

Christian Socialism? A Critical Evaluation of Christian Socialist Theology

Anthony A.J. Williams

KEY WORDS

| Christian Socialism | Social Gospel | Liberation Theology |
| Politics | Political Theology | Eisegesis |

ABSTRACT

Despite the more obvious associations between Christianity and right-wing politics, left-wing Christianity does exist in various forms, one of which is the Christian Socialism of Britain. This paper draws on British Christian Socialism from the late-Nineteenth to mid-Twentieth Century – a formative period, following from the paternalistic “Christian Socialism” of Maurice and others, coinciding with the formation of the British Labour Party, and leading up to the formation of the Christian Socialist Movement (now Christians on the Left) in 1960. Christian Socialism is shown to be drawn from Christian theological thought, including Scripture, church teaching, and the sacraments. Christian Socialism’s key concepts – equality, collectivism and democracy – are drawn from the core concept of human brotherhood, itself drawn from the notion of God’s universal Fatherhood. However, this foundation of Christian Socialism in theological thought is deeply flawed, the result of misinterpretation, misapplication and eisegesis. Biblical warnings against the wresting and twisting of Scripture and against the preaching of any false gospel are therefore to be taken into account, indicating that Christian Socialism may not be Christian at all.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of Christian Socialism can appear to be an aberration when Christianity in the US and UK – particularly evangelical Christianity – is more readily associated with conservative politics. White evangelicals in America form a solid base for the Republican Party, and hold to a variety of conservative political positions.¹ This political partnership has led to the notion within British politics that Christians are necessarily right-wing. While, for example, research by Theos indicates that there is not a comparable Religious Right operating in the UK, several instances are given of where the media and others have made the assumption that such a phenomenon does exist; a commentator in the *New Statesman*, to take one, argues that “the Christian movements both here and in the

USA clearly feel most at home on the right”, because “the agendas of the Christian church and the political right-wing make comfortable bed-fellows. You know the kind of thing: anti-abortion, anti-unions, opposed to same-sex marriage and tough on crime”.²

Left-wing Christianity nevertheless does exist. It cuts across denominational and cultural lines, from the primarily Roman Catholic liberation theology of Latin America, to the progressive evangelicalism and “red-letter” Christianity of Sojourners in the US, to the largely Anglican and Nonconformist Christian Socialism of Britain. Neither is this left-wing

¹ D.K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford, 2010), p.193 and p.206.

² A. Walton, A. Hatcher and N. Spencer, *Is there a ‘Religious Right’ Emerging in Britain?* (London, 2013), pp.11-13; A.Z. Williams, ‘Faith should not dictate political affiliation’, *New Statesman*; <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2011/06/god-debate-faith-grayling>; accessed 14th Dec 2015.

Christianity a secular phenomenon with a religious façade; those who practice it draw from the Bible, church teaching, and the sacraments – even if, as we shall see, these things are often misinterpreted and misapplied.

It is F.D. Maurice and his circle, including Charles Kingsley, Thomas Ludlow and others, who established the term “Christian Socialism” in 1849.³ These early Christian Socialists were, however, more instinctively conservatives, and “much of the first Christian Socialist writings seem no more than pious, paternalist but benevolent Toryism”.⁴ Maurice, for example, “held traditional views about social rank, monarchy and aristocracy and was opposed to unions”.⁵ The concern of this group was, despite their chosen name, not to espouse socialism but to find “what Christianity had to offer the *challenge* of socialism”.⁶ It was instead the group’s successors in the late-Nineteenth and early-Twentieth Century who espoused a truly left-wing Christianity. This latter period therefore stands as a formative one in the history of Christian Socialism: following the paternalism of Maurice and others, coinciding with the formation of the British Labour Party, and leading towards the formation of the Christian Socialist Movement (now Christians on the Left) in 1960.

For that reason the doctoral research from which this paper is drawn was focused on this period in seeking to discover and systematise the ideological make-up of Christian Socialism. The research was based on a number of key individuals from the period in question, those who espoused Christian Socialism and left

enough written material in the form of books, pamphlets and transcripts of speeches to allow a hermeneutical analysis of their ideological views. As some of these figures are not widely known it is helpful to introduce them at the outset:

- John Clifford (1836-1923) – Baptist minister, President of the Christian Socialist League.
- James Keir Hardie (1856-1915) – Labour politician, often considered the founder of the Labour Party.
- Stewart Headlam (1847-1924) – Anglican minister, founded the Guild of St Matthew.
- Henry Scott Holland (1847-1918) – Anglican minister, founded the Christian Social Union.
- Samuel Keeble (1853-1946) – Wesleyan Methodist minister, founded the Wesleyan Methodist Union for Social Service.
- George Lansbury (1859-1940) – Labour politician, Labour Party leader 1932-5.
- Richard H. Tawney (1880-1962) – Labour political activist, economic historian.
- William Temple (1881-1944) – Anglican minister, successively Bishop of Manchester, Archbishop of York and Archbishop of Canterbury.
- Wilfred Wellock (1879-1972) – Labour politician, Independent Labour Party MP, Independent Methodist lay preacher.
- John Wheatley (1869-1930): Labour politician, founder of the Catholic Socialist Society.

These men, representing an array of denominations and social backgrounds, as well as being divided evenly between ministers of religion and those who operated primarily within the political sphere, constitute a representative sample of Christian Socialists in this period.

Christian Socialism is distinct from other forms of socialism – Marxism or Fabianism, for

3 C. Bryant, *Possible Dreams: A Personal History of the British Christian Socialists* (London, 1997), p.51.

4 *Ibid.*, p.41.

5 A. Wilkinson, *Christian Socialism: From Scott Holland to Tony Blair* (Oxford, 1998), p.18.

6 Bryant, *Possible Dreams*, p.41. Emphasis added.

example – insofar as it is derived primarily from moral or ethical standards rather than scientific (it may be preferred, pseudo-scientific) ones, such as economics, eugenics or “laws” of history. It is also distinct, however, from other forms of ethical socialism, for it draws particularly from Christian thought. As one writer puts it, Christian Socialism is “rightly bracketed with other ‘ethical’ socialisms. But although it has fed from them and into them, it rests on unique foundations”.⁷ These foundations include the Bible, the historical and contemporary teaching of the church, and the example of the sacraments. We will examine each of these in turn, followed by a critique of the Christian Socialist interpretation from an evangelical perspective.

THE BIBLE

Christian Socialist use of the Bible as a basis for their political beliefs was extensive. This section is therefore split into two, examining, firstly, Christian Socialism’s core concept of brotherhood and, secondly, other proof texts advanced in favour of Christian Socialism.

(a) Brotherhood of Man

A key theme in Christian Socialist writing – indeed, the core concept which holds Christian Socialism together as a political ideology – is the brotherhood of man, drawn from the notion of God’s universal Fatherhood. This idea is drawn in part from the teaching of Christ in the Gospel of Matthew: “But be ye not called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in

heaven”.⁸ The Christian Socialist understood the Bible to teach, as George Lansbury put it, God’s “Fatherhood and the consequent Brotherhood of man”, and that they were sent forth with, in James Keir Hardie’s words, a “Gospel [...] proclaiming all men sons of God and brethren one with another”.⁹

This apparent teaching was used as a powerful argument against capitalism. Samuel Keeble identified “the great Christian principles of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man” as in tension with the inherent selfishness and individualism of capitalism. Competition, according to Keeble, “is contrary [...] to the teaching of the Christian religion, which [...] condemns selfishness, and demands that men love their neighbour as themselves. It is contrary, because Christianity proclaims the brotherhood men”.¹⁰ John Wheatley made the point even more strongly in a letter to the *Glasgow Observer*, ‘A Catholic Defence of Socialism’, asking “in a society which is one of swindler versus the swindled, how can there be brotherly love?”¹¹ Capitalism therefore stood condemned, for it ignored and made impossible to practice the familial relations which the Bible declared existed between all people.

This negative argument – that capitalism was contrary to the brotherly existence urged by Scripture – was also accompanied by a positive

7 P. Bickley, *Building Jerusalem: Christianity and the Labour Party* (London, 2010), p.8.

8 Matthew 23:8-9. Unless otherwise stated Scripture is quoted from the Holy Bible: King James Version. Quotations marked “ESV” are taken from the Holy Bible: English Standard Version.

9 Interview with Lansbury from the Christian Commonwealth Newspaper, 11 August 1915, London School of Economics and Political Science [LSE] archive, Lansbury/7 213; J.T. Leckie, *Socialism in Britain: From the Industrial Revolution to the Present Day* (London, 1972), p.106.

10 S.E. Keeble, *Industrial Day-Dreams: Studies in Industrial Ethics and Economics* (London, 1907 – original publication 1896), pp.17 and p.,214.

11 J. Hannan, *The Life of John Wheatley* (Nottingham, 1988), p.11.

one – that socialism was the system by which brotherly love could be practiced. According to Keeble, a “great cry of Socialism” was “for brotherhood – the most Christian of cries”. “The Socialist”, in Keeble’s opinion, “who demands brotherhood in industry is far nearer the mind of Christ than the economist who clamours for ‘free’ competition”.¹² This view was also expressed in the declaration of John Clifford’s Free Church Socialist League:

Believing that the principle of Brotherhood as taught by Jesus Christ cannot adequately be wrought out under existing industrial and commercial conditions, and that the faithful and commonplace application of this principle must result in the Socialization of all natural resources, as well as the instruments of production, distribution and exchange, the League exists to assist in the work of eliminating the former by building the latter Social Order.¹³

For the Christian Socialist, therefore, socialism is the natural and rightful outworking of Biblical Christianity; the Bible teaches that God is the Father, and socialism is that system whereby the people of the world, or of a particular society, can live as brothers and sisters.

The main defining features of the society envisaged by Christian Socialists were equality, co-operation and democracy. These are Christian Socialism’s key concepts, and each one is underpinned by the core concept of human brotherhood, itself derived from the universal Fatherhood of God. The concept of equality flows naturally from the concept of brotherhood, as William Temple explained:

Apart from faith in God there is really nothing to be said for the notion of human equality. Men do not seem to be equal in

any respect, if we judge by the available evidence. But if all are children of one Father, then all are equal heirs of a status in comparison with which the apparent differences of quality and capacity are unimportant; in the deepest and most important of all – their relationship with God – all are equal.¹⁴

“Men are brothers, whether rich or poor, masters or men, high or low, white or coloured [*sic*]”, wrote Keeble. “They are equally the children of the heavenly Father.”¹⁵

The concept of co-operation in economic and industrial matters is also drawn from the concept of brotherhood, for those who were, on this interpretation, part of one family should work together rather than competing against each other. “A well-conducted family”, declared R.H. Tawney, “does not, when in low water, encourage some of its members to grab all they can, while leaving others to go short. On the contrary, it endeavours to ensure that its diminished resources shall be used to the best advantage in the interests of all”.¹⁶ Keeble agrees with this, writing that “if Christ came to teach anything, and if reason and God’s Word have any validity, then all we are brethren, the human race is God’s family, and mutual service is the only true law of human or industrial society”¹⁷

It may not be immediately obvious that the concept of democracy is drawn from the concept of brotherhood; if, however, democracy is viewed as that system which allows each individual to take part in the governance of society, then it makes sense from a perspective which views humanity as a family that each family member should have their say and their

14 W. Temple, *Christianity and the Social Order* (London, 1976 – original publication 1942), p.37.

15 S.E. Keeble, *Christian Responsibility for the Social Order* (London, 1922), p.261.

16 Wilkinson, *Christian Socialism*, p.105.

17 Keeble, *Industrial Day-Dreams*, p.200.

12 Keeble, *Industrial Day-Dreams*, p.151 and p.152.

13 S. Mayor, *The Churches and the Labour Movement* (London, 1967), p.203.

part in the political process. "Man is created for fellowship in the family of God", argued Temple, "fellowship first with God, and through that with all God's other children. And that is the primary test that must be applied to every system that is constructed and every change in the system that is proposed. Does it help us nearer towards the fullness and richness of personal fellowship?" From this Temple argued that democracy was the best system, for by including everybody in the political process it led to the greater expression of fellowship, and "gives the highest value, higher than any other political scheme to the personality and the personal relationships of all the citizens of the community".¹⁸ We can see, therefore, that the key political concepts of Christian Socialism are all derived from a core concept which is primarily Biblical and theological in nature.

(b) Other proof texts

Apart from this core concept Christian Socialists appealed to a wide variety of Scriptural ideas and proof texts. Many of these, as well as the concept of brotherhood, were drawn from the teaching and example of Christ. One historian speaks of Christian Socialism as a "Christ-centred faith"; Keir Hardie went so far as to declare that "the impetus which drove me first of all into the Labour movement, and the inspiration which has carried me on in it, has been derived more from the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, than from all other sources combined".¹⁹ The

18 W. Temple, *The Church Looks Forward* (London, 1944), p.141 and p.143.

19 P. d'A Jones, *The Christian Socialist Revival 1811-1914: Religion, Class, and Social Conscience in Late-Victorian England* (Princeton NJ, 1968), p.88; J. Keir Hardie, 'Labour and Christianity: Is the Labour Movement against Christianity?', in *Labour and Religion: by Ten Members of Parliament and Other Bodies* (London, 1910), p.49.

view of Stewart Headlam was that "[a]ll those ideas which we now express vaguely under the terms solidarity, brotherhood, co-operation, socialism, seem to have been vividly present in Jesus Christ's teaching".²⁰

Christ's Sermon on the Mount was a particular influence on Christian Socialists with "its message of hope for the poor and forgotten".²¹ Hardie, for example, declared: "Socialism is the application to industry of the teachings contained in the Sermon on the Mount", which is "a consistent and powerful argument against property".²² The teaching in the Sermon about Mammon was also influential for Christian Socialists, who attacked capitalism for enshrining the worship of Mammon, in the form of material wealth, rather than Christ. A journalist summarising a speech by George Lansbury reported: "Society was not based (he said) on the principle of Christ, but on the principle of money worship".²³

Christian Socialists pointed to other of Christ's denunciations of wealth; Headlam, for example, referring to the account of the rich man and Lazarus, argued that "the rich man was in Hell simply because he allowed the contrast between rich and poor to go on as a matter of course, day after day, without taking any pains to stop it".²⁴ This view is expounded by John Wheatley in *How the Miners are Robbed*, in which he imagines a trial of capitalists and

20 S.D. Headlam, *The Meaning of the Mass: Five Lectures with Other Sermons and Addresses* (London, 1905), p.73.

21 G. Foote, *The Labour Party's Political Thought: A History* (London, 1997), p.44.

22 J. Keir Hardie, *Can a Man Be a Christian On a Pound a Week?* (Manchester, c.1905-10), pp.13-4 and p.3.

23 Newspaper cutting about Lansbury speaking at Llanelly, 1919, LSE archives, Lansbury/8 99.

24 Headlam, *Meaning of the Mass*, p.79; S.D. Headlam, *Christian Socialism – A Lecture: Fabian Tract No.42* (London, 1899), p.4.

those who have supported them. One of the witnesses called to give evidence before the magistrate on behalf of the capitalist accused is a clergyman:

Mag. – My dear sir, you are injuring Christianity by trying to explain away that on which it was founded. Did not its Divine Founder say – ‘Woe to the rich, for you have your consolation.’?

Wit. – Yes, your honour; but I think He meant they should use their wealth properly.

Mag. – Why close your eyes to the fact that it is not the mismanagement of wealth, but the possession of it that is here condemned?²⁵

The parables were also employed as arguments for socialism. It was the parable of the sheep and the goats which, to Headlam, “seems to compel every Christian to be a socialist”²⁶ Keeble made the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard into an argument for a government-mandated minimum wage, suggesting that, a denarius per day being a sufficient amount on which to live, each of the workers in the parable received a living wage, even those who had not been hired for a full day.²⁷ Christ was also, at times, viewed by the Christian Socialists as Himself a political revolutionary. For Headlam, Christ was “a radical reformer”, “a Socialistic carpenter” and a “revolutionary Socialist from

25 J. Wheatley, *How the Miners are Robbed: The Duke in the Dock (startling court case)*, (Nottingham, 1973 – original publication 1907), p.17. Wheatley refers here to Luke 6:24 – “But woe unto you that are rich! for ye have received your consolation.”

26 Headlam, *Meaning of the Mass*, p.83.

27 Keeble, *Industrial Day-Dreams*, p.246.

Galilee”²⁸ Lansbury viewed Christ as “the greatest revolutionary force of His times”, “the lonely Galilean – Communist, agitator, martyr – crucified as one who stirred up the people and set class against class”²⁹

Other parts of Scripture, Old as well as New Testament, were advanced as part of the socialist cause. The words of Paul in 2 Thessalonians – “if any would not work, neither should he eat” – could be used to argue against provision for the unemployed; Christian Socialists reversed that interpretation by making the verse refer to a capitalist class which exploited the labouring class and lived without having to work. Such an argument was made by Headlam Hardie, Wheatley and Keeble.³⁰

Headlam and Hardie also pointed to the condemnation of the rich in the Epistle of James: “Go to now ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupted [...] Behold, the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth: and the cries of them which have reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord of sabaoth”³¹ One historian of the movement points to Paul’s

28 S.D. Headlam, *Priestcraft and Progress: Being Sermons and Lectures* (London, 1878), p.7; J.R. Orens, *Stewart Headlam’s Radical Anglicanism: The Mass, the Masses, and the Music Hall* (Chicago IL, 2003), p.24. K. Leech, ‘Stewart Headlam, 1847-1924, and the Guild of St Matthew’, in M.B. Reckitt, ed., *For Christ and the People: Studies of Four Socialist Priests and Prophets of the Church of England* (London, 1968), p.78;

29 J. Schneer, *George Lansbury* (Manchester, 1990), p.1.

30 Orens, *Headlam’s Radical Anglicanism*, p.97; J. Keir Hardie, *Socialism and Christianity: Keir Hardie Library No.4* (London, 1907), p.5; J. Keir Hardie, *From Serfdom to Socialism* (London, 1907), p.39; Wheatley, *Miners*, p.17; Keeble, *Industrial Day-Dreams*, p.228 and p.245.

31 Headlam, *Socialist’s Church*, p.59; J. Keir Hardie, *Can a Man be a Christian on a Pound a Week?* (Manchester, c.1905-10), p.3; Hardie, *Serfdom to Socialism*, p.39. The Biblical reference for the above is James 5:1-2a, 5.

description of “the body” in 1 Corinthians and its importance “to Christian Socialists with its image of the body where every part has a function and where the body prospers by mutual inter-dependence and fellowship”.³² Keeble, for one, declared the image to be “the pattern to society. This is how men are meant to dwell together on all the face of the earth”.³³

The Acts of the Apostles, in which Luke records that “all that believed were together, and had all things in common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need”, were also used to argue for a collectivist, co-operative order of society.³⁴ In the words of Headlam: “The first Christians were, as you well know, in the simplest sense of the word communists – they put all their goods into a common fund and distribution was made to every man according to his need”.³⁵ For Hardie the Christians here were also “Communists”, while Temple describes the situation as “voluntary communism”.³⁶

The main arguments advanced from the Old Testament were drawn from the doctrine of creation and from the land laws given to Israel. Christian Socialism’s core concept of brotherhood is clearly linked to the idea of all people having been created equal by God, as has been explained in the context of Tawney’s thought: “Fundamental to Tawney was his belief that there was a common humanity created by God, each member of which is of equal worth”, and “for Tawney the doctrine of Creation meant that society must be based on the equal worth

of all”.³⁷ Tawney viewed the consequences of capitalism as “an odious outrage on the image of God”.³⁸ The same argument was advanced by Wilfred Wellock, who declared that the issue of whether society should be capitalist or socialist “depends upon whether we are going to regard man as a beast or a soul, a collection of physical appetites or a spiritual being made in the image of God”.³⁹ Another implication of the doctrine of creation was that the land, being created by God, ought not to be privately or exclusively owned. Lansbury’s view was that “land was not made by man but by God, and belongs to the whole people, for the use of mankind and not for the profit of the idle few”.⁴⁰ Similarly, Wheatley told a working-class audience, that the “gifts of God” in creation “have been stolen from you”.⁴¹

Keeble makes just the same argument from the laws given to Israel regulating the use of land: “The Hebrew regulations concerning the Sabbath year, land-debts, rural housing, the pledge, and the year of Jubilee, all declare that ‘the earth is the Lord’s’, and not the landlord’s, and they all aim at preserving the economic freedom of the worker and his family. There is no absolute property in land in the Bible”.⁴² According to Headlam “a study of Hebrew polity shows that careful arrangements were made, by the Jubilee laws especially, to deal righteously with the land, to see that the whole

32 Wilkinson, *Christian Socialism*, p.105. The passage in question is 1 Corinthians 12:20-26.

33 Keeble, *Christian Responsibility*, p.256.

34 Acts of the Apostles 2:44-5.

35 Headlam, *Meaning of the Mass*, p.29.

36 Hardie, *Can a Man be a Christian?*, p.11; Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, p.47.

37 Wilkinson, *Christian Socialism*, 107; Bryant, *Possible Dreams*, p.197.

38 A. Wright, *R.H. Tawney* (Manchester, 1987), p.93.

39 W. Wellock, *Christian Communism: What It Is and Why It Is Necessary* (Manchester, 1921), p.10.

40 Newspaper article in the ‘Liverpool Daily Post’ on a speech made by Lansbury as Carnarvon, 18 September 1911, LSE archive, Lansbury/4 219.

41 I.S. Wood, ‘John Wheatley and Catholic Socialism’, in A.R. Morton, ed., *After Socialism? The Future of Radical Christianity* (Edinburgh, 1994), p.21.

42 S.E. Keeble, ‘Introduction’, in S.E. Keeble, ed., *The Social Teaching of the Bible* (London, 1909), p.19.

community enjoyed its value”.⁴³ Likewise, Hardie writes that “land could neither be sold outright nor held for more than a limited period as security for debt; even the debtor was freed from all obligations when the year of Jubilee came round”.⁴⁴ Temple argued that the year of Jubilee should be reinstated in order to prevent monopoly of land.⁴⁵ Again, we can see that Christian Socialists made extensive use of the Scripture in defending and advancing their political programme.

CHURCH TEACHING

The writings of Christian Socialists indicate that, in addition to Scripture, they in part derived their socialist beliefs from the teaching of the church. This included both the teaching of church fathers, as well as the contemporary teaching of the church. For example, in his *Catholic Working Man* John Wheatley’s arguments were “reinforced with wide-ranging quotations from the church fathers, Cardinal Manning, and, perhaps most effectively in its immediate local context, Archbishop Maguire himself”, Maguire being an Archbishop of Glasgow who had attacked Wheatley for his socialist views.⁴⁶ R.H. Tawney’s view was that “if men accepted the teaching of the Christian Church they would have a body of principles not only resting on authority [...] but setting out the main lines of a moral scheme of the universe and deducing man’s duties and rights, freedom, responsibility, justice, etc”.⁴⁷

43 Headlam, *Socialist’s Church*, p.59.

44 Hardie, *Serfdom to Socialism*, p.32.

45 Wilkinson, *Christian Socialism*, p.118.

46 I.S. Wood, *John Wheatley* (Manchester, 1990), p.27.

47 L. Goldman, *The Life of R.H. Tawney: Socialism and History* (London, 2013), p.183.

It is Samuel Keeble who gives the most extensive treatment of the teaching and example of the church throughout history, giving in his *Christian Responsibility for the Social Order* – after a similarly extensive Biblical theology of socialism – just over forty pages to a chronological account of socialism throughout the history of the church. He begins by noting the contribution of the earliest Christians to social reform, arguing that they “protected the poor, the widow, and the orphan”, and “dignified labour by engaging in it”.⁴⁸ James Keir Hardie adds that “it is now known that Communism in goods was practiced by Christians for at least three hundred years after the death of Christ”.⁴⁹ Keeble goes on to reference some of the apocryphal gospels and epistles from the early church, pointing to the “Way of Light” described by the writer of the Epistle of Barnabas – “thou shalt communicate to thy neighbour all thou hast; thou shalt not call anything thine own” – and quoting from the Shepherd of Hermas – “Justify the widow, judge the cause of the fatherless, and spend your riches and your wealth in such works as these”.⁵⁰

Keeble then moves on to the writings of those regarded as the Church Fathers, first pointing to the words of Tertullian: “We who mingle in mind and soul have no hesitation as to fellowship in property”. Cyprian is then quoted, commanding that Christians should “imitate the equality of God in the common gifts of nature, which the whole human race should equally enjoy”. “The unequal division of wealth,” writes Ambrose of Milan, “is the result of egotism and violence”.⁵¹ Again, these quotes appear to compel both equality and common

48 Keeble, *Christian Responsibility*, p.36 and p.51.

49 Hardie, *Socialism and Christianity*, p.5.

50 Keeble, *Christian Responsibility*, pp.37-8.

51 *Ibid*, p.39 and p.41.

ownership. Keeble also writes of Augustine, who is elsewhere quoted: "Let us, therefore, my brethren, abstain from the possession of private property, or from the love of it if we cannot abstain from the possession of it".⁵² William Temple also makes reference to Augustine in his *Christianity and the Social Order*.⁵³

Keeble then shifts his focus to the pre-Reformation and Reformation era, citing firstly John Wyclif – "the ideal remains that no man should hold separate property, and that all should be had in common" – and his contemporary, John Ball – "things would never go right in England as long as goods were not in common, and so long as there were villeins and gentlemen".⁵⁴ Some praise is offered for Martin Luther, but Keeble is critical of Luther's opposition to the peasants, and chooses to quote Thomas Muntzer: "our sovereigns and rulers are at the bottom of all usury, thievery, and robbery; they take all created things into their possession".⁵⁵ Other ecclesiastical figures from the era such as John Calvin, Hugh Latimer and Thomas More are also given as examples.⁵⁶ Wilfred Wellock, similarly, argued that socialism was "in the spirit of men like Wyclif, Luther, Knox", while Hardie pointed to Ball, the "Communistic teachings of Wycliffe", "John Huss the Communist", Muntzer, the Anabaptists and the Levellers.⁵⁷

Christian Socialists not only looked back to

the church of the past for inspiration, but could also find elements of socialism in the modern-day church. Stewart Headlam, according to one biographer, "used the Book of Common Prayer as a textbook in socialism".⁵⁸ Tawney also references the Book of Common Prayer in arguing that a prosperous society "depends upon co-operative effort, and co-operation upon moral principles. And moral principles are what the prophets of this dispensation despise. So the world 'continues in scarcity,' because it is too grasping and too short-sighted to see that 'which maketh men to be of one mind in a house.'" ⁵⁹

That which came to be known as Catholic social teaching has been identified as important in the political thought of John Wheatley.⁶⁰ "Catholic social teaching", according to one writer, "unequivocally maintains that the purpose of the state is to promote the common good, both for individuals and in terms of conditions appropriate for all".⁶¹ The only major document to have been written during Wheatley's lifetime was Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum* or *On the Condition of Labour* in 1891, an encyclical written in response to the problems caused by the industrial revolution. It is not difficult to see why such a document could be used by socialists such as Wheatley to argue for socialism, or as a basis of their personal socialist beliefs. For instance, Leo

52 S.E. Keeble, *The Ideal of the Material Life and other Social Addresses* (London, 1908), p.227.

53 Temple, *Christianity and the Social Order*, p.50

54 Keeble, *Christian Responsibility*, pp.58-9. Villeins: medieval, a feudal tenant entirely subject to a lord or manor to whom he paid dues and services in return for land (OED).

55 *Ibid.*, p.68, p.71 and p.72.

56 *Ibid.*, p.73, p.76 and p.77.

57 W. Wellock, *The Way Out, or The Road to the New World* (London, 1922), p.31; Hardie, *Serfdom to Socialism*, pp.40-1.

58 Orens, *Headlam's Radical Anglicanism*, p.1.

59 R.H Tawney, *The Acquisitive Society* (London, 1921), p.12. Here Tawney is quoting from the Book of Common Prayer paraphrase of Psalm 68: "He is a Father of the fatherless, and defendeth the cause of the widows; even God in his holy habitation. He is the God that maketh men to be of one mind in an house, and bringeth prisoners out of captivity".

60 Wood, *Wheatley*, p.160.

61 D. Cloutier, 'Modern Politics and Catholic Social Teaching', in D.M. McCarthy, *The Heart of Catholic Social Teaching: Its Origins and Contemporary Significance* (Grand Rapids MI, 2009), p.106.

writes: “But all agree, and there can be no question whatever, that some remedy must be found, and quickly found, for the misery and wretchedness which press so heavily at this moment on the large majority of the very poor”.⁶² Again Leo refers to “the cruelty of grasping speculators who use human beings as mere instruments for making money”, and calls for rulers to ensure that the poor are “housed, clothed and enabled to support life”.⁶³ Here Pope Leo seems to be supportive of socialist ideas. In various ways then the teaching and example of the church throughout history was deployed as an argument for Christian Socialism.

THE SACRAMENTS

The sacraments have been identified as a key aspect of Christian Socialism, with one historian of the movement writing of “sacramental socialism”, “a phrase which stands for the belief that the best proof and witness of the socialism of Christ is in the Holy Sacraments of the Church – especially Baptism and the Mass”.⁶⁴ It need hardly be stated that this sacramentalism held more significance for Catholics – whether Roman Catholics or Anglo-Catholics – than for Nonconformists; in the former tradition it is the administration of the sacraments rather than the preaching of the Word which is the focal point of worship. The foremost sacramental socialist, Stewart Headlam, saw both sacraments as of equal significance: “Baptism, the Sacrament of Equality, and Holy Communion, the Sacrament of Brotherhood: these two are fundamental, the one abolishing all class distinctions, and

62 C.E. Curran, *Catholic Social Teaching 1891-Present: A Historical, Theological and Ethical Analysis* (Washington DC, 2002) p.174.

63 *Ibid.*, p.199 and p.188.

64 Jones, *Christian Socialist Revival*, p.28.

admitting all into the Christian Church, simply on the ground of humanity; the other pledging and enabling all to live the life of brotherhood”.⁶⁵

This view was shared by Henry Scott Holland, who linked the “social solidarity of man” with “the essential solidarity of Church fellowship” as expressed in the Eucharist.⁶⁶ Holland’s Christian Social Union passed a resolution that its members should be those who had a “bond of union in the Sacrament of Christ’s body”, on the grounds that this allowed the CSU to “demand from Communicants that social service to which their Communion pledges them”.⁶⁷ William Temple, similarly, viewed the Eucharist as “the perfect picture of the Christian society”.⁶⁸ George Lansbury also speaks of the meaning of this sacrament, writing that “the Communion service to me is not only the sacrifice again of Christ but a reminder of all the good men and women who have made their sacrifices in order to make the world better”.⁶⁹ Headlam reportedly declared that “those who come to Holy Communion must be holy communists”.⁷⁰

Headlam linked the mass with baptism as we have seen above, writing that “we claim every little baby born into the world as being equal with every other little baby, no matter whether it be the child of a costermonger or the child of a prince”.⁷¹ Headlam viewed the two sacraments as complementary:

65 Headlam, *Socialist’s Church*, p.5.

66 H. Scott Holland, ed., *Our Neighbours: A Handbook for the C.S.U.* (London, 1911), p.60.

67 Jones, *Christian Socialist Revival*, p.178; Holland, *Our Neighbours*, p.60.

68 W. Temple, *The Church Looks Forward* (London, 1944), p.113.

69 Interview with Lansbury from the Christian Commonwealth Newspaper, 11 August 1915, LSE archive, Lansbury/7 213.

70 Mayor, *Churches and Labour Movement*, p.215.

71 Headlam, *Meaning of the Mass*, p.28.

And so, just as the most old-fashioned clergyman, whatever may have been his politics, or views on social questions, was by the mere fact of his baptising the labourer's little baby bearing witness to the truths of equality in a more far-reaching way than any French Revolution ever did: so the quietest and the most retiring of you when you kneel on Easter morning to receive Jesus Christ for your strength and refreshment, are also bearing witness to truths which, when realised, will regenerate the world: which will put down the mighty, scatter the proud, empty the pockets of the rich.⁷²

To the Christian Socialists therefore – and especially to Headlam – the sacraments are both examples of and arguments for a socialist order of society.

CRITIQUE

We may conclude from the above that Christian Socialism is an ideology rooted in a form of Christian thinking – arguments being made from the Bible, church teaching, and the sacraments – rather than being merely secular socialism with a religious appellation. The question which remains, however, is whether or not the Christian Socialist appeal to Christian theology is justified. In this final section we will see that the theological basis of Christian Socialism is in fact deeply flawed.

The concept at the core of Christian Socialism, as argued above, is brotherhood, and the other key concepts – equality, co-operation and democracy – are all drawn from that. The concept of universal brotherhood is itself drawn from the notion of God's universal Fatherhood. This notion, however, is easily refuted. A key text is found in John's Gospel: "Then said they to [Jesus], We be not born of fornication; we have

one Father, even God. Jesus said unto them, If God were your Father, ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me [...] Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do".⁷³ We may also point to the words of the writer to the Hebrews: "It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons".⁷⁴ Both passages indicate that those who are not Christians do not have God as their Father.

This then refutes the Christian Socialist argument is that all people on earth make up one big family, and ought on that familial basis to share resources. We have seen, for example, John Clifford arguing "that the principle of Brotherhood as taught by Jesus Christ cannot adequately be wrought out under existing industrial and commercial conditions, and that the faithful and commonplace application of this principle must result in the Socialization of all natural resources, as well as the instruments of production, distribution and exchange". The "principle of Brotherhood as taught by Jesus Christ", however, does not suggest a universal family as the basis for a collectivist order of society; it in fact states that humanity is divided into two camps – those who follow Him, and those who do not.

The Christian Socialist might counter that all the people on earth have been equally created by God, and on that basis relate to Him as sons and daughters and to each other as brothers and sisters. While, however, it is correct to say that all people are God's children in the sense that they are His creation, in a fallen world they do not all

⁷³ John: 8:42 and 44.

⁷⁴ Hebrews 12:7-9. (ESV)

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp.27-8.

relate to Him on that basis; Christ clearly states that those who oppose Him cannot claim to have God as their Father. The Christian Socialist vision of a collectivist society requires unity of vision and purpose; this unity could potentially exist between those who share brotherhood on the basis of a common Christian faith, but cannot exist between those who share no such brotherhood, even if it is accepted that they share brotherhood on the basis of a common creation. All mankind are linked insofar as they are all created by God, but, again, in this fallen world, mankind consists of believers and unbelievers, and these two groups will have different aims, objectives and priorities. If then the Christian Socialist argues for the existence of brotherhood on the basis of a common faith with its unity of vision and purpose, this is false; if the argument is for brotherhood on the basis of a common status as God's created beings, this is insufficient.

Questions may also be raised over other Christian Socialist uses of Scripture. Keir Hardie's view of the Sermon on the Mount as "a consistent and powerful argument against property" cannot be sustained. Hardie might have had in mind Christ's instruction "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth", yet we are not to understand from this verse that private property must be collectivised, but rather that we ought to concentrate more on eternal and spiritual things than temporal and materialistic things.⁷⁵ Socialism is no less focused on the materialistic than capitalism; it is not evident that the creation of a socialist society would remove the Mammon worship against which the Christian Socialists argued.

Criticisms may also be applied to Samuel Keeble's interpretation of the parable of the workers in the vineyard as an argument for the

75 Matthew 6:19.

government-mandated minimum wage. The Lord taught that parables spoke of "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven", rather than earthly issues; in this case the parable refers to the common reward that each believer will receive – eternal salvation – regardless the stage of life at which they are saved.⁷⁶ We may also take issue with the application of Paul's discussion of "the body" in 1 Corinthians 12 to the right ordering of society. The "body" referred to is not society but the church; Paul writes that "by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body", and that this body is "the body of Christ", "the church".⁷⁷ The description of common ownership in Acts of the Apostles does not compel a socialist order of society as this generous giving and sharing of resources took place solely within the church rather than throughout society.⁷⁸ The same applies to Israel's land laws; these laws were given to the community of Old Testament believers, and today point to the free sharing of resources within the church, as exemplified in Acts.

The idea of Christ as a revolutionary figure must also be dismissed given that Scripture teaches Christ to have been falsely accused of these things:

And the whole multitude of them arose, and led him unto Pilate. And they began to accuse him, saying, We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, saying that he himself is Christ a King. And Pilate asked him, saying, Art thou the King of the Jews? And he answered him and said, Thou sayest it. Then said Pilate to the chief

76 Matthew 13:11.

77 1 Corinthians 12:14, 27 and 28.

78 Some have also advanced the argument that the holding in common of property in Acts does not suggest socialism as it was purely voluntary. This is true, but cannot be used as an argument against a socialist interpretation; there are, at least in theory, libertarian, voluntarist and democratic forms of socialism and communism as well as coercive, authoritarian ones.

priests and to the people, I find no fault in this man [...] And Pilate, when he had called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, Said unto them, Ye have brought this man unto me, as one that perverteth the people: and, behold, I, having examined him before you, have found no fault in this man touching those things whereof ye accuse him.⁷⁹

We can ourselves look to the synoptic Gospels and see that Christ did not forbid “to give tribute to Caesar”, but rather taught: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s”.⁸⁰ This stands as a denial of, for example, Lansbury’s description of Jesus: “the lonely Galilean – Communist, agitator, martyr – crucified as one who stirred up the people and set class against class”.⁸¹

The Christian Socialist use of past and contemporary church teaching to argue for socialism can also be faulty. For example, the use of *Rerum novarum* must be dismissed given Pope Leo’s declarations in the encyclical itself that “the main tenet of socialism, the community of goods, must be utterly rejected”, and that “[e]very human being has by nature the right to possess private property as one’s own”.⁸² Some of the quotes employed by Keeble from sources such as the Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Barnabas could be interpreted as advocating individual acts of charity rather than economic organisation, while those from church fathers – for example, Tertullian: “We who mingle in mind and soul have no hesitation as to fellowship in property” – appear to apply to the church as a community rather than society. Drawing on our discussion of brotherhood,

above, we can re-state that Christians and non-Christians do not “mingle in mind and soul”. While much of the past and contemporary teaching of the church is open to interpretation, it does have to be allowed that some – such as the teaching of Wyclif that “the ideal remains that no man should hold separate property, and that all should be had in common” – seems clearly to suggest socialism. From the evangelical perspective, however, with its doctrine of *sola scriptura*, it suffices to conclude that whether or not figures from church history or the modern church have argued for or against socialism matters very little.

The flawed interpretations given to the sacraments, however, matter much more. Stewart Headlam’s view of baptism as a “Sacrament of Equality” is easily dismissed from a Baptist perspective, as stated in the 1689 Confession of Faith: “Those who do actually profess repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience to, our Lord Jesus Christ, are the only proper subjects of this ordinance”.⁸³ It is, however, not even necessary to take this Baptist perspective. The Heidelberg Catechism argues that “by baptism, as sign of the covenant, [children of believers] must be grafted into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers”.⁸⁴ In fact, even the Thirty-Nine Articles of Headlam’s own Church of England view the sacrament as “a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened, but it is also a sign of Regeneration or New-Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church”.⁸⁵ Here we see that, in the Baptist, Presbyterian and Anglican

79 Luke 23:1-4 and 13-14.

80 Matthew 22:21. Also Mark 12:17 and Luke 20:25.

81 Scheer, *Lansbury*, p.1.

82 Curran, *Catholic Social Teaching*, p.199 and p.200.

83 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, 29:2.

84 Heidelberg Catechism, 74.

85 The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, 27.

traditions, baptism, rather than representing universal equality, in fact differentiates between believers – or, the children of believers – and unbelievers.

The same is true of the Lord's Supper: rather than "enabling all to live the life of brotherhood", the Thirty-Nine Articles – based on 1 Corinthians 11 – restrict the sacrament to Christians, for when non-Christians eat the bread and wine "in no wise are they partakers of Christ: but rather, to their condemnation, do eat and drink the sign or Sacrament of so great a thing".⁸⁶ Headlam's universal application of the sacraments is therefore denied by one of the foundational documents of his own church. Lansbury is also wrong in his view that "the Communion service to me is not only the sacrifice again of Christ but a reminder of all the good men and women who have made their sacrifices in order to make the world better", for the teaching of Christ at the institution of the Lord's Supper is that the sacrament is solely in remembrance of Him.⁸⁷ Much of the theological argument underpinning Christian Socialism does not then stand up to scrutiny, for the Christian Socialist interpretation attached to scripture, church teaching and the sacraments can be shown to be, at best, questionable, and at worst, demonstrably false.

CONCLUSION

On Sunday the 25th September 2016, the day after his re-election as leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn received a rapturous welcome at the Christians on the Left conference service, held at an evangelical Anglican church near the conference venue in Liverpool. The Christians who had gathered

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸⁷ Luke 22:19-20.

for worship that morning offered vocal support for Corbyn as he described the "fundamental tenets of Christianity" as being "social justice", "sharing" and "compassion". The same morning Corbyn appeared on the BBC's *Andrew Marr Show* arguing for a £500 billion government "investment" into the economy, and at the Momentum "The World Transformed" rally, arguing for the "central and mainstream" relevance of the left-wing group's ideas.⁸⁸ Just over 12 months earlier, in the United States, Bernie Sanders made a campaign visit to the evangelical Liberty University, at which he set out a vision of social justice based on the words of Amos, "But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream", adding that this was not possible "in a nation and in a world which worships not love of brothers and sisters, not love of the poor and the sick, but worships the acquisition of money and great wealth".⁸⁹ Sanders' speech caused one pastor and Liberty graduate to endorse the senator for President, for Sanders "declares justice for the poor. He declares Good News for 'the least of these'. He has come to bring Gospel".⁹⁰

These examples indicate the contemporary relevance of the above discussion. Christians, including evangelical Christians, continue to offer support for a socialist agenda, and socialist figures such as Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders. Yet even in the key formative period

⁸⁸ 'Jeremy Corbyn on Brexit, NHS and Syria – BBC News', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxO_5_0xGdw, accessed 5th November 2016; A. Cowburn, 'Momentum's ideas 'absolutely essential', says Jeremy Corbyn', *Independent*, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/momentum-s-ideas-absolutely-essential-says-jeremy-corbyn-a7329276.html>, accessed 5th November 2016.

⁸⁹ 'Bernie Sanders Liberty University speech, annotated', <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/09/14/bernie-sanders-liberty-university-speech-annotated/>, accessed 5th November 2016. Sanders is referring to Amos 5:24.

⁹⁰ 'Biblical Argument for Bernie', <https://clyp.it/eusxalwe>, accessed 5th November 2016.

for – at least, British – Christian Socialism, the Christian case for socialism has simply not been made. The Sermon on the Mount does not render a “consistent and powerful argument against property”, nor was Jesus Christ a revolutionary, “crucified as one who stirred up the people and set class against class”; Church teaching is not consistent on the matter of politics or economics, and even if it was ought not to be treated as authoritative; the sacraments illuminate distinctions rather than picturing equality, as it is only believers – or the children of believers – who are legitimately baptised, while communion is only for professing Christians. The notion of universal human brotherhood cannot be sustained to any adequate degree, and if it is accepted that this is the concept at the heart of Christian Socialism, then the very foundation of Christian Socialism is flawed.

This, it should be noted, is not to suggest that Christians ought to offer their support for conservative positions over liberal ones, or a capitalist economy over a socialist one, for a discussion of the Christian case for capitalism would find the theological arguments advanced equally faulty. Samuel Keeble, for example, used the parable of the workers in the vineyard as an argument for a government-mandated minimum wage; we may view this as ridiculous, and yet it is no more or less ridiculous than Bryan Fischer of the American Family Association using the very same parable to draw precisely the opposite conclusion, on the grounds that the owner of the vineyard had control of his own property and reserved for himself the right to set wages. “Bottom line”, argues Fischer, “Jesus was a capitalist. The economy in which his stories take place is an economy predicated on the private ownership of the means of production”⁹¹

91 B. Fischer, ‘Jesus was Not a Socialist’, <http://www.afa.net/the-stand/bible/2015/10/jesus-was-not-a-socialist/>, accessed 5th November 2016.

In contrast to both positions, the Christian should not expect the Bible to teach support for any political ideology, any man-made political belief system. With that caveat in place, however, we may conclude that the combination of Christianity with socialism represents a two-fold danger. Firstly, it often seems that Christian Socialists were engaging an eisegetical rather than exegetical exercise, reading their socialism into their theology rather than drawing their socialism from their theology. The warning of the Apostle Peter therefore applies, for Christian Socialists may be among those that “wrest” or “twist” the Scriptures “to their own destruction”⁹² Secondly, the Christian Socialist message may act as a false gospel, replacing the Gospel message of salvation in Jesus Christ with a message of social improvement; note, for example, that the pastor above views Bernie Sanders’ message as “Gospel”. The Apostle Paul declares: “If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed”⁹³

There is then such a thing as left-wing Christianity, obscured though it is by the more visible tradition of right-wing Christianity. Left-wing Christianity is not a secular creed with a religious façade, but draws very much from theological thinking. The core concept of Christian Socialism, human brotherhood – itself derived from the idea of God’s Fatherhood and leading to the concepts of equality, collectivism and democracy – is based on an interpretation of Biblical teaching. In the same way parables of Christ, apostolic epistles and Old Testament laws could be transformed into arguments for socialism. The teaching and example of the

www.afa.net/the-stand/bible/2015/10/jesus-was-not-a-socialist/, accessed 5th November 2016.

92 2 Peter 3:16.

93 Galatians 1:9.

church, both in the past – such as the writings of church fathers and the example of early Christians – and in the present – interpretations of liturgical documents and the papal encyclical which laid the foundation for Catholic social teaching – also contributed to the socialist case. The same is true of the messages seemingly conveyed by the sacraments: brotherhood and equality. So much of this theological argument is flawed however, derived from misinterpretation, misapplication and eisegesis, that we may question whether Christian Socialism is really Christian at all.

Anthony Williams

Dr Anthony Williams is a tutor in politics at the University of Liverpool. He has recently completed his doctoral thesis, 'Christian Socialism as a Political Ideology', and is interested in Christian thought about and engagement with politics, as well as political ideology in general. ORCID: 0000-0002-3811-1756.