thursday 10 July 1952; Johnson, *Searching for Light*, pp. 286-288.

<sup>85</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.5867 Manifesto of Chinese Catholics Protesting Against American Bacteriological Warfare, 25 June 1952.

<sup>86</sup> Hewlett Johnson, Press Statement, 8 July 1952 (unnumbered in archive); HJP UKC-JOH-COR.5852 Kenneth Enoch, *The Evidence of Two American Airmen*, 8 April 1952.

<sup>87</sup> Hewlett Johnson, *I Appeal* (London, 1952).

vilified in the press, and a House of Lords debate was scheduled to discuss his activities.<sup>88</sup>

In the debate, the Labour peer Lord Ammon asked if it would be possible for the Government to bring legal action against Johnson for his statements, which he felt might create difficulties for the British Government internationally, and for bringing the Church of England into disrepute.<sup>89</sup> Archbishop Fisher, using the protection of parliamentary privilege to speak his mind, excoriated Johnson as “blind, unreasonable and stupid” and criticised Johnson’s condemnation of the US based on nothing more than a cursory examination of evidence that he was not qualified to judge, when had he demanded only an impartial investigation, there would have been no grounds to complain about his conduct. However, Fisher declared that the Church could do nothing to censure Johnson. A Church charge of heresy would assuredly fail, and though the Church Dignitaries (Retirement) Measure 1948 allowed a priest to be impeached for ‘unbecoming conduct’, it precluded prosecution on the grounds of political or social opinions.<sup>90</sup> Others joined Fisher in castigating Johnson, and there appears to have been some support for the Liberal Lord Teviot’s suggestion that new legislation be brought forward to remove Johnson and others of similar opinions from the Church.<sup>91</sup> However, the sense of immediate impotence permeated the contributions. For the Government, the Marquess of Salisbury closed the debate by concluding that Johnson was “not dangerous, he is merely contemptible. And the course most consistent with the dignity of this House and of

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<sup>88</sup> *Sunday Express*, 6 July 1952; HJP UKC-JOH-COR.1719 John Baker White MP to Hewlett Johnson, 8 July 1952; HJP UKC-JOH-COR.1760 John Profumo MP to Hewlett Johnson, 6 July 1952.

<sup>89</sup> *Hansard*, House of Lords Debate, 15 July 1952, Vol. 177, c. 1116.

<sup>90</sup> *Hansard*, Lords Debate, Vol. 177, cc. 1120-1126.

<sup>91</sup> *Hansard*, Lords Debate, Vol. 177, c. 1130.

this country is to treat him with the contempt he most surely deserves.”<sup>92</sup> The Cabinet seems to have reached the same conclusion, deciding that to attempt to censure Johnson would only give his views greater publicity, and that therefore it was politically better to ignore him as much as possible.<sup>93</sup>

The debate reveals a particular concern with Johnson’s political activities in light of his position as Dean of Canterbury. The Earl Winterton told the House that Johnson, as Dean “is very valuable to the Communists” and “is connected in many peoples’ minds with the Church of England and with Canterbury Cathedral, and is even confused with the Archbishop himself.”<sup>94</sup> Winterton’s view, shared by many other members, was that Johnson’s political views, especially his uncritical support of the USSR, were incompatible with his position as Dean. Furthermore, despite Johnson not being a member of the CPGB, his support for communism meant that he willingly subordinated himself to the policies and outlook of the CPGB and the Soviet Union, and therefore was subordinated to a hierarchy that compromised his post. Winterton especially highlighted the moral inconsistencies of Johnson’s friendships with those in the Soviet Union and China who had persecuted Christians: “The moral offence is that he has gone to be a colleague of torturers and apparently to approve of that torture.”<sup>95</sup>

The debate is also notable because of the references to the CPGB, which offer some potential insights into Johnson’s relationship with the Party. Fisher suggested that to join the Party would necessitate an acceptance of the official atheism of the Party,

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<sup>92</sup> *Hansard*, Lords Debate, Vol. 177, cc. 1163-1164.

<sup>93</sup> Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet, 10 July 1952, National Archives CAB 128/25/17; *Daily Graphic and Daily Sketch*, 16 July 1952.

<sup>94</sup> *Hansard*, Lords Debate, Vol. 177, c. 1138.

<sup>95</sup> *Hansard*, Lords Debate, Vol. 177, cc. 1137-1139.

and that this explains Johnson's non-membership.<sup>96</sup> Though Fisher explained that Johnson was not a subscriber to atheistic communism, Earl Winterton responded by arguing that "the Dean is an avowed, acknowledged, and orthodox Communist. He is not...actually a member of the Communist Party; but one would need to be very jejune or very naïve ... if one supposed that the fact that he has not signed on the dotted line makes him any less a Communist."<sup>97</sup> In these two views we actually see three possible explanations for Johnson's non-membership of the CPGB. The first, suggested by Fisher, is that to join the CPGB would be an acceptance of atheism, something that Johnson could not accept. Similarly, the second possibility is that membership of the CPGB may have made ecclesiastical charges of heresy, which could have led to his dismissal, much more plausible. Finally, Winterton suggested that Johnson saw himself as a Communist regardless of Party membership, and that Party membership was therefore irrelevant. Of course, these factors are not mutually exclusive, and it is probable that all three played their part in Johnson's calculated distance from the CPGB.

It should also be noted here that the CPGB as an organisation may have been unwilling to welcome Johnson as a member. There were individuals, such as Victor Gollancz's collaborator in the Left Book Club John Strachey that the Party viewed as more useful to its cause as non-members, as the Party could plausibly claim that these individuals were impartial even as they enthusiastically advocated communism and the Soviet Union. Certainly Victor Gollancz was viewed as such by Party headquarters, and the CPGB was able to exercise a certain amount of control over

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<sup>96</sup> *Hansard*, Lords Debate, Vol. 177, c. 1124.

<sup>97</sup> *Hansard*, Lords Debate, Vol. 177, c. 1137.

the LBC, however loudly Gollancz proclaimed his independence.<sup>98</sup> However, it is also possible that the CPGB would have been wary of welcoming Johnson into the fold. Johnson, though he frequently followed the line of the CPGB, was an individualist and his willingness to enter disputes with his Church superiors suggests that he would have been unwilling to submit to Party discipline. His independence was evidently troubling for Harry Pollitt, General Secretary of the CPGB, with a brief interlude during the Second World War, from 1929 until 1956, who is reported as describing Johnson to Gollancz as “that bloody red arse of a dean”, though the veracity of this quote is difficult to ascertain.<sup>99</sup>

In their debate, the House of Lords concluded that nothing could be done to censure Johnson, and he did nothing to temper his support for the Soviet Union, or for Stalin. In 1956, Johnson demonstrated his ongoing support for Stalin by refusing to accept Khrushchev’s denunciation of him. Khrushchev’s ‘secret speech’ to the twentieth Congress of the CPSU was the beginning of a process of ‘de-Stalinisation’ that caused a crisis of confidence amongst many European communists, who had closely identified with Stalinism. Johnson rejected Khrushchev’s claims and continued to praise Stalin, resulting in a “poisonous” atmosphere amongst the Chapter.<sup>100</sup> The Soviet invasion of Hungary later the same year drove many Communists from the Party, and Johnson considered publicly renouncing his support for the Soviet Union, but finally rationalised that Soviet troops had been asked to intervene to restore order and protect the revolution.<sup>101</sup> For this reason, Johnson argued, while unable to condone the actions of the Soviet Union (on this occasion), the context of this

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<sup>98</sup> Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Victor Gollancz: A Biography* (London, 1987), pp. 234-235; p. 245.

<sup>99</sup> Edwards, *Victor Gollancz*, p. 245.

<sup>100</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.1378 Julian Bickersteth, John Shirley, Alex Sargent and Aubrey Standen to Hewlett Johnson, 18 February 1956; Johnson, *Searching for Light*, p. 332.

<sup>101</sup> Hughes, *The Red Dean*, p. 170.

incident was completely different to the British and French intervention in Suez in same year. In Johnson's mind, the invasion of Hungary was an effort to protect the building of socialism and the prevention of a return of fascism, while the invasion of Suez was for narrow capitalist interests.<sup>102</sup>

While the press vilified Johnson for his continued support for the Soviet Union, Church and secular authorities seem to have demurred from adding to the publicity, and there was no official reprimand. From 1952 until his retirement in 1963, the main source of opposition to Johnson's political activities was the students of the King's School, Canterbury, of which Johnson, as Dean was Chairman of the Board of Governors. In 1956, students presented him with a petition calling on him to renounce his "misconceived faith in the Soviet Union."<sup>103</sup> The Governors also felt that Johnson's activities were harming the School, and discussed ways in which he could be removed from his position as Chairman.<sup>104</sup> Fisher was forced to intervene, and proposed a compromise in which Johnson would absent himself from Governors' meetings until a more permanent solution could be found.<sup>105</sup> Johnson agreed, and voluntarily absented himself from meetings. On occasions that the Dean's presence would normally be required his place was taken by the Archbishop. Johnson finally returned to his duties in 1961, animosity apparently having subsided.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.7269 Notes on Hungary and the Soviet Union, 1956; Johnson, *Searching for Light*, p. 370.

<sup>103</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.5606 Petition from King's School Students, 1956.

<sup>104</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.6692 Minutes of the Meeting of the Governors of the King's School, 14 December 1956.

<sup>105</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.6687 Fisher to Johnson 13 February 1957.

<sup>106</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.1377 Minutes of the Meeting of the Governors of the King's School, 2 April 1957; Johnson, *Searching for Light*, p. 371.

Quite why Johnson was happy to absent himself from his duties as Chairman of the Board of Governors for so long over his political views when he was unwilling to resign from the Deanery over the issue of freedom of speech, is interesting to consider. It is probable that Johnson rationalised that he was not resigning his post as Chairman, and that therefore he had not renounced his duties. It is equally probable that he saw this as an opportunity to temporarily reduce his duties in Canterbury and give more time to international issues, just as he had done after his return from China in 1932. Johnson's political activities continued, and he participated in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the late 1950s. Though he did not attend the inaugural meeting in 1958 or the first annual march from Trafalgar Square to the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment at Aldermaston, he did participate regularly in the following years. The CPGB was ambivalent about the formation of CND at first, as the Party endorsed Moscow's policy of negotiated reduction of nuclear weapons rather than unilateral disarmament. CND also advertised itself as a movement open to all, regardless of political views, though most of its members were leftists.<sup>107</sup> Johnson appears to have mirrored this ambivalence, though he soon became involved in CND activities. Johnson spoke at a British Peace Committee rally in Trafalgar Square in 1960, held in conjunction with CND, on the evils of nuclear weapons,<sup>108</sup> and in 1959, Johnson affixed a banner above the Deanery entrance that read 'Christians, Ban Nuclear Weapons', linking the Deanery to another political message. The students of the King's School protested, and twice the banner was vandalised, but on both occasions Johnson had it restored, and it remained in place until Johnson's retirement, when it was taken "as a trophy"

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<sup>107</sup> David Childs, *The Two Red Flags: European Social Democracy and Soviet Communism Since 1945* (London, 2000), p. 56.

<sup>108</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*, p. 333, p. 397.

by the boys of the School.<sup>109</sup> In another paradoxical move however, after his retirement, and still demanding the banning of nuclear weapons, Johnson travelled to China and accepted Premier Chou En-Lai's estimation that China, then a nuclear power, required the weapons in order to stabilise the international arms situation. Johnson accepted this without argument, though he was careful to note Chou's wish for the eventual destruction of all nuclear stockpiles.<sup>110</sup>

## Conclusion

Johnson retired from Canterbury in 1963, at the age of 89, after another dispute with the Chapter in December 1962. The details of this dispute are unknown, though Hughes, having interviewed those involved, summarised the quarrel as "so unpleasant and so trivial that, fourteen years later, none of the protagonists would discuss the details."<sup>111</sup> The Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, accepted Johnson's resignation. Johnson resisted many calls for his resignation from Canterbury, and despite sailing close to the wind, never committed any of the small number of improprieties that could have led to his dismissal. His support for the Soviet Union and his close affinity with the policies of the CPGB were embarrassing, frustrating and infuriating for Church and secular authorities alike, and Johnson's position as Dean of Canterbury aroused great concern that his views would be associated with the views of the Church as a whole, and because of the Church of England's status as an established Church, that these views might be seen to undermine the policies of the state. Despite this, there was no mechanism that could be used to remove

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<sup>109</sup> HJP UKC-JOH-COR.9834Hewlett Johnson, Press Statement on Nuclear Weapons, 1963; Johnson, *Searching for Light*, p. 397; Butler, *The Red Dean*, pp. 214-215.

<sup>110</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*, p. 429.

<sup>111</sup> Hughes, *The Red Dean*, p. 196.

Johnson, and there was a reluctance to design a structure to impeach him, however vocally Johnson espoused Communist policy and support of the USSR. The desire to not make a martyr of him was stronger than the wish to be rid of him.

There were a number of probable reasons for Johnson's non-membership of the CPGB. The official atheism of the CPGB made it difficult, especially one as senior as the Dean of Canterbury, to join, and while Johnson explained this atheism as nothing more than a rejection of a form of religion that had lost its purpose, he realised that joining the CPGB would create too much controversy for him to remain in his post, and he chose Church over Party. Additionally, Johnson focussed his attention on the international sphere, and we know little about his domestic voting habits, though it seems probable he supported either Communist or Labour candidates. When challenged, he used the fact that MacDonald had appointed him to legitimise his political activity, and he was perhaps prepared to support whichever political party best represented his views. Finally, his non-membership of the Party did not prevent him from espousing the policies of the Party, and since Johnson had argued in *Christians and Communism* that the two were essentially the same belief system, communism being the practical application of Christianity, it is possible that Johnson felt that membership of the CPGB was unnecessary.

A common criticism has been that Johnson continued to support Communist regimes despite their ideological atheism and, particularly in the case of Stalin's Soviet Union, the suppression of dissenters, including Christians. Partly, perhaps, this was due to a form of wilful self-deception. Certainly both Hughes and Butler have cited

this,<sup>112</sup> but Johnson rationalised that communist atheism was on the one hand a reaction to oppressive and outdated Christian churches and on the other a challenge for religion to engage with social and political issues in order to build a more just society. Johnson truly believed this, and that communists and socialists were truly working toward building the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. Johnson's faith in the Soviet Union was reinforced by his tours of the USSR managed by VOKS. As a senior figure in the hierarchy of the Church of England, Johnson was carefully cultivated for propaganda purposes.

Johnson comfortably reconciled his political and religious beliefs, and the most complete statement on his theology is still *Christians and Communism*. Johnson has suffered to a certain extent from the fact that, as Butler argues, "his [Johnson's] name is associated with no 'school' of theological thought",<sup>113</sup> and so he receives comparatively little attention in histories of the Church of England. However, Johnson is a significant figure in understanding how communist clergymen understood the relationship between communism as an ideology and as practiced in the Soviet Union and Christianity. He also helps us to understand the attitude of the Church of England to clerical dissenters, and relations between Churchmen and party politics, despite his non-membership of the CPGB. In the following chapter we turn our attention to Alan Ecclestone, whom Johnson had met in 1950, and who in 1948 did in fact join the CPGB.

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<sup>112</sup> Butler, *The Red Dean*, pp. 248-249; Hughes, *The Red Dean*, p. 204.

<sup>113</sup> Butler, *The Red Dean*, p. 244.

## **A Priest in the Party: Alan Ecclestone**

The three clergymen considered thus far all accommodated Marxism with their Christianity. Their political and theological outlook was shared by Alan Ecclestone, the final member of our group, who differed in that in 1948, he joined the CPGB. Ecclestone's membership of the CPGB caused consternation within his parish and beyond, not least because he went beyond a mere 'card carrying' membership, and played a role in Party activities, including a part in bringing the 1950 Peace Congress to Sheffield and standing as a Communist candidate on five occasions in Sheffield municipal elections in the 1960s. Ecclestone was subject to criticism from some quarters within the Party itself because of his position as a clergyman. He also made the difficult decision to remain in the CPGB through the tumultuous years of 1956 and 1968, the Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia respectively. He finally left the Party at some point in the late 1980s for reasons quite apart from the suppression of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and seems to have regretted this rupture almost immediately.<sup>1</sup> Ecclestone's membership of the CPGB allows us to explore the relationship between Christianity and communism in ways not afforded us by our examinations of Cummings, Noel and Johnson. These individuals at times worked very closely with Communists on a local and a national level, but always from the position of a fellow traveller, outside the Party hierarchy and independent of Party discipline. Ecclestone, by contrast, presents an opportunity to examine his outlook within the framework of Party membership.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Gorrige, 'Ecclestone, Alan (1904-1992)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), online edition, accessed 3 May 2010.

Ecclestone's membership of the CPGB grew out of a commitment to radical socialism, and from an interpretation of Anglican Christianity inspired by Noel's Catholic Crusade. The Church of the Holy Trinity, Sneyd, became an important Crusade church and it was here in about 1918 that Ecclestone first became aware of Crusade teachings that would influence his own later ministry. This chapter examines Ecclestone's dual role as clergyman and Communist Party member, considering how he understood the relationship between Christianity and communism and his role in that relationship. The chapter considers firstly Ecclestone's Church career and ministry, examining the influence of the Catholic Crusade in particular. We then investigate Ecclestone's political involvements, his connections with the Labour and Independent Labour parties and his turn to the CPGB. We consider his Party membership and the responses of his congregation, Church authorities, and fellow Party members, as well as the intersection of his radical politics with his theology. Ecclestone's CPGB membership also provides an opportunity to consider the extent to which there was or was not a type of 'British McCarthyism' after the Second World War. In chapter four, we saw that Johnson's career demonstrated how legal and traditional minutiae, combined with an unwillingness to break with those traditions of independence and freedom of thought, meant that despite the number and frequency of voices calling for his dismissal, such demands never bore fruit. Our examination of Ecclestone's career affords a similar opportunity.

Tim Gorrings's biography of Ecclestone, generally sympathetic and based largely on personal knowledge is utilised here for narrative details. Gorrings provides much detail on Ecclestone's activities and preaching, but fails to rigorously interrogate the

wider political environment in which he worked. Ecclestone's papers at Sheffield Archives include a number of draft sermons and unpublished material, documents relating to Church events and a small amount of material relating to the CPGB. Unfortunately, this collection is limited in scope as Ecclestone was, in Gorrings's words, "ruthless" with his own papers, not for fear of betraying fellow CPGB members or clergy but because he saw no need to preserve much of this material.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, a number of Ecclestone's former parishioners in Darnall have provided testimonies, and Ecclestone's surviving sons have provided documents and recollections. We also utilise the national and local press and a volume of published and unpublished material entitled *Firing the Clay*.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Catholic Crusade, Ministry and Theology**

Ecclestone received a religious upbringing, his father an Anglican, his mother a nonconformist who regarded the Church of England as part of the autocracy of the state. She had an intense interest in politics, and Ecclestone later remembered her excitement in telling him of the Tsar's abdication in 1917.<sup>4</sup> After the October Revolution, during his studies at Newcastle-under-Lyme High School, Ecclestone stood apart from his peers in the Debating Society by arguing that Bolshevism was the only political programme that would allow democracy to develop. It was at this time that he first became aware of the 'red' Church of the Holy Trinity in Sneyd.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gorrings, *Alan Ecclestone*, p. xiv.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Cotter (ed.), *Firing the Clay: Articles and Addresses by Alan Ecclestone* (Sheffield, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Gorrings, *Alan Ecclestone*, pp. 4-5 and p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 16 December 1992; Alan Webster, 'Sermon for the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Ordination of Alan Ecclestone by Dr. Williams, Bishop of Carlisle', 28 September 1991. I am indebted to Martin Ecclestone for providing a copy of this sermon.

Holy Trinity was a Catholic Crusade church from the beginning of the movement. The vicar, Jim Wilson, had built a large working-class congregation by examining social questions and was assisted by his curate, Harold Mason, who had been a close supporter of Noel in Thaxted. The central ideas of the Catholic Crusade had a significant impact on Ecclestone, and shaped his future political and theological outlook. As we have seen, the Catholic Crusade provided a ‘this-worldly’ interpretation of Christian principles, with particular political implications. These ideas have been seen within the broader category of Christian Socialist theology and philosophy, but represented the extreme radical wing of such traditions. For example, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, which affirms the unity and co-equal status of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit was seen in Crusade theology as an example of ‘Eternal Comradeship’. Thus, comradeship, not competition, was presented as mankind’s natural state. Additionally, the Incarnation, the doctrine of God manifested as man was used to demonstrate that the nature of God was inextricably coexistent with human nature. The essence of God therefore was not separate from humanity or something to be worked towards, but something to be recognised within every human being. Ecclestone made repeated use of this concept in his later sermons, speeches and addresses.<sup>6</sup>

Ecclestone taught at King Edward VII Grammar School and then at Durham University from 1927 until 1930 before seeking ordination. While at Durham he began teaching for the Workers Educational Association. With only a brief interlude during his two curacies, he continued to teach for the WEA until his retirement, seeing the education of the working man and woman as central to social

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<sup>6</sup> AEP 1995/82 ‘The Word Made Flesh’ sermons.

improvement.<sup>7</sup> In the spring of 1930 however, Ecclestone decided to seek ordination, not as a response to a calling specifically to the priesthood, but in order to make a positive impact on the world. As Gorringe has it, it was “a desire to change rather than simply interpret events”<sup>8</sup> that inspired him to seek ordination. Teaching gave him an opportunity to help others along the path of discovery, but he recognised that this endeavour, however enjoyable it was, would forever limit him to interpreting the world, and sharing these interpretations with his students. Action was to become a key part of Ecclestone’s philosophy, and it is likely that had Ecclestone remained as a teacher, even with the latitude that university teaching allowed, he would have become frustrated with the limited scope of action he could take.

The theology of the Catholic Crusade that Ecclestone encountered at Sneyd demonstrated to Ecclestone that Anglicans could both be part of the established Church and hold a radical theology while making a positive difference to the local community. This political theology satisfied both Ecclestone’s interpretation of Christianity, and his desire for a theology that engaged with the everyday world. He criticised the formal theological training he received at Wells Theological College, in which he identified a “failure of contact...between the Church and the life of society.”<sup>9</sup> For Ecclestone, the ministry of the Catholic Crusade made contact between the Church and the society it served. It is perhaps curious that Ecclestone entered the Church of England when his mother, so influential a figure, was so suspicious of the established Church. However, Ecclestone was not burdened by these same suspicions. Having seen at Sneyd that Anglican priests could belong to

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<sup>7</sup> Gorringe, *Alan Ecclestone*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>8</sup> Gorringe, ‘Ecclestone, Alan (1904-1992)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

<sup>9</sup> Gorringe, *Alan Ecclestone*, p. 43.

the Church of England and at the same time dissent from it, the foundations were laid for his later understandings of the relationship between his position in the Church of England and communist commitments.

After training at Wells, largely conventional in its emphasis on the Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion,<sup>10</sup> Ecclestone served curacies first at Christ Church, Carlisle, and then at St. John's in Barrow, during which he attempted to begin the sort of regular meetings that he had seen in Sneyd, but without much success. He had the support of his superiors in this, as such activity was seen as evangelical mission work, but it seems that as a curate, he lacked the authority that he would later have as a vicar in his own right, and his efforts failed to attract significant numbers.<sup>11</sup>

In 1936 Ecclestone was granted the living of St. Paul's, Frizington, Cumbria. The parish was predominantly working-class in character, the main source of employment, for those fortunate enough to be employed, being mining. Poverty was high and living conditions were hard. As we have seen in the examples of Cummings and Noel, these conditions provided an ideal environment in which the activities of a young socialist priest could develop. By this time, Ecclestone had gained a good understanding of the varied theological traditions within the Church of England, and had fully accepted the theology of the Catholic Crusade. Had Noel's Crusade not dissolved in 1936 it is probable that St. Paul's would have become a Catholic Crusade Church.

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<sup>10</sup> Edward Leighton Elwes, *The History of Wells Theological College* (London, 1923).

<sup>11</sup> Gorringe, *Alan Ecclestone*, pp. 50-52.

In addition to the influence of the Catholic Crusade, Ecclestone drew on the work of John Macmurray, whose interpretation of the relationship between Christianity and communism is discussed above. Ecclestone's interpretation of Macmurray's thought was that the task of the individual was to engage with society in order to create opportunities for collective efforts to improve society, and his task as a clergyman was to reconnect the Church with the society it supposedly served.<sup>12</sup>

One of Ecclestone's key strategies to accomplish this, and a central feature of his ministry, was the Parish Meeting. For Ecclestone, this embodied the outward application of Christian faith, and was an opportunity to build the community that Ecclestone believed was so vital. He was influenced by the Catholic Crusade practise at Sneyd in which a group of parishioners came together on a voluntary basis to discuss issues such as liturgy and faith but also matters such as housing, food prices, and even international politics. Ecclestone drew on the lessons of the Catholic Crusade in group organisation and leadership, forming the Parish Meeting and taking a democratic leadership role, allowing attendees to speak their minds openly and being prepared to learn from the group as much as he was prepared to teach.<sup>13</sup> In many ways, Ecclestone's Parish Meeting presaged G. D. H. Cole's argument of the need for small local groups to be the basis of democratic life.<sup>14</sup> The Bishop of Sheffield, Leslie Hunter, was attracted to this idea of a regular meeting to foster a sense of community, and when Hunter invited Ecclestone to take the living of Holy Trinity in Darnall in 1942, it was on the proviso of establishing a Parish Meeting there.

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<sup>12</sup> John Macmurray, *Creative Society: A Study of the Relation of Christianity to Communism* (London, 1935), pp. 88-89; John Macmurray, *The Form of the Personal*, Vol. 1: *The Self as Agent*; Vol. 2: *Persons in Relation* (London, 1957); John Macmurray, *Search for Reality in Religion* (London, 1965).

<sup>13</sup> Alan Ecclestone, *The Parish Meeting at Work* (London, 1953).

<sup>14</sup> G. D. H. Cole. *Europe, Russia and the Future* (London, 1941), pp. 156-172.

Hunter was an eminently capable bishop and from his arrival in Sheffield in 1939 he set out to recruit capable clergy to the diocese.<sup>15</sup> Many were socialists, but Ecclestone was amongst the most theologically and politically radical. Though Hunter would distance himself from Ecclestone on the issue of the latter's membership of the CPGB, he defended Ecclestone as the best of his clergy; a summation that many parishioners, though not all, agreed with.<sup>16</sup> In addition to Ecclestone, in 1944 Hunter brought into the diocese the Rev. Ted Wickham, like Ecclestone an Anglo-Catholic priest with a passion for preaching to the working classes. Hunter's ambition in bringing men such as Ecclestone and Wickham was to inspire greater democratic activity throughout the diocese, and to engage with the working classes of Sheffield. Specifically, Hunter hoped Ecclestone's example would inspire other priests in the diocese to establish similar Parish Meetings, and that Wickham, as the leader of what became known as the Sheffield Industrial Mission, would engage with working men in the steel mills and factories of Sheffield and by demonstrating the relevance of Christianity to their working lives draw them into active participation in the Church. Neither of these initiatives were entirely successful. Ecclestone's well-known communism dissuaded other clergy from following his example, and Wickham's efforts were not sustained after Hunter's retirement and Wickham's preferment to the Suffragan Bishopric of Middleton in the Diocese of Manchester.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gordon Hewitt (ed.), *Strategist for the Spirit: Leslie Hunter, Bishop of Sheffield 1939-62* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 68-71.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Price to the Author, 4 March 2013; Martin Ecclestone to the Author, 31 May 2013.

<sup>17</sup> David Price, *Sheffield Troublemakers: Rebels and Radicals in Sheffield History* (Chichester, 2008), pp. 138-148.

Nevertheless, upon his arrival in Sheffield Ecclestone began the Parish Meeting and, as in Frizington, the vitality of the Meeting was strong. The Meeting was an attempt to reconceive what the Church meant and to place it at the very centre of Parish life, and provide a forum in which parishioners of all political and theological views could explore together the meaning of Christianity in the modern world. As part of this aim, the Meeting often discussed problems that existed within the Church, such as the failure to engage with the problems faced by large numbers of the population in their daily lives. In addition, and perhaps Ecclestone was reflecting on his training at Wells when discussing this, the Meeting critiqued the fact that the clergy were drawn largely from one social group, and educated in one theological tradition. Ecclestone knew that there were clergy that espoused different theological trends, indeed, he was among that very group, and he believed that that Church must accept some change in order to remain relevant to the lives of ordinary people.<sup>18</sup>

The meeting was held every week in the vicarage, and local issues often created a great deal of discussion, but international politics was always on the agenda. Attendance at the Parish meeting was usually high throughout Ecclestone's time at Darnall as attendees felt that they could not only learn, but share their own ideas. Ecclestone worked hard to accept all ideas that were aired at the meeting, and presented himself not as a teacher, but as a fellow learner. Even when visiting dignitaries attended the Meeting, they participated in the discussion as equals, rather than as 'teachers' themselves.<sup>19</sup> The Parish meeting became the centre of parish life, in part because of Ecclestone's determined effort to cease all other Church organisations. He regarded uniformed societies with suspicion, and disbanded Scout

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<sup>18</sup> Ecclestone, *The Parish Meeting at Work*; Frank Fisher to the Author, 22 May 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Gorringe, *Alan Ecclestone*, p. 80.

and Guide associations in Darnall, and closed local groups of the Church of England Men's Society and the Mother's Union. His parishioners were variously impressed by his boldness, or dismayed by his audacity, but his reason for closing down these organisations was his conviction that Christians should not spend their weeks ensconced in closed groups but should instead be active in their local communities.<sup>20</sup> Ecclestone himself personified this principle by regularly touring the parish in an effort to visit every house. In twenty-seven years at Darnall, he was able to visit to every house three times, and only rarely was he turned away. This was a task that he saw as a duty, and though he had initially felt ill-prepared for it, he saw this as the logical conclusion of the all-important connection between community and communion.

Ecclestone believed that these strategies, parish meetings and visits, were viable solutions to the problems of demonstrating the Church's relevance to modern society, a vital task that in his view the Church was failing. He was critical of Church leaders who failed to adopt specific objectives and strategies to address the problems of modern society. In particular, he was disappointed by the conclusion of the 1941 Malvern Conference, called by then Archbishop of York William Temple. The meeting was intended to consider the implications of Christian faith for modern society, but it stopped short of codifying any form of political programme for the Church, and was limited to discussing general principles that could be applied to particular problems by individual Christians.<sup>21</sup> This was largely due to Temple's own view that the Church must avoid becoming an authoritarian agent of social control, and that individual Christians were best placed to pursue individual

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<sup>20</sup> Alan Billings to the Author 30 April 2013.

<sup>21</sup> *Malvern, 1941: The Life of the Church and the Order of Society; Being the Proceedings of the Archbishop of York's Conference* (London, 1941), esp. pp. vii-viii.

strategies. This view he set out later the same year in his *Christianity and Social Order*.<sup>22</sup> This stance was insufficient for Ecclestone, who felt that the Church should direct its clergy to address social questions, and it was for this reason that when Temple died in 1944 after a brief two years as Archbishop of Canterbury Ecclestone felt that Temple had been unsuccessful in positioning the Church for its mission in society. However, what Ecclestone felt was lacking in the Church's engagement with social and political matters he would find in his interpretation of Marxism, and the Communist Party of Great Britain.<sup>23</sup>

### **Politics and the Communist Party of Great Britain**

The Catholic Crusade and Macmurray both influenced Ecclestone's thought, from which he imbibed the importance of action, drawing on the emphasis that Marx placed on praxis,<sup>24</sup> and how Ecclestone incorporated this into his ministry. This was not limited however to ministry. Ecclestone became involved in a number of political activities before he finally joined the CPGB in 1948, though upon joining the officially atheist Party, his political activity accelerated. Ecclestone had turned to socialism as early as 1917, taking an interest in the Russian Revolutions and later advocating for Bolshevism in his school Debating Society. He refused to participate when his classmates at St. Katherine's were pressed into strikebreaking activities in 1926,<sup>25</sup> and during his curacy in Barrow he enthusiastically polled the parish as part

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<sup>22</sup> Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, pp. 31-32 and pp. 96-97.

<sup>23</sup> Alan Ecclestone, *Marxism: A Paper presented to the Sheffield Theological Society by the Rev. Alan Ecclestone on January 15<sup>th</sup> 1968* (Sheffield, 1968); Ecclestone, 'With Marx for Christ', in Cotter (ed.), *Firing the Clay*, pp.122-130.

<sup>24</sup> Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach' (1845) in Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, pp. 69-72.

<sup>25</sup> Gorringe, *Alan Ecclestone*, p. 37.

of Dick Sheppard's Peace Pledge Union.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately for Ecclestone, the area was largely dependent on the shipyards for employment, and the people were thus ambivalent about rearmament. The local Conservative MP, Sir Jonah Walker-Smith, visited Ecclestone to demand to know why Ecclestone had intervened in politics, arguing that the issue didn't concern him and he should restrict himself to religious matters. Their interview broke up acrimoniously.<sup>27</sup>

Ecclestone was drawn to the PPU's pledge to renounce war and campaign against the causes of war, but in the late 1930s he came to believe that the threat posed by Hitler's Germany was so great that pacifism was not sufficient to deal with the crisis. His view was shared by others, including Etienne Watts, the vicar of All Saints, Manchester, whose pamphlet 'Fascism Menaces the Church' set out the position of the non-pacifist Christian left. It was a difficult position to defend.<sup>28</sup> Essentially, it was argued that although war was a great evil, to allow Hitler's Germany to conquer the civilised, Christian world would lead to greater evil. This was a position in stark contrast to that taken by the CPGB when war was declared in 1939. The Party maintained a policy of pacifism until 1941, when dramatic shifts of allegiances brought the Soviet Union into the war on the side of the western allies.<sup>29</sup>

In Frizington, Ecclestone involved himself in a number of political campaigns that, though independent of the CPGB, often counted many communists among their membership. During the Spanish Civil War he joined the Food Ship for Spain Committee, an organisation that Johnson was also closely involved with. Ecclestone

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<sup>26</sup> Martin Pugh, 'Pacifism and Politics in Britain, 1931-1935', *The Historical Journal* 23 (3) (September 1980): 641-656.

<sup>27</sup> Gorringe, *Alan Ecclestone*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>28</sup> Etienne Watts, 'Fascism Menaces the Church'.

<sup>29</sup> Morgan, *Pollitt*, pp. 115-118.

also established a local group of the Left Book Club (LBC) and persuaded the LBC's founder, Victor Gollancz, to address a Group meeting in late 1938. The LBC was not a CPGB organisation, and Gollancz always stressed its independence, but much of the membership, and indeed many of the staff in the years 1936-1940, were Party members. Despite his denials of Communist control of the LBC, Gollancz was aware of their influence.<sup>30</sup> Gollancz spoke to Ecclestone's Group shortly after the events at Munich in September, and had himself concluded that war was inevitable, and that a pacifist stance was insufficient for dealing with the crisis.<sup>31</sup>

Having become a socialist during his schooldays, Ecclestone joined the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in the mid-1920s and migrated to the mainstream Labour Party when he moved to Durham in 1927. Under the auspices of the Labour Party he established a University Labour Club, with mixed success. He was able to entice Labour MPs and prominent Christian Socialists to visit and speak, but at least one student left the University altogether after encountering the Labour Club and reading Ecclestone's volumes of Lenin.<sup>32</sup> Ecclestone remained loyal to Labour throughout the Second World War and endorsed the party's manifesto of 1945, but quickly became dissatisfied when it became apparent that this programme would not be fully implemented. Disappointment was provoked for example by the unequal approach to decolonisation, as India was granted independence in 1947, but colonial policies persisted in Egypt, Malaysia and Indonesia. Of course, political imperatives often dictated government policy, but Ecclestone felt that the Labour Party had reneged on a moral imperative in favour of political expediency. Believing that Labour had abandoned its commitment to socialism, Ecclestone looked for an alternative and

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<sup>30</sup> Lewis, *The Left Book Club*, pp. 107-108.

<sup>31</sup> Dudley Edwards, *Victor Gollancz*, p. 244; pp. 283-286.

<sup>32</sup> Gorringe, *Alan Ecclestone*, p. 41.

found the Communist Party. Although CPGB membership had been declining since the middle of the war, the Party experienced a new wave of membership, of which Ecclestone, and his wife Delia, were part, joining in February 1948.<sup>33</sup>

Interestingly, the incident of Ecclestone and his wife joining the CPGB does appear to fit Thomas Linehan's model of 'communist marriages' and membership.<sup>34</sup>

Studying the inter-war period, Linehan has found that married couples often appeared together on the CPGB's membership lists, and in his analysis finds that CPGB members were frequently expected to recruit their partners, and other family members, to the Party. In Linehan's analysis, such social networks played an important role in recruitment to 'high risk' organisations, of which the CPGB was one example. In this instance, 'high risk' refers to organisations that demanded the active and public participation of their members, who would potentially risk the hostility of neighbours and the authorities as a result. It would be wrong to argue that such social networks were either the decisive factor in determining Party membership or a factor exclusively affecting the CPGB, but in the case of the Ecclestons, the model does apply.

The notion of a clergyman joining an avowedly atheist political party seems incongruous. However, there are reasons that Ecclestone was able to join the CPGB without sacrificing his Christian faith. Firstly, there was no formal rule in the Constitution of the CPGB that barred clergymen of any denomination from joining the Party. Indeed, the Constitution of the Party, like those of other European communist parties, enshrined the principle of religious freedom. Though the official

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<sup>33</sup> Morgan, Cohen and Flinn, *Communists and British Society*, pp.14-26.

<sup>34</sup> Linehan, *Communism in Britain, 1920-39*, pp. 67-71.

ideology of the Party regarded religion as an outdated concept, this did not bar clergymen from membership. Nowhere in the Constitution was the complete adherence to every aspect of Marxist ideology enforced on Party members. Individual members were free to believe what they wanted to believe, provided that they accepted that the CPGB would offer not official support to any religious denomination, and that they accepted Party discipline. The only point on which Ecclestone could not satisfy the traditional membership requirement was that he was not a member of a trade union as none existed for his profession. It also appears that Ecclestone was dissuaded from affiliating to an alternative union because firstly, it seems he felt that it would be wrong to belong to a union for a profession that he was not a member of. Secondly, Ecclestone had turned to the CPGB as a vehicle for the establishment of socialism, and it was the CPGB to which he wished to contribute. This is not to say he disregarded the efforts of trade unions in defending the rights of workers or in providing workers with an organisational structure within which to agitate for social change, simply that it was the CPGB within which he wanted to pursue the establishment of socialism and that additional membership of a union would be a distraction.<sup>35</sup>

Secondly, while the CPGB was akin to other European communist parties in ideology, structure and affiliation to the Communist International, it was marked by particular differences in the culture of the Party. Most European communist parties, for example those in France, Germany and Italy were defined by strict organisation and a rigid adherence to a Party line usually handed down from, or defensive of, the Soviet Union. The CPGB however, differed in that individual members were

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<sup>35</sup> *Daily Worker* (n.d., 1962). I am indebted to Jacob Ecclestone for providing me with this article.

afforded greater latitude than might be expected in other parties. Neal Wood argued that the CPGB was generally more temperate than its European counterparts, more open to associate with non-communist organisations, and permissive of the discussion of disparate ideas and concepts amongst its members.<sup>36</sup> Famously, Arthur Koestler likened the CPGB to a vicarage tea party rather than a revolutionary cadre,<sup>37</sup> and Manuilsky contrasted it to the German Communist Party, which allowed no deviation from the party line.<sup>38</sup> This culture of permissiveness meant that the Party was prepared, at least following the Second World War, to accept Church of England clergymen into their membership. Earlier generations of clergymen had faced more informal obstacles to membership, such as hostility from early generations of communists that held to absolute atheism as part of a personal revolution against oppressive religion, to those who were hostile to the Anglican Church because of its status as an established Church. Many believed, as had Ecclestone's mother, that the Church of England was part of the political order that they were ultimately working to overthrow and therefore marked Anglicans out for particular suspicion.

Many Anglicans resisted the CPGB due to a conviction that the official atheism of the Soviet Union was itself a crusading principle that would sweep religion away. The suppression and closure of many Orthodox churches in the Soviet Union was cited as evidence for Communist hostility towards religion.<sup>39</sup> For many Anglicans, this danger was very real, and was the starting point for all schisms between Anglicans who shunned communism and those who embraced it. The relationship

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<sup>36</sup> Neal Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals* (London, 1959), pp. 23-24.

<sup>37</sup> Morgan, Cohen and Flinn, *Communists and British Society*, p. 265.

<sup>38</sup> Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941* (London, 1985), pp. 45-46.

<sup>39</sup> Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, pp. 311-312.

between the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Orthodox Churches within its borders was far more complex than the ruthless attempt by the former to stamp out the latter, and although many Orthodox churches were closed, and Orthodox clergy persecuted, particularly under Stalin, the Orthodox Church was never eliminated within the Soviet Union, and was often co-opted onto the side of the Soviet authorities.<sup>40</sup> Ecclestone's view on the persecution of Christians in the USSR is difficult to determine as he made few references to the condition of Russian Christians in his writings and sermons, but a letter to the *Daily Worker* in 1962, in which Ecclestone responded to critics of his CPGB candidature in Sheffield Council elections, provides some clues. Critics claimed that reconciling Christianity and communism was impossible, and that by supporting the Soviet Union, Ecclestone was complicit in Soviet repression of Christians. Responding, Ecclestone wrote "I do not claim that Communists have been free from evil errors," and reminding his critics of the Christian Church's own history of persecuting others he "beg[ged] Christians to be less self-righteous." He also explained that while the CPGB naturally looked to the Soviet Union as its ideological ally, as British communists it was reforming British society with which they, and he, was concerned, and that British communists were part of the "great Labour movement of this country, even though they are excluded from the Labour Party by the timid non-socialists who control that Party."<sup>41</sup>

If the CPGB had misgivings about the Church of England because of its status as an established Church, Ecclestone certainly did not see this as a problem in his

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<sup>40</sup> Roslof, *Red Priests*, pp. 16-38. The Russian Orthodox Church proved a useful ally of the Soviet state in depicting the war with Nazi Germany as the 'Great Patriotic War', see Daniel Peris, "God is Now On Our Side": The Religious Revival on Unoccupied Soviet Territory During World War II", *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1 (1) (Winter 2000): 97-118.

<sup>41</sup> *Daily Worker* (n.d., 1962).

membership. The Parish Meeting often discussed the relative merits and demerits of the disestablishment of the Church of England, and this topic features prominently in his writing. An unpublished manuscript elucidates his ideas on the subject and concludes that critics who call for the Church to remain out of politics fail to recognise that the Church had been ‘in politics’ due to its established character, for more than four centuries “on the basis of an expectation that it will be always what its political masters require it to be.”<sup>42</sup> He argued that the Church of England, because of its unique status as an established church, had become complacent and reliant on state patronage. This created an atmosphere in which scripture and ministry became stilted, and the essential message of Christianity, for Ecclestone the building of the Kingdom of God on Earth, was lost. It also meant that the Church had no real imperative to pursue an active social role. As long as it could rely on the state, Ecclestone argued, the Church had no need to demonstrate its relevance to the population it allegedly served. Disestablishment would not only free the Church from the patronage of the state, it would provide a much needed opportunity to jolt the Church back from the path of increasing irrelevance. It would shake the Church out of its complacency and create an environment in which Anglican clergy could participate in an open debate about the nature and meanings of Christianity. The likelihood that a Communist administration would push for the disestablishment of the Church of England of England was a positive good in Ecclestone’s eyes, and something that senior Anglicans would have found untenable.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> AEP 1995/82 notes on disestablishment of the Church of England (n.d.); Ecclestone, ‘On the Disestablishment of the Church of England’ in Cotter (ed.), *Firing the Clay*, pp. 122-130.

<sup>43</sup> CPGB briefing notes on Church-Party relations praised the principle of separation between Church and State and indicated a policy of disestablishment in Britain. See ‘Note on the Communist Attitude to Religion’, CPGB Speaker’s Notes (n.d.), LHA CP/CENT/SPN/1/10.

Ecclestone set out his understanding of Marxism at a meeting of the Sheffield Theological Society in 1968.<sup>44</sup> He felt that, just as the Church had lost touch with true Christianity and with modern society, the doctrine of Marxism developed through the lenses of Leninism, Stalinism, then European communist parties, had lost something of the original Marx. Just as he hated stilted theology, Ecclestone argued that the codification of ‘Marxism’ had diminished the moral element of Marx’s philosophy. He understood Marxism as a process of analysis that provided the preparatory work for social action, and as a philosophy that was concerned above all else with promoting the fulfilment of human life. In practical terms this meant the mobilisation of available resources for the mutual improvement of all. He argued that this activity could be planned and carried out intelligently and that therefore any reluctance to engage in such activity was unjustifiable.

In another essay, ‘With Marx For Christ’, Ecclestone developed these thoughts further by reflecting on the relationship between Marxism and Christianity.<sup>45</sup> This essay reminded Christians that they “were warned a long time ago not to delude themselves into coming before God with their relations with other people unexamined.” He reminded Christians that they had been told that true service to God meant the “taking off of the yoke from the oppressed and the feeding of the hungry.” On this test, Ecclestone argued, that the Christian Church had failed. Too often the churches had been more concerned with monopolising religious authority than with serving the communities they were supposedly responsible for. Marxism was therefore to be seen as a challenge to engage with this history and reconsider the

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<sup>44</sup> Alan Ecclestone, ‘Marxism: A Paper presented to the Sheffield Theological Society’, 15 January 1968, reprinted in *Keys: Sheffield University Catholic Society Magazine*, (Sheffield, 1968).

<sup>45</sup> Ecclestone, ‘With Marx For Christ’ (n.d., 1960s), in Cotter (ed.), *Firing the Clay*, pp. 19-25. A draft is included in his papers, AEP 1995/82 Box 2.

relationship of the churches to ordinary people. Marxism brought a quality of questioning, of investigating relationships and discovering “the truth of our human condition without which men and women cannot be at one with each other or themselves or, as Christians would say, with God.”<sup>46</sup>

From this understanding of Marxism, and considering Ecclestone’s belief that churchmen should play a direct role in the development of a political programme, Ecclestone took seriously his duties as a member of the CPGB. He volunteered to sell the *Daily Worker* around Sheffield, and used this as an opportunity to explain his views on communism and Christianity to local people. This quasi-missionary work seems to have been generally well received.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, just as Ecclestone opened up the vicarage to parishioners for the purpose of the Parish Meeting, he also made his home available to the local CPGB Branch as a venue for regular meetings, and when the Ecclestone family moved from the old vicarage to the new, the Branch meetings moved with them. The notion of a group of CPGB atheists congregating in the local vicar’s home to discuss their political programme evidently amused some attendees.<sup>48</sup> The Branch meeting often welcomed leading figures within the Party, including Willie Gallacher, James Klugmann, and Harry Pollitt himself.<sup>49</sup> Though Party membership had increased dramatically during the years of the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union, compared to other political parties the CPGB remained numerically very small. Much was often demanded of dedicated members, and Ecclestone determined to be closely involved in the workings of the local Party

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<sup>46</sup> Ecclestone, ‘With Marx For Christ’, in *Firing the Clay*, p. 24.

<sup>47</sup> Jon Ball to the Author, 28 February 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Les Smith to the Author 5 March 2013.

<sup>49</sup> Gorringe, *Alan Ecclestone*, p. 118.

branch. For Ecclestone, belonging to the CPGB provided an opportunity of sharing in and shaping the political and social life of the community.

Bishop Hunter however was troubled. He had attempted to discourage Ecclestone from joining the CPGB, arguing that it would be problematic, and once he had joined the Party, it became difficult to recruit curates to Darnall. Having worked with Ecclestone was enough to tar young clergymen with a reputation as dangerous radicals, so many were reluctant to come to Darnall, and those that did stayed for shorter and shorter periods.<sup>50</sup> The senior hierarchy of the Church of England also monitored Ecclestone's political activities. Following Temple's Conference at Malvern in 1941, which had failed, in Ecclestone's view, to agree a practical and rigorous strategy for engaging with social and political problems, a number of socialist Anglicans formed the Council of Clergy and Ministers for Common Ownership, taking their cue from Richard Acland who had called for common ownership of industry at the conference, a proposal that Temple disagreed with.<sup>51</sup> Ecclestone was a member of the Council, which eventually changed its name to the Society of Socialist Clergy and Ministers and published the monthly journal *Magnificat*, named after the Marian hymn which spoke of pulling the mighty down from their seats and exalting the humble and sending the rich away, and which was seen by its members as the revolutionary heart of Christianity. The Society finally merged with the Socialist Christian League in 1960 to form the Christian Socialist

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<sup>50</sup> Gorringe, *Alan Ecclestone*, p. 78.

<sup>51</sup> Matthew Grimley, *Citizenship, Community and the Church of England: Liberal Anglican Theories of the State Between the Wars* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 206-207; *Malvern, 1941: The Life of the Church and the Order of Society, Being the Proceedings of the Archbishop of York's Conference* (London, 1941).

Movement.<sup>52</sup> We have no record of when Ecclestone's involvement ceased, and his papers contain no clues as to his level of involvement, but his name was included on a confidential statement prepared for the Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, warning of communist-backed organisations that were mobilising Christian support for the Soviet Union. The Society of Socialist Clergy and Ministers was described as using seditious tactics, concealing their motives behind harmless sounding names, and that "it is possible that a certain number of clergymen become attracted to them without appreciating their real character."<sup>53</sup> The statement claimed that the Society was under the control of the CPGB and alleged the membership included Ecclestone, Johnson, Stanley Evans (1912-1965),<sup>54</sup> and Etienne Watts.

Ecclestone's membership of the CPGB drew the hostility of the famously anti-communist Archbishop of York Cyril Garbett who described Ecclestone's decision to join the Party as "illogical", and is quoted as saying, when a complaint reached him about Ecclestone's politics: "a man who preaches both Christianity and communism suffers from a fundamental inconsistency of mind."<sup>55</sup> After serving as Bishop of Southwark and of Winchester, Garbett succeeded William Temple to the Archbishopric of York in 1942. He was a traditional churchman who defended the established status of the Church of England, campaigned for house building programmes, and supported the foundation of the welfare state. However, Garbett's concern with social issues did not engender any sympathy for communist ideology.

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<sup>52</sup> Peter Barberis, John McHugh and Mike Tyldesley, *Encyclopaedia of British and Irish Political Organisations* (London, 2000), pp. 380-381.

<sup>53</sup> LPL CFR G 6/1 f. 151 Confidential draft statement for the Archbishop of Canterbury to be read at the Bishop's meeting of the Archbishop's Council on Foreign Relations (n.d., probably November-December 1954).

<sup>54</sup> Kenneth Leech, 'Evans, Stanley George (1912-1965)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), online edition, accessed 14 October 2010.

<sup>55</sup> Gorringe, *Alan Ecclestone*, p. 102; pp. 129-130.

He remained an implacable foe of communism, and though he visited the Soviet Union in 1943, ostensibly as part of a good-will visit from the Church of England to a then allied country, the reports of this delegation, and subsequent correspondence between its members and the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church, were carefully scrutinised by the Foreign Office.<sup>56</sup> In 1949, Garbett travelled to the USA to allay American suspicions of a British Labour government that to American sensibilities appeared to be pursuing a dangerously socialist agenda of nationalising key industries and establishing universal welfare programmes. Garbett was stressed to US policy-makers that Britain was not a socialist state and that instead she was as keen as the USA to defend western civilisation against the dangers of communism.<sup>57</sup> Ironically, Ecclestone would have agreed that Britain was not moving towards true socialism, but while Garbett breathed a sigh of relief, Ecclestone joined the CPGB to further the cause of socialism.

Garbett's growing conservatism following the Second World War was what led him to criticise Ecclestone's membership of the CPGB and to question the sanity of communist clergy. His anti-communism led him to take issue with Ecclestone and Johnson, though Johnson, a far more public figure than Ecclestone, drew the greater part of Garbett's attention.<sup>58</sup> Even so, Ecclestone's political activities meant that even Bishop Hunter was forced to distance himself from Ecclestone's politics. Hunter was pressured to reprimand or otherwise sanction Ecclestone for his activities, but recognising Ecclestone's skill as a parish priest refrained from doing so, though it has been suggested that Ecclestone was denied preferment within the

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<sup>56</sup> Kirby, *Church, State and Propaganda*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>57</sup> Kirby, *Church, State and Propaganda*, pp. 179-181.

<sup>58</sup> Kirby, *Church, State and Propaganda*, pp. 257-258.

Church because of his Party membership.<sup>59</sup> Ecclestone's CPGB membership also drew opposition from members of the laity. Many members of the congregation left Holy Trinity in protest at Ecclestone's politics, incredulous that a clergyman would join a party that adhered to an atheist ideology, but that was also affiliated to the government of a country that had repressed its own national church.<sup>60</sup>

Quite apart from clergy and congregation however, Ecclestone faced opposition from fellow communists. Shortly after joining the Party, Ecclestone was invited to address the branch meeting when one anti-clerical member raised a point of order that Ecclestone not be permitted to speak. A vote was taken, but Ecclestone was allowed to proceed. At another meeting, Ecclestone began questioning a visiting speaker, who, somewhat perturbed by the intelligence of the questions, asked Ecclestone what his profession was. Ecclestone's response was to remove his scarf and reveal his clerical collar, prompting the speaker to lament that an obviously intelligent man had chosen such a career.<sup>61</sup> However, Ecclestone was regarded with admiration by members of the local Party, who recognised that he had experience that he could share. At one branch meeting members voted to waive the standing order that religion was not to be discussed in order to allow Ecclestone to speak about God, demonstrating a changing attitude on the part of local Party members to religion in the later 1950s and 1960s.<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore, Ecclestone appears to have been aware that joining the CPGB would result in some hostility and took measures to avoid as many difficulties in the parish

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<sup>59</sup> Morgan, Cohen and Flinn, *Communists and British Society*, p. 266.

<sup>60</sup> Les Smith to the Author 5 March 2013, Susan Price to the Author 4 March 2013; Clive Lemmon to the Author 1 May 2013; Mike Atkinson to the Author 31 March 2013.

<sup>61</sup> Les Smith to the Author 5 March 2013.

<sup>62</sup> Gorringe, *Alan Ecclestone*, p. 121.

as possible. He was, we have seen, devoted to his parish duties, and although he had never concealed his communism, he expected that membership of the CPGB might raise the ire of many in the congregation. To forestall this, he refrained as much as possible from making overt political statements in the pulpit. When he joined the Party in 1948, he announced to the assembled congregations at each service on the following Sunday that he had done so, and explained his reasons. He stated that he believed in the principles of socialism as the extension of the doctrine of the Kingdom of God, and that as the Labour Government had failed to enact those principles, he must commit to a Party that he believed would work towards those principles, even if it were a far less numerically significant party. From then on, though his sermons were often on the themes of economic justice and radical social reform, he refrained from explicitly mentioning the CPGB, though he did occasionally refer to current issues, such as the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination or events in the Soviet Union.<sup>63</sup> This was probably to ensure that Church or civil authorities could contrive no excuse for removing him from his post, as was attempted in Johnson's case.

Though he took care to separate his political activity from his preaching, Ecclestone was involved in a number of campaigns organised or otherwise supported by the CPGB. He attended the first World Peace Congress in Paris in 1949 and was chairman of the Sheffield committee of the World Peace Council. Under his leadership, the committee gathered a petition of fifty thousand signatures for peace and against atomic weapons.<sup>64</sup> This success led to the proposal that Sheffield be the venue for the Second World Peace Congress in 1950 after the Labour government

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<sup>63</sup> Monica Dyson to the Author, 28 February 2013, 30 April 2013; Benjamin Heineman, *The Politics of the Powerless: A Study of the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination* (London, 1972).

<sup>64</sup> Gorringe, *Alan Ecclestone*, p. 123.

renege on an agreement to allow the meeting to be held in London. When the government then barred most international delegates from entering the country, the meeting moved to Warsaw, but not before delegates in Sheffield heard Hewlett Johnson and Pablo Picasso speak at a session chaired by Ecclestone.<sup>65</sup>

The suppression of the Congress, celebrated by sections of the British press,<sup>66</sup> provides us with a case study to consider ‘McCarthyite’ trends in Britain in the early 1950s. McCarthyism was characterised in the USA both by the targeted repression of real and suspected communists by various governmental and quasi-autonomous bodies, and by a prevailing informal attitude of hostility to leftists, who were seen as subverting the ‘American’ way of life or as dangerous ‘fifth columnists’ supporting the aggression of the USSR.<sup>67</sup> In Britain however, it is more difficult to identify ‘McCarthyite’ trends. The more distinctive features of sanctioned political repression in the USA, such as the Un-American Activities Committee, were never replicated in Britain, and though there were certainly small organisations and individuals that agitated against communist ‘subterfuge’, perhaps something of the moderation, compromise and accommodation that Neal Wood identified in the CPGB was indicative of British society more broadly, and led to a permissive attitude towards communists.<sup>68</sup> However, such permissiveness had its limits. While there may not have been any long term formal suppression of communist groups there were sporadic attempts to suppress certain campaigns or individuals, and in

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<sup>65</sup> Bill Moore, *Cold War in Sheffield: The Story of the Second World Peace Conference, November 1950* (Sheffield, 1990); Price, *Sheffield Troublemakers*, pp. 141-142.

<sup>66</sup> British Pathé, ‘Peace Gets a Move On’, <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/peace-gets-a-move-on>, accessed 21 May 2013; *The Manchester Guardian*, 14 November 1950.

<sup>67</sup> Ellen Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Princeton, 1998); Richard M. Freeland, *The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism: Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics and Internal Security, 1946-1948* (London, 1985); David Caute, *The Fellow-Travelers: A Postscript to the Enlightenment* (London, 1973), pp. 303-343; David Caute, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge under Truman and Eisenhower* (London, 1978).

<sup>68</sup> Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals*, p. 24.

many cases, it was the lack of a legal basis that prevented hostile attitudes towards socialists and communists from becoming institutionalised. For example, we saw in Johnson's case that there was no legal basis for removing him from his post as Dean of Canterbury. In many cases, British secular and Church authorities were limited in the scope of action they could take. In the case of the Sheffield Peace Congress, there were no grounds on which the meeting could be banned, but it was possible to restrict attendance from overseas, thus, the authorities hoped, reducing its significance.<sup>69</sup> Ecclestone was dismayed by the barring of so many delegates, but it seems he was not altogether surprised, seeing these actions as a further Labour repudiation of socialist ideals. Undeterred, he travelled to Warsaw and participated in the relocated Congress.<sup>70</sup>

As was the case for many CPGB members, Ecclestone experienced two crises of conscience precipitated by the Soviet repression of Hungary in 1956 and of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The CPGB leadership of course remained loyal to Moscow and defended the suppression of these two revolts, but many members left the Party in protest at Soviet policy.<sup>71</sup> The events of 1956 were compounded by Khrushchev's 'secret speech' at the twentieth Congress of the CPSU. This speech came as a shock to many communists in the Soviet Union and the west, as the near-apotheosis of Stalin had by 1956 been orthodox Soviet doctrine for decades. Superficially, it was designed to draw the CPSU back to its foundational Marxist-Leninist ideology, but it was also an attempt to legitimise Khrushchev's leadership.<sup>72</sup> It is conspicuous that of the small number of CPGB documents in Ecclestone's papers, most relate to the

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<sup>69</sup> Phillip Deery, 'The Dove Flies East: Whitehall, Warsaw and the 1950 World Peace Congress', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 48 (4) (2002), pp. 449-468.

<sup>70</sup> Gorrington, *Alan Ecclestone*, pp. 123-125.

<sup>71</sup> Morgan, Cohen and Flinn, *Communists and British Society*, p. 232, pp. 228-229.

<sup>72</sup> Morgan, Cohen and Flinn, *Communists and British Society*, p. 19.

invasion of Hungary and the 'Secret Speech'. Ecclestone studied the speech carefully, and concluded that it was an attempt to explain the excesses of Stalinism as an aberration.<sup>73</sup> It forced him to confront the repression of dissenters under Stalin, but the emphasis on Stalin's personal culpability meant that there were no fundamental questions to be answered on the nature of communism, and so Ecclestone resolved to remain in the Party.

The Soviet invasion of Hungary was in some ways a more traumatic event for western communists. The Soviet explanation of events was that initial legitimate protests had been usurped by counter-revolutionary factions that sought to overthrow the Soviet-backed government, which had appealed to the USSR for assistance, and thus the counter-revolution was broken. The Soviet repression of the protests, the use of troops, and the high casualty figures caused a crisis of confidence for communists. In the CPGB, prominent members rejected the Soviet line that Party headquarters repeated, and many left the Party.<sup>74</sup> Ecclestone was deeply conflicted over these events. He collected a number of newspaper cuttings relating to the revolt, asked questions at branch meetings, and made a series of notes in order to understand what had happened. These notes remain in his personal papers and reveal that he concluded that the Soviet regime had suppressed a protest movement that had had legitimate complaints. They also reveal that he considered renouncing his membership, but concluded that he had made a commitment to the CPGB, and still felt that it was the vehicle most likely for the realisation of socialism. We know that Ecclestone fondly remembered the excitement he experienced when news of the Russian Revolution had reached him as a teenager, and so his decision to remain in

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<sup>73</sup> AEP 1995/82 *Manchester Guardian* pamphlet, 'Full Text of the Khrushchev Speech', June 1956.

<sup>74</sup> Morgan, Cohen and Flinn, *Communists and British Society*, p. 19.

the CPGB can be seen as part of the trend of a generation of communists for whom the October Revolution was the central point in their political understandings.<sup>75</sup> It has been argued that for many such communists, the political programme they had committed to could not exist without the point of reference provided by the Soviet Union and indeed that loyalty was now given by most members to communism as an ideology, rather than to the Soviet Union.<sup>76</sup>

It is possible that by the time of the Prague Spring of 1968, and the subsequent Soviet invasion, Ecclestone thus reached the same conclusions. That the Soviet Union had erred by suppressing a legitimate regime did not alter the fact that communism as an ideology remained the most viable for the actualisation of political change of the form desired by Ecclestone, namely, that of the establishment of the Kingdom of God. The lack of documents relating to the Prague Spring in Ecclestone's papers, while so much remains on Hungary, suggests that it was not as significant a crisis as the events of 1968, though it is possible that Ecclestone, nearing retirement, was withdrawing some of his more active support of the CPGB, though it should be noted that his support for communism as a political programme does not appear to have ever wavered.<sup>77</sup>

Ecclestone resolved the uncertainty raised in 1956 to his own satisfaction by the 1960s, when he stood as the Communist candidate for Darnall in five consecutive Sheffield municipal elections, beginning in 1962. This generated some press coverage as this was the first time that a clergyman had stood on a Communist ticket in a public election. Ecclestone had been selected, said the Party, because he was

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<sup>75</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth Century Life*, (London, 2002), pp. 217-18.

<sup>76</sup> Morgan, Cohen and Flinn, *Communists and British Society*, pp. 228-229.

<sup>77</sup> Gorringe, *Alan Ecclestone*, pp. 132-133.

“one of the best-informed members of the Party in the area.” At the announcement of his candidature, Ecclestone read a statement in which he pre-empted questions on how he saw the relationship between Christianity and communism, saying, “These are not alternatives. The alternative to communism is capitalism and I believe this to be a menace to the world”.<sup>78</sup> A second short article revealed that as a result of his standing for the CPGB Ecclestone was receiving a high volume of private mail, not just from Sheffield voters but from nationwide correspondents, some of which offered only criticism, some of which expressed confusion, but the majority of which offered support and encouragement.<sup>79</sup>

Ecclestone stood for the CPGB because he still believed that the Party’s programme would establish the pre-requisites for a society in which the Kingdom of God on Earth could develop. However, he lost his deposit in every ballot, usually achieving between six and seven per cent of the vote.<sup>80</sup> Despite the small percentages, Ecclestone achieved some notoriety in the press as the first vicar to stand as a CPGB candidate, and this attracted some vitriol from individuals who felt that clergymen should not meddle in politics, least of all with an ‘atheist’ party.<sup>81</sup> However, it also appears to be the case that Ecclestone’s Communism was tolerated by fellow clergy because Sheffield was a Labour dominated city and so Ecclestone stood little chance

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<sup>78</sup> *The Guardian*, 10 February 1962; *The Times*, 10 February 1962.

<sup>79</sup> *The Guardian*, 26 February 1962; Christopher Bagley to Alan Ecclestone 9 February 1962; J. H. Clark to Alan Ecclestone 18 February 1962; Harold Shaw to Alan Ecclestone 19 February 1962; M.B. Wilkinson to Alan Ecclestone 22 February 1962. I am indebted to Jacob Ecclestone for providing me with copies of this correspondence. Unfortunately, it is unclear if Ecclestone replied to these letters.

<sup>80</sup> Sheffield City Council, *Council Yearbook and Diary, 1962-1963* (Sheffield, 1963); *1963-1964* (Sheffield, 1964); *1964-1965* (Sheffield, 1965); *1965-1966* (Sheffield, 1966); *1966-1967* (Sheffield, 1967).

<sup>81</sup> Harold Shaw to Alan Ecclestone 19 February 1962; M.B. Wilkinson to Alan Ecclestone 22 February 1962.

of being elected. His membership of and candidature for the CPGB therefore, however embarrassing and unseemly, was ultimately regarded as irrelevant.<sup>82</sup>

In the late 1960s, as an ordained priest of the Church of England and a card-carrying member of the CPGB, Ecclestone was ideally placed to contribute to the growing dialogue between Christians and Marxists then taking place throughout Europe and beyond. This largely informal movement created an environment in which intellectuals on both sides of the divide could discuss what Christianity and Marxism might have in common, and the relationship between them. Furthermore, it was envisioned not only as a way of learning more about the other side of the discussion, but also as a way for Christians and Marxists to come to a fuller understanding of their own position in the discussion.<sup>83</sup> In 1967 *Marxism Today* published a series of articles on Christianity and following this a conference was organised by James Klugmann, then editor of the journal, and Paul Oestreicher of the British Council of Churches. Ecclestone took the Chair. Philosophical and theoretical questions were examined from both sides, before considering practical issues such as health, housing and poverty. Ecclestone had agreed to speak for both sides in the discussion, given his unique membership of both groups. Ecclestone was satisfied that the meeting demonstrated that, finally, others were now discovering the connections between the two camps that he had been aware of and working within for many years.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Alan Billings to the Author, 30 April 2013; Les Smith to the Author, 5 March 2013.

<sup>83</sup> Peter Hebblethwaite, *The Christian-Marxist Dialogue*; Milan Machoveč, *A Marxist Looks at Jesus* (London, 1976), pp. 16-17.

<sup>84</sup> *The Times*, 15 September 1967; 10 October 1967.

## Conclusion

Reflecting on the Dialogue meeting in October 1967, *The Times* noted that Ecclestone, being both a clergyman and CPGB member, had “a foot in both camps”.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, he endeavoured to build bridges between them. His membership of the CPGB grew out of a commitment to what he saw as the moral principles of Marxism, and from a belief that the CPGB represented the best means to achieve the establishment of a society based on Christian doctrines. However, by the mid-1980s, the CPGB had undergone many changes, and had begun its transformation into the Democratic Left,<sup>86</sup> and in this ‘decay’ period, Ecclestone terminated his membership, though the exact date is unclear. This schism saddened him, but it appears that he re-joined the Labour Party, perhaps feeling that in a different political environment to that of 1948, the Labour Party, however flawed, was the best vehicle available to achieve social change.<sup>87</sup>

Ecclestone was not naïve when it came to the CPGB and the Soviet Union. The notes he made regarding Khrushchev’s ‘Secret Speech’ and the invasion of Hungary demonstrate a deep and concerted effort to understand events as part of a broader narrative. He was certainly comfortable admitting mistakes. He and fellow communists had suspected the existence of the Gulag under Stalin, though not to the extent that later proved to be the case, but he explained that one risk in taking a minority position was that it became easier to defend indefensible things. In retirement, he acknowledged to friends and family that his membership of the CPGB had had some unexpected implications for his ministry. However, he did not express

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<sup>85</sup> *The Times*, 10 October 1967.

<sup>86</sup> Morgan, Cohen and Flinn, *Communists and British Society*, p. 230.

<sup>87</sup> *Church Times*, 19 June 1992; Alan Billings to the Author, 30 April 2013.

regret for joining the CPGB or participating in political campaigns, and unlike some senior Anglicans, he never saw his membership as an error.<sup>88</sup> He responded to criticism whenever it was encountered, and was keen to engage his critics in meaningful discussion on his views, though with varying levels of success.

Party membership does appear to have had a negative influence of Ecclestone's career, precluding preferment to a canonry or another parish, but likewise Ecclestone was never anxious for preferment.<sup>89</sup> Quite the opposite, we find him during his time at Darnall praising the virtues of permanency in clerical appointments, as a certain level of familiarity and trust is necessary before the kind of success that Ecclestone achieved with the Parish Meeting in Darnall can be possible. The twenty-seven years that Ecclestone spent at Darnall meant that he could involve himself fully in social and political work. Though the Catholic Crusade had dissolved before Ecclestone began his ministry, its theology informed all his work. His sermons, addresses and articles frequently drew upon Catholic Crusade themes of fellowship, comradeship, and the Incarnation, the living Body of the Church. Ecclestone's membership of the CPGB remained for some a "serious misjudgement,"<sup>90</sup> but he never struggled to reconcile it with his Christianity because, in his view the two were inextricably related. The Christian-Marxist dialogue was for Ecclestone a dialogue between groups that, at their core, sought the same practical outcomes.

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<sup>88</sup> Gorringe, *Alan Ecclestone*, p. 127; Les Smith to the Author, 5 March 2013; Maggie Bell to the Author, 7 March 2013.

<sup>89</sup> Gorringe, *Alan Ecclestone*, pp. 129-130; Martin Ecclestone to the Author, 13 May 2013.

<sup>90</sup> Gorringe, *Alan Ecclestone*, p. 167.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I have argued that Cummings, Noel, Johnson and Ecclestone all successfully reconciled Christianity and Marxism in theory and practice. All four members of our group came to a Marxist interpretation of socialism, characterised by common ownership, cooperative production, and distribution according to need, but this was a Marxism that was rooted in their Christian faith. We have seen that, far from being irreconcilable, the clergymen examined here identified commonalities between the two sets of ideas that made the former the practical application of the latter. We have seen that this accommodation was made in a variety of political and Church contexts between 1906 and 1969 and that these changing contexts shaped the ministries and activities of our four clergymen.

In making this accommodation between Christianity and Marxism, our clergymen drew upon a number of traditions of radical Christian thought. Nineteenth century Christian Socialism had an influence, especially in that it inspired a missionary zeal in our clergymen to engage with working people and address political and social issues that affected their congregations' daily lives, but we have also seen that seventeenth century movements such as the Levellers and Diggers had an influence, especially on Cummings. Naturally, these clergymen all also drew upon the teachings of Christ, and in particular focused on Jesus' exultation of the poor and the meek. Johnson in particular highlighted the socialism in Christ's teachings in *Christians and Communism*, and Noel supported his analysis of Christ with detailed investigations on the Early Church Fathers.

To accommodate Marxism into their thought they all had to grapple with the issue of Marxist atheism. However, in all cases this was overcome without great difficulty. The atheism in Marx's thought was generally explained by rationalising that the Churches of Marx's day had become disconnected from the societies they supposedly served, and had ceased to function as truly Christian bodies. Johnson even went as far as claiming that atheism was simply a device to ensure that Communists were not distracted from building the Kingdom of God on Earth.<sup>1</sup>

The problem of Communist atheism was a more difficult one to overcome when it came to the issue of membership of the CPGB. On this point, the specific political contexts in which each member of our group ministered had an impact on their approach to this problem. For instance, members of the Catholic Crusade were barred from participating in atheist organisations,<sup>2</sup> though the wider circle of 'friends' of the Catholic Crusade included CPGB members, notably Reg Groves and Stewart Purkis. By contrast, after the Second World War the political context was such that Ecclestone was able to join the Party without any real difficulty. This is largely due to the attitude of the CPGB, which we have seen was militantly anti-religious in the 1920s, but relaxed its outlook on religious organisations and individuals in the 1930s, though it continued to regard religion as an outmoded concept. Finally, the Party's approach to religion opened to the extent that in the 1960s, a formal dialogue between Christians and Marxists began.<sup>3</sup>

However, it should be again noted here that, though our group of clergymen all eventually supported the CPGB, either from inside or outside the Party structure,

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, *Searching for Light*, p. 367.

<sup>2</sup> CNP U DNO/7/4 *The Catholic Crusade: Constitution and Rules*, c. 1933.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel, 'British Marxist Historians', pp. 50-51; Hebblethwaite, *The Christian-Marxist Dialogue*.

they often arrived at the CPGB after having turned to other parties that they believed would be the best mechanism to actualise the revolutionary change they sought. The Marxist BSP, which folded into the CPGB in 1920, attracted support from Cummings and Noel, and the ILP and Labour Party also enjoyed the support of our clergymen at one time or another. This was part of a process in which our group searched for the most viable route to achieve change, though ideologically, it was the CPGB to which they most naturally gravitated.

International politics also informed the context in which these clergymen ministered. The existence of the Soviet Union represented for each of them proof of impending millenarian change, in which a new economic and social order would be brought about. They all celebrated the Soviet Union as such, though it is notable that at times, each of them struggled to reconcile the reality of the Soviet Union with their hopes. Cummings was disillusioned after touring the USSR in 1938. Noel distanced himself from Stalinism after the split with Trotsky and the expulsion of Trotskyists from the CPGB. Johnson considered renouncing his enthusiasm for the Soviet Union in 1956 but finally rationalised that whatever evils the USSR committed they were in the cause of preserving a great spiritual movement, and Ecclestone determined that Stalin as an individual was to blame for Soviet repression, and so there were no fundamental challenges to the Soviet project as a whole.

Their enthusiasm for communism and the Soviet Union was alternately embarrassing and infuriating for the Church hierarchy, secular authorities and congregations. Each of them faced opposition from several quarters, but this seems only to have hardened their resolve. It does appear that their pro-Soviet and pro-Communist views

precluded advancement, and it is probable that Johnson secured his position as Dean of Canterbury because of his churchmanship skills and that his appointment was confirmed with no foreknowledge of what the context of the 1930s would bring. His cultivation by VOKS as a propagandist made him a particularly troublesome figure.<sup>4</sup> Our group defended their views with appeals to radical interpretations of Christianity and a claim that as clergymen they had a moral duty to engage with political issues. Church authorities at various levels were often called upon to sanction them, but generally proved unable to do so. The Church of England in our period of study was a much more open organisation that was able to accommodate clergy with extremely divergent views. Even when those views were embarrassing, and there were concerns that the Church might be brought into disrepute, there was reluctance to prohibit free speech. Of course, the Church of England's status as a wealthy, secure, established Church ensured that its leaders could afford to tolerate some dissent.

Secular authorities were often similarly unwilling or unable to impose sanctions upon the clergymen in our group. This is perhaps due to a strain of permissiveness in British society, similar to that which has been identified in the CPGB,<sup>5</sup> but it should also be noted that there were occasional concerted efforts to silence certain campaigns and individuals. The House of Lords debate that followed Johnson's accusations of germ warfare in Korea was marked by calls for him to be removed from his post but also by a sense of impotence in the face of Johnson's activities.<sup>6</sup> There was simply no mechanism in existence that would allow the authorities to

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<sup>4</sup> Stern, *Western Intellectuals and the Soviet Union, 1920-40*, pp. 142-174.

<sup>5</sup> Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals*, p. 24; Morgan, Cohen and Flinn, *Communists and British Society*, pp. 56-97.

<sup>6</sup> *Hansard*, House of Lords Debate, 15 July 1952.

remove Johnson from his position, and likewise Ecclestone's membership of the CPGB, though troublesome for Bishop Hunter, was completely beyond his control.<sup>7</sup> The Consistory Court could only instruct Noel to remove the red flag from Thaxted Church, it could not dictate the sermons,<sup>8</sup> and the Ashton authorities could do nothing about Cummings' Sunday school programme.<sup>9</sup>

This does not mean that some sanctions were not applied on occasion. The Second World Peace Congress in 1950 that was due to be held in London, then in Sheffield and that was finally reorganised in Warsaw demonstrates a certain willingness on the part of the authorities to suppress pro-communist and pro-Soviet activity, and when the authorities had a legal mechanism that would allow them to act, they did so.<sup>10</sup> However, it is clear that such opportunities to impose sanctions were few and far between and that there was an ongoing unwillingness to engage in widespread suppression. It is also possible that the support that these clergymen were able to mobilise acted as a check on any plans to oppose them.

The limited scope of this thesis has necessitated a restricted sample of four Anglican clergymen, but a number of additional individuals have been identified throughout who, though they have not been a core focus of study, shared the Christian Marxist outlook of our four clergymen. These individuals, Etienne Watts, William Bryn Thomas, F. H. Amphlett Micklewright, E. O. Iredell, Jack Putterill, and Stanley Evans, would constitute interesting avenues for further research, in order to ascertain the breadth of pro-Soviet and pro-Communist views within the Church of England.

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<sup>7</sup> Gorringe, *Alan Ecclestone*, p. 78.

<sup>8</sup> Noel, *The Battle of the Flags*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ashton Reporter*, 18 February 1922.

<sup>10</sup> Moore, *Cold War in Sheffield*.

This thesis has provided indicative evidence of a trend of Christian Marxists within the Church of England, and a broader study of these other individuals may supplement that evidence.

Many historians have dismissed clerical supporters of communism,<sup>11</sup> but those that have seriously investigated them have struggled to categorise them satisfactorily. It is possible to apply the terms ‘fellow traveller’ and ‘crypto-communist’ to these individuals, but neither term encapsulates the outlook and various milieu of these individuals. Neither category accounts for Ecclestone’s membership of the CPGB for example. It is therefore the contention of this thesis that these clergymen might better be categorised as Christian Marxists, defined by a deeply-held Christian belief and a commitment to revolutionary economic, political and social change, but not necessarily defined by membership of the CPGB, as this was impossible, for different reasons, for Cummings, Noel and Johnson. Their positions as Church of England clergymen informed the ways in which their political theology was formed, and the category Christian Marxist reflects the role Christianity had in their thinking, a facet also not accounted for by the categories ‘fellow traveller’ or ‘crypto-communist’.

This thesis has demonstrated that the Christian Marxism of Cummings, Noel, Johnson and Ecclestone marked a distinct political and theological trend within the Church of England. They accepted Marxism into their outlook and were able to comfortably reconcile it with their religious faith. This constitutes an important and under-researched area of the field of political religion. Cummings, Noel, Johnson

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<sup>11</sup> Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, pp. 172-174; pp. 319-320; Hollander, *Political Pilgrims*, p. 117; Burleigh, *Sacred Causes*, pp. 342-343.

and Ecclestone came to represent a distinct political theological movement, and should be examined as such.

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