

## REVIEW ESSAY

# Protestant Sectarianism in Twentieth-Century British Labour History: From Free and Labour Churches to Pentecostalism and the Churches of Christ

PETER ACKERS

*School of Business & Economics, Loughborough University  
Epinal Way, Loughborough, Leicestershire, LE11 3TU, UK and  
Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia*

E-mail: [peter.ackers1@virginmedia.com](mailto:peter.ackers1@virginmedia.com)

---

CATTERALL, PETER. *Labour and the Free Churches, 1918–1939. Radicalism, Righteousness and Religion.* Bloomsbury, London [etc.] 2016. 336 pp. £90.00. (Paper: £28.99.)

JOHNSON, NEIL. *The Labour Church. The Movement and Its Message.* Routledge, Abingdon 2018. 234 pp. £92.00.

### RELIGION IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY LABOUR HISTORY

The British educated classes have long worried and fantasized about working-class religious belief and unbelief. Anglican churchmen feared Methodist “enthusiasm” in the eighteenth century, radicalism in the aftermath of the French Revolution, and urban, industrial irreligion after the 1851 Religious Census on churchgoing.<sup>1</sup> In a mirror image of these old anxieties, most labour historians have wished away Christianity in the twentieth century. The long-standing shared socialist teleology of Marxists and Fabians leads to the modern, socialist labour movement.<sup>2</sup> In this Marxian take on secularization theory, a new, more cohesive proletariat or singular “working class” forms, with an anti-capitalist, “socialist” consciousness reflected in the

1. See D. Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (London, 2005), a global history.

2. See S. Webb and B. Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (London, 1894/1920); and J. Hinton, *Labour and Socialism: A History of the British Labour Movement 1867–1974* (London, 1983).

political, trade union, and co-operative institutions of the “labour movement”. Suddenly, economic, social, and political history find a single, unified subject. At the level of belief, socialism displaces those old Victorian pretenders for working-class hearts and minds: conservatism, liberalism, and Christianity. Sometime between 1914 and 1918, the Christian religion disappears from ordinary lives, as in Selina Todd’s recent, *The People*, where popular religious faith is barely worth talking about.<sup>3</sup>

This sudden vanishing is surprising, since the influential historians of the post-war Communist Party History group – Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, A.L. Morton, Edward Thompson and others – wrote widely on popular faith in earlier periods. Politicized during the patriotic Popular Front era, they paid proper attention to the highly distinctive native, radical Protestant religious tradition, emerging from the mid-seventeenth-century English civil war, first as “Dissent” (Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers) and then as “Nonconformity” (with the subsequent addition of Methodists and Unitarians).<sup>4</sup> They were prepared to debate the impact of Methodism, a movement that was alleged to have produced working-class quiescence, yet also provided many early trade union leaders. Even so, an underlying “progressive” socialist bias against irrational faith drew a line at the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

In line with secularization theory more generally, there is little doubt that working-class Christianity declined in Britain during the twentieth century. The real questions are: when was the turning point; what were the underlying processes; and how much did these depend on our specific national context? Calum Brown’s recent influential account has shifted the collapse of British Christianity from the Great War to the 1960s, by which time the “decline of working-class politics” was also well advanced.<sup>6</sup> If, as the two books under review in this article suggest, working-class Christianity loomed large well into the middle of the last century, this opens up an alternative trajectory. Perhaps, the two deaths took place at roughly the same time in the same house. Maybe, socialism – in Britain at least – insofar as it ever had genuine popular appeal, was a late, romantic flowering of older Christian sentiment,

3. S. Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class 1910–2010* (London, 2014).

4. This concept of religious Nonconformity applies better to England and Wales than to Scotland with its national Presbyterian church.

5. See, for instance, E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963); and E.J. Hobsbawm, “The Labour Sects”, in *idem*, *Primitive Rebels* (London, 1971), ch. VIII; *idem*, “Methodism and the Threat of Revolution in Britain”, in *idem*, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1964), ch. 3; and *idem*, “Religion and the Rise of Socialism”, in *idem*, *Worlds of Labour: Further Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1984), ch. 3.

6. C. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London, 2001); B. Hindess, *The Decline of Working-Class Politics* (London, 1971).

such that both faiths fell together with the advent of post-World War II prosperity and a mass consumer society?

But before jumping to this or other conclusions, it is worth making one key distinction between three concepts that are conflated in Marxian labour history: *the working classes*; *the labour movement*; and *socialism*. For much of the last century, the working classes meant manual workers and their families, a clear majority of the British population. In objective sociological terms, this was a very diverse group, divided by skill and occupation, with a strong moral distinction between the “rough” and the “respectable”.<sup>7</sup> Hoggart recalls that his nonconformist family, “were though poor, clearly very much of the respectable working class”, whereas the miner, “Jack was obviously a rough sort of chap”. Occupational status alone did not explain the distinction, though. There were respectable miners too, many of them Primitive Methodists. Indeed, chapel-going was once central to this divide, with drink and gambling on the other side. For the sociologist, Strangleman: “The divide between ‘rough’ and ‘respectable’ (hard living and steady living) working class is as old as industrialization” – though it has now lost any religious connotation.<sup>8</sup> The working classes did manual work. Other than that, they remained an economically, socially, culturally, and politically diverse collection of differing identities.

The twentieth-century labour movement gave more cohesion to the working classes. “There were thus good reasons for the existence of a more clearly delineated working-class movement by 1910. But the change must not be exaggerated”. For the rest of the century, British trade unions remained sectional interest groups, divided by skill, status, and industry.<sup>9</sup> They represented the “organized working classes” – in all their variety – but union density fell to 25.4 per cent in 1930 and only reached 33.1 per cent in 1940.<sup>10</sup> According to McKibbin, “in the interwar years Labour (at best) won no more than half the working-class vote”, in a period of “remarkable Conservative hegemony which lasted unchallengeable until the Second World War”.<sup>11</sup> In short, many manual workers never joined a union or voted Labour, still less shopped mainly at the Co-operative store. Both religion and political activism were strongest in the “respectable” working class.

7. See D. Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, ch. 4 (New Haven, CT, 1998) and A.J. Reid, *Social Classes and Social Relations in Britain, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1995), ch. 3.

8. R. Hoggart, *A Local Habitation: Life and Times 1918–1940* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 10 and 105; T. Strangleman, “Chavs and the Working Class”, *Working-Class Perspectives*, 3 October 2011, available at: <https://workingclassstudies.wordpress.com/2011/10/03/chavs-and-the-working-class/>; last accessed 5 December 2018.

9. H.A. Clegg, A. Fox, and A.F. Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1964), p. 488.

10. A. Marsh and B. Cox, *The Trade Union Movement in the UK 1992* (Oxford, 1992), p. 23, Table 8.

11. R. McKibbin, *Parties and People: England 1914–1951* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 70 and 73.

Thus, there is no easy jump forwards from working-class attitudes to labour movement ideology, let alone backwards such that “the movement” speaks for some unified proletarian mass.

The putative next step, from the labour movement to socialism, is even more problematic, except in the relatively trivial sense that, after the Great War, “Labour” and “socialist” became popular synonyms. British trade unions, the working-class backbone of the labour movement, were instrumental, occupational organizations, established mainly by radical Liberals long before the advent of modern socialism. Their main activity, free collective bargaining, owed little or nothing to socialist ideas; even after they had created the Labour Party to represent their political interests. Strong, ideological socialism was primarily a middle-class ideology that emerged outside the working classes and only ever strongly influenced a small activist minority. The Webbs had described the old Liberalism as: “the conversion of the Trade Union leaders to middle-class views”.<sup>12</sup> Yet, most of the working-class “socialism” that followed was either a loose tag for Labour’s highly pragmatic social reform, or a sentimental, secularized version of the Christian cry against injustice. Serious, scientific socialists were thin on the ground.<sup>13</sup>

We can dispute the details of this argument – the weight of working-class socialists and so on – but the basic tripartite, analytical distinction is critical to serious labour history. The history of the working classes (plural) should not be conflated with the history of the labour movement, nor with the history of socialism. All are interesting and important in their own way. But it makes sense for historians today to turn the socialist telescope around, start with what actual working people thought about religion – without prejudging their appropriate consciousness – then see how this influenced the labour movement, and only after that explore what link, if any, there was to socialism. Both interesting new books reviewed here do something in between: focusing on the religious institutions but linking these to socialist ideas and labour movement institutions. The real working classes themselves often have only a shadowy presence.

#### MAINSTREAM BRITISH NONCONFORMITY

Peter Catterall’s *Labour and the Free Churches, 1918–1939*, addresses the mainstream non-Anglican Protestant churches, whose membership and political influence peaked during the last Liberal government, just as the Labour Party began to take shape as an independent entity. By 1918,

12. S. Webb and B. Webb, *The History*, p. 369.

13. R. McKibbin, “Why Was There No Marxism in Great Britain?”, *English Historical Review*, 99 (1984), pp. 287–333.

Catterall's departure point, the party had become the main opposition to the Conservatives with its own, ostensibly "socialist" constitution, though its ranks thronged with former Liberals – most notably one early leader, Arthur Henderson – while progressive Liberal ideas imbued much of its early thinking. Virtually all the early figures came from religious nonconformity, even if they had left behind formal faith and practice. Henderson remained a devout Wesleyan Methodist; Keir Hardie, an active evangelical; while Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden came from similar backgrounds. By this time too, the radical Protestant churches had come of age, shedding the defensive "nonconformist" title for the positive "free churches", to distinguish themselves from the state "Anglican", Church of England.

Catterall explores the changing relationship between the free churches and the Labour Party through four different "prisms": the church leadership response to the rise of the new party; local changes at chapel level, including declining attendance and rising social mobility; the churches' contribution of personnel to the labour movement; and the development of ideas and ideals. Indirectly, these last three prisms move us from the changing social composition of the churches, including a slowly shrinking working-class presence, through individual involvement in the labour movement, to the engagement with socialist ideas. But by starting with the progressive, professional ministry and ending with socialist ideas, Catterall slips too easily into middle-class people speaking "on behalf of" an idealized, unified working class; the bane of British labour history.<sup>14</sup>

Even so, his findings are arresting. In 1918, free church links were predominant among Labour MPs, trade union and co-operative leaders; though by 1939 this was less so. Moreover, Christian rhetoric, centred on Jesus Christ and social justice, continued to pervade interwar Labour politics. That said, at the policy level, the Victorian Liberal, nonconformist policy prescriptions for respectable working-class life – temperance to restrict alcohol consumption, opposition to gambling, Sunday closing, non-denominational schools and, above all, self-help and voluntary associational solutions to social problems – had a declining purchase in the new party. Conservative-dominated national governments ruled through most of these ostensibly "red", interwar decades.<sup>15</sup> And as Labour sought to wrest a mass working-class electorate from the two old parties of government, it needed to appeal not only to Anglicans and the growing, largely Irish-origin, Roman Catholic population, but also to irreligious families

14. Reid, *Social Classes*, p. 45, dissects skill and income differences, while challenging "simplistic notions of a homogenous working-class culture".

15. The misleadingly leftist image of interwar Britain arises from the intellectual and cultural politics of the Popular Front. See A. Croft, *Red Letter Days: British Fiction in the 1930s* (London, 1990).

enjoying the new mass society of cinema and spectator sport. So, while most still sent their children to Sunday School, the Club and Institute Union (CIU) working men's club, serving alcohol, challenged the chapel as an influence on policy.

Here, there is no lurch to Marxist or even Fabian socialism, but a gradual ideological shift, as the state becomes increasingly the preferred agency of social change. The huge, lingering coal mining crisis fostered union support for nationalization, but also shaped wider intellectual support for state planning. This reflected a growing state-socialist hegemony, as middle-class socialists flooded into the new individual membership Labour Party, then into Parliament, and began to dominate its policy thinking.<sup>16</sup> Gradually, they displaced the old radical autodidact solutions of individual self-help coupled to voluntary associational, civil society institutions, such as trade unions, consumer co-operatives, and housing associations. Ambitions for the central state began to eclipse the potential of local government. Catterall charts the conversion of "Christian Socialist" religious ministers to state solutions, as the old Victorian moralism is simply transferred to a new instrument (where it still resides).

Some of this new statism is understandable: anticipating post-war reformist social democracy. The interwar state was too small in a fully fledged popular liberal democracy, to address public concerns about mass unemployment, absolute poverty, and slum housing. Such urgent problems were beyond the reach of individual and civil society solutions alone. The old nonconformist labour movement had been shaped by "respectable", self-improving, self-reliant, skilled men, who became trade union and Labour leaders. Full democracy enfranchised the poorer, more economically insecure remainder of the working classes and, according to Catterall, social change blurred the boundaries between the two. Moreover, late Victorian poverty studies had convinced many that individual moral failures, such as drunkenness and gambling, were an inadequate explanation for poverty. Low wages and overstocked, unregulated labour markets made civilized family life impossible.

Yet, there are problems with Catterall's analysis of this religious transition from associational progressive liberalism to state-socialism. First, he understates the efficacy and potential longevity of the liberal-pluralist project. The New Liberal progressivism of the early twentieth century had already moved beyond Victorian political economy to develop more active state policies for the new mass society. The 1906 Liberal government laid the foundations for the welfare state, borrowing from German social insurance ideas. And it is

16. P. Ackers and A. Reid (eds), *Alternatives to State-Socialism in Britain* (London, 2016) defines "state-socialism" more broadly than just Soviet communism, to include reformist trends that prefer central state planning to decentralized and voluntary associational solutions to social problems.

worth recalling that the two principal architects of post-war social democratic welfare and economics were William Beveridge and John Maynard Keynes, both progressives liberals, not socialists. Besides, associational solutions retained great potential force.

In one crucial case, trade unions and collective bargaining, they won over state-socialist ideas. The real industrial relations story of Britain's interwar years is not the General Strike, which so exercised the consciences of Catterall's free church ministers, but the slow, steady, silent advance of national collective bargaining.<sup>17</sup> This laid the foundations of the post-war British voluntarist industrial relations system; always in tension with statist ambitions of middle-class Fabian planners. Here there was no *Strange Death of Liberal England*, no abrupt caesura in British political economy.<sup>18</sup> Instead, New Liberal employers, like the Quaker Chocolate manufacturer, Cadbury, elaborated pluralist systems of partnership with moderate trade unions; and the TUC contributed to national "corporate bias".<sup>19</sup> The role of the state had already changed, but in a way consistent with older liberal-pluralist traditions.

At the same time, the much neglected third arm of the Webb's tripartite British labour movement, consumer co-operation, was emerging as a large force during this period, with its voluntary vision of a "Co-operative Commonwealth". Beyond these twin pillars lay a plethora of collective self-help institutions and experiments: worker co-operatives, building societies, housing associations and so on. At the same time, Joseph Chamberlain's Victorian, nonconformist, local government initiatives were being extended by Labour authorities into areas like welfare and council housing. In short, the progressive Liberal, civil society approach was far from exhausted and could easily have blended with newer ethical socialist and social democratic strands in the post-World War II era. Anti-statist Protestantism, grounded in the autonomous, dissenting, gathered congregation, was the historical taproot of these enduring liberal-pluralist ideas and the associated associational culture.

Why, then, did many free church socialists lose faith in *their own* proud voluntarist traditions, nurtured through centuries of protesting against a state-church that stifled freedom of conscience and action, and become so mesmerised by the state-socialist promise that central planning would solve almost all social problems? Catterall tends to see this as a necessary modern transition, in step with the spirit of the age. Had they been edging towards some pragmatic, pluralist social democracy that balanced state and voluntary

17. H.A. Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889*, vols II & III (Oxford 1985, 1994).

18. G. Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London, 1935).

19. J. Kimberley, "Edward Cadbury: An Egalitarian Employer and Supporter of Working Women's Campaigns", in Ackers & Reid, *Alternatives*, pp. 153–177; and K. Middlemas, *Politics in Industrial Society* (London, 1979).

forces – as trade union leaders like Ernest Bevin and Walter Citrine were – we might applaud their prescience. But when reading quotes endorsing full public ownership of the means of production, it is hard not to see well-intentioned Christians falling under the spell of Sidney and Beatrice Webb's, *The Soviet Union: A New Civilisation* (1935)?

Catterall's reading of developments in working-class religion is subtle. He recognizes the complexity of the working classes and the declining political weight of the free churches in the new world of mass production and mass democracy. One dimension of Protestant nonconformity contributes to this decline and merits wider discussion. While working-class Catholicism was growing by migration and high fertility, the free churches were shrinking as a presence in the working classes through accelerated social mobility – self-improvement – and falling fertility. As Catterall demonstrates, their decline, at this early stage, is far more complex than a simple loss of faith. Indebtedness, due to excessive Victorian church building, and movement of population out of city centres, leaves them running to catch-up with social change. Most interesting of all is the suggestion that the emphasis of the new liberal theology on “social gospel” and church associational life (clubs and outings) had the unintended consequence that the spiritual content and sense of individual salvation was drained out of institutional religion. Ironically, policies designed to hold the working classes to the churches led to them losing faith or looking elsewhere.

As for the labour movement, Catterall's main attention is given to the Labour Party, where a high proportion of religious activists are middle-class idealists. However, the trade unions are well-represented, suggesting that the free churches should be considered a part of the labour movement, precisely because of their unique contribution to its leadership, which far exceeded their sociological presence in the working classes. This distinction between *leaders* and *followers* is critical to labour history. Radical Protestants, especially Methodists, had an important, indirect influence on the mentality of the British working classes in general. And without some popular evangelical resonance, the free churches could not have provided so many leaders. Equally, without such roots in the working classes, these leaders would not have emerged from local congregations. This said, it was the direct provision of leaders that distinguished their unique contribution.

To be fair, this distinction can also be employed to frame the role of Marxist socialists within the British labour movement, including the activists of Britain's tiny Communist Party, which played a disproportionate leadership role in British trade unions after World War II. In broad sociological terms, here is a new type of sect, with its own distinctive theology and millenarian prospect. From this perspective, labour movement secularization never fully takes place at the activist level; it merely shifts from one faith to another. And there is plenty of evidence that ordinary working people often preferred leaders more austere and committed than themselves, prepared to spend their



days in endless committee meetings. Often, labour movement policies were shaped by these figures, in dialogue with the more bread-and-butter concerns of the rank and file. Well-organized communists thrived on mass apathy and opportunist, militant free collective bargaining. Thus, the politics of the labour movement were never a simple reflection of working-class consciousness, even though activists had to maintain some complex dialogue with what ordinary people thought and wanted. Strong faith mattered most as a source of leaders.

“Socialism” remains the most problematic concept in this study, since Catterall never defines the ideology or who it belongs too. He is clear that Marxist ideas have little resonance in the British working classes. And most of his free church Christian socialist witnesses are middle-class enthusiasts washed along, as we have seen, by what they think is the river of history. He also senses, quite rightly, a generational shift among trade union activists, as those brought up in the evangelical Victorian chapel give way to sons and daughters subject to more secular influences. But this is the view from the mainline, by now liberal Protestant denominations: Methodist (unified in 1932), Congregational and Baptist. Still more neglected is the hidden world of working-class religion outside these by now establishment churches.

#### ON THE RADICAL MARGINS

At first sight, Neil Johnson’s new study of *The Labour Church* seems a good place to start. Perhaps now we will hear directly the faith of the masses, largely free from middle-class interpolation? Sadly, this is not the case. Instead, we find a fascinating study of a strand of that important, though eccentric terrain in the *history of British socialist ideas*, where explicit religious ideas blend with a utopian socialist faith. In many respects, this returns us to the ground where Marxian labour historians feel most comfortable. If we must have religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, let this be as liberal, agnostic, and this-worldly as possible. Hence the relative popularity of Victorian Unitarians and Quakers, in contrast to the widely disliked Methodists. The tiny Labour Church sect already has a large literature, including a visit by the venerable Eric Hobsbawm, who comforted himself that here was an obscure transitional institution on the road to modern secular socialism. The author of this new study is a Methodist minister, who takes seriously the “Theological Socialism” of the Labour Church’s prophet, John Trevor, argues that the “movement” was more influential than Hobsbawm suggests, and regards it not as an instance of proto-secularization, but of the extension of religious consciousness into the twentieth century.

Trevor's big, simple, apocalyptic idea was that "God is in the Labour movement", not in the mainstream Christian churches, nor even exclusively in Christianity. Influenced by Unitarian transcendentalism and inflamed by an idealized, utopian take on the late Victorian "Labour Question", he developed a post-Christian theology and advocated Labour Churches to practice this in Sunday services. Johnson subtly distinguishes this approach from the broader streams of Christian Socialism and Ethical Socialism that were so influential amongst Britain's strongest socialist group, the Independent Labour Party (ILP). The first Labour Church appeared in 1891 and the main movement had collapsed within a decade. However, Johnson has unearthed two further developments, which lasted from the Great War to the early 1930s: in Britain's second city, Birmingham, and in Canada.

There are several problems with Johnson's larger claims for the Labour Church. First, the Church was indeed tiny and ephemeral. We are given no overall membership figures but hear of a handful of congregations, while Birmingham "averaged little more than 100 members". By comparison, national Methodist membership (a narrow measure) peaked at 841,462 in 1930.<sup>20</sup> No sooner had local churches formed than they collapsed, while the first national movement lasted less than a decade. Second, the movement looks doctrinally inchoate, despite Johnson's claim that they represent a consistent, if tolerant, version of Theological Socialism.

This is particularly true of the two twentieth-century developments. The Canadian Labour Churches appear a radical fragment of the much larger Methodist social gospel movement; while their distant Birmingham cousins operate more like Sunday meetings of the local ILP, with whom they have strong links. Birmingham was one of England's great Nonconformist cities, so it is no surprise that some socialists would want to take on the religious colour of their local background. There are two useful reconstructions of Labour Church services in the Appendices, but neither convince that this was really a popular religious movement. Rather, the Labour Church seems to be living off the cultural capital of a much deeper and more widespread working-class chapel tradition. Only in this sense – that socialism was best sold as the incarnation of Christ's life and teaching – does their transient existence support the case for twentieth-century, working-class religiosity. For if the British working classes had lost all interest in religion, the tone of this small initiative would be hard to comprehend.

Overall, the Labour Church phenomenon was so small that even if it were a genuine "labour sect", this would not amount to much on its own; except, perhaps, as an exemplar for some future Protestant vision of liberation theology. In that sense, Trevor's ideas are more intriguing than his scant following. As an enquiry into the *history of working-class religiosity*, there is a still

20. Hempton, *Methodism*, p. 214.

more glaring problem: little or no evidence of any substantial working-class base – compared, say, to the Primitive Methodists or many Anglican and Catholic urban congregations. “Labour” appears as an ideological affiliation, not a social description. What we find instead is a home for middle-class, socialist idealists, even some manufacturers; and many more disillusioned but highly educated, radical clerics from the Unitarian and other denominations. Once more, the dreams and fantasies of intellectuals about the working classes are confused with the more down-to-earth lives and aspirations of manual workers and the trade unions that represent them. No doubt there were working-class labour movement activists in the Labour Church, but how representative were they? To find some more authentic voices of working-class faith, we need to look elsewhere.

#### CONCLUSION: LABOUR HISTORY AND WORKING-CLASS CHRISTIANITY

In a democratic age, middle-class church leaders – then as now – tend to assume that the poor want a socially relevant religion that talks about the politics of social justice. Centre-to-left, university-based labour historians are prone to fete those groups that go down this road and neglect the others. They prefer the progressive familiar to the conservative “other”. Yet, twentieth-century British evidence suggests that the more theologically liberal and socially conscious the churches became, the more their working-class support dissipated. If the Protestant social gospel was a popular failure, why was this so? Was this just the accidental off-spin of other secularizing forces at work – the rise of the state and mass popular culture – or was it something integral to the type of religion that was being offered?

As labour historians, we are most concerned with those working-class groups that had the greatest “elective affinity” with the *organized* labour movement: producing union and co-operative leaders and activists, local Labour councillors, and even MPs. Wearmouth has done an impressive job of rounding up British Methodist labour movement activists.<sup>21</sup> There are some from almost every connexion, but Primitive Methodists stand out, particularly among farmworkers and coal miners. However, even here the concept of the “labour sect” oversimplifies the situation. The real contribution of Protestant religion to the British labour movement was not a theology – whether Theological Socialism or social gospel – but a distinctive local congregational culture that stressed self-help, education, discipline, and building your own civil society institutions, such as trade unions and co-operatives. This associational life produced Christian autodidacts, with a calling,

21. For a sample, see R.F. Wearmouth, *Methodism and the Trade Unions* (London, 1959).

prepared to become working-class leaders. Men and women who did not need outside intellectuals to tell them what to do or to do things for them.<sup>22</sup>

However, this milieu was also grounded in a specific generational moment in the movement from sect to denomination and linked to specific localities. Most of Catterall's free church, working-class, labour movement leaders were schooled in an earlier era of simple, common sense, bible Christianity and born-again evangelical religion. Often, they had grown up in "Back Street Bethels", located in working-class areas, where there were opportunities to preach and lead, and no middle-class elite to get in the way.<sup>23</sup> As mature adults, they may have become susceptible to a more critical, liberal, and social theology, but this was not what formed them as autodidacts. Indeed, if the mainstream, theologically liberal, social gospel failed to "attract back" the working classes, this may be because it was perceived as a form of middle-class paternalism, at a time when the secular state alternative was gaining greater purchase. As Catterall recognizes, politicized religion was not offering working people much that they could not get elsewhere; especially once the state began to substitute for the chapel welfare system.

But religion, all religion, is about much more than material solutions to material problems. Perhaps the question to ask is: did either the social gospel or Theological Socialism meet working-class spiritual needs, as they negotiated difficult work and family lives, birth, death and marriage? There is some evidence that those groups that stayed outside the liberal mainstream, and appealed directly to the heart and soul, thrived longer. The most obvious case is the dramatic twentieth-century resurgence of American evangelical Christianity. On the rational, bible Christian side, the Churches of Christ are an interesting British instance, since their national membership peaked in 1930, while in a working-class, industrial city like Leicester, the highpoint was 1936. Here, a lingering, conservative theology combined with autodidact political initiative in the unions and co-operatives.<sup>24</sup>

The Pentecostal and Charismatic movement is the heir to early Methodism, as emotional Protestant religion. The fastest-growing Christian movement in the world now and for much of the past century, this revives a full-blown supernatural Christianity, with "signs and wonders", speaking in tongues, and healing miracles. To take just one obscure example, Bethel

22. Though maybe they did when politics shifted up to state economic and social policy. For McKibbin, *Parties and People*, p. 84: "1931 also represented the failure of the autodidact tradition in British politics".

23. See P. Ackers, "West End Chapel, Back Street Bethel: Labour and Capital in the Wigan Churches of Christ c.1845-1945", *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 47:2 (1996), pp. 298-329; D. Thompson, *Let Sects and Parties Fall: A Short History of the Association of Churches of Christ in Great Britain and Ireland* (Birmingham, 1980).

24. See P. Ackers, "Experiments in Industrial Democracy: An Historical Assessment of the Leicestershire Boot and Shoe Co-Operative Co-Partnership Movement", *Labor History*, 57:4 (2016), pp. 526-548.

Evangelistic Society ran “crusades” in the poor “distressed” areas of the English industrial Midlands and North throughout the 1930s, attracting thousands to tent meetings.<sup>25</sup> Such campaigns embraced everything secular intellectuals find repulsive about popular faith and thus have been largely ignored by labour historians. The interesting question is why this later generation of working-class evangelicals contributed so few activists to the post-war labour movement, compared to their precursors?

For Pasture, “all religions are transnational movements *par excellence*”.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, there is a certain bounded internationalism that runs through the Anglophone, Protestant world of these two books, albeit with limited resonance beyond. Thus, the Labour Church idea followed English migrants to Canada, while the mainstream British free churches borrowed “higher” bible criticism from German Lutherans and shared liberal social gospel with their American cousins. American evangelicals influenced early nineteenth-century Primitive Methodist camp meetings and post-war Billy Graham crusades. The Churches of Christ saw evangelists come from the USA and labour activists emigrate to North America. But then again, the crucial milieu for working-class families was always local, usually within walking distance of their home. Thus, the British Labour Church survived in Birmingham and almost nowhere else; whereas the Churches of Christ produced groups of labour activists in two distinctive towns: boot and shoe Leicester and coalmining Wigan. What would their politically conservative American cousins have thought, had they known?<sup>27</sup>

The interwar British labour movement leadership was probably more shaped by Christianity than any other in Europe. Yet, there was no visible institutional expression of this, as found in those continental European labour movements explicitly divided by political ideology and religion. A foreigner looking at the TUC, Co-operative Union, and Labour Party sees three unified, secular movements. In part, this was because for radical Protestants, faith was a private matter in one important sense: you influenced others by Christian example and persuasion, not by imposing your denominational dogma on the state or other civil society organizations. For some,

25. D. Watts (with G. Green & R. Mountford) *Edward Jefferrey's, Healing Evangelist: His Story, Movement and Legacy* (Stourbridge, 2017) reviewed by this author in *The Chapels Society Newsletter*, Spring 2018.

26. See P. Pasture, “Introduction”, in L. Heerma van Voss, P. Pasture and J. De Maeyer (eds), *Between Cross and Class: Comparative Histories of Christian Labour in Europe, 1840–2000* (Bern, 2010), pp. 9–48; and H. McLeod, “Religion and the Organisation of the Working Class in Great Britain, c.1830–1960”, in Heerma van Voss, Pasture, and De Maeyer, *Between Cross and Class*, pp. 285–304.

27. Global histories of the Churches of Christ include: M. Casey and D. Foster (eds) *The Stone-Campbell Movement: An International Religious Tradition* (Knoxville, TN, 2002); and D. Williams, D.A. Foster, and P.M. Blowers (eds), *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* (St. Louis, MO, 2013).

denominations were themselves suspect and they preferred to present as “just Christians”. Such men and women could be pioneers of secularization, while still deeply religious. And an anti-clerical suspicion of state religion often held that no church hierarchy should direct the individual conscience. Such self-effacing met the less idealistic trade union concern that this should be a *Labour Party* that served the practical interests of the organized working classes and not some new utopian venture. All this has led to a historical paradox, however. The formal secularism of British labour movement institutions – nonconformists fought for secular state schools too – and the Labour Party’s relatively nominal adherence to “socialism” from 1918, has allowed Marxian labour historians to present this most religiously inflected movement as part of some standard march to state-socialism. Catterall and Johnson’s two excellent new studies do something to remedy that historical misconception.