
Morris, Christianity and Socialism: An Episode

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The *Manifesto of the Socialist League*, published in February 1885, concludes with a call to adherents to have ‘frankness and fraternal trust in each other, and single-hearted devotion to the religion of Socialism, the only religion which the Socialist League professes’.¹ Inclusion of the phrase ‘religion of socialism’ can be understood in the context of efforts by League founder and Manifesto contributor Ernest Belfort Bax, a confirmed atheist, to define socialism as the human ideal that would replace theological creeds. Writing in *Justice*, the newspaper of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), six months before the split which created the Socialist League, Bax declared: ‘It is in the hope and the struggle for a higher social life, ever-widening, ever-intensifying, whose ultimate possibilities are beyond the power of language to express or thought to conceive, that the Socialist finds his ideal, his religion.’² Bax republished this essay in December 1886 along with others dealing with related themes in *The Religion of Socialism*, contributing further to the currency of the expression in the British socialist movement which, as Stephen Yeo reminds us, had significant resonance in these years.³ Morris himself, the principal hand in drafting the Manifesto, also conceived of socialism in these terms, telling Rev. George Bainton in 1888 that while the foundation of socialism was economic, it ‘must be accompanied by an ethical or religious sense of responsibility to each man and for each of his fellows’.⁴

Nevertheless, Morris remained the atheist he had been since the end of his days at Oxford as he was to show in correspondence in *Commonweal* in March 1890 with A.T. Rickarby, who had written with an appeal for socialists to end their ‘sneers and unjust charges in regard to our religion’. Declaring himself to be ‘in substantial agreement with the grand ideal which the Socialist League sets before itself in its statement of principles,’ Rickarby objected in particular to comments that had appeared in *Commonweal* on 21 December 1889. In this issue an item written by May Morris included reference to the practice of Price’s candle factory at Battersea, owned

by the Christian evangelical and paternalist Wilson family, only to employ girls ‘of good character’ and that once a girl ‘loses her character,’ to dismiss her. Recounting a conversation with her informant May Morris went on: ‘Seriously, is it not time that even the pious and virtuous made a mental effort, and try to understand what they drive men and women to by their false sentiment and false notions of moral purity? Price sheds his shining light amid a crowd of less virtuous factories of “extremely bad character”, as my friend said with bated breath, “where prostitutes are content to take a lower wage to eke out their shameful trade”. Is it not just possible that houses of fair and fame send them thither on casting them out of doors? The religious mind thus turns a deaf ear to all argument, however; I receive a pious smile and “The Lord’s will be done.”’⁵

Rickarby revealed that he had the 21 December edition of *Commonweal* ‘put into my hands on Tuesday at Lambeth Baths,’ placing him at the widely reported lecture given by Bishop Alfred Barry on 25 February, which ended in confusion following protests by socialists. Barry’s lecture, the fourth in a series of six on aspects of Christianity and Socialism, had been commissioned by the bishop of Rochester, Anthony Thorold, whose diocese included swathes of poverty-stricken riverside south London. Almost certainly responding to the growing influence of socialists in local politics and the militancy of the gas stokers at this time on strike at the works of the South Metropolitan Gas Company, the bishop, a conservative in politics who regarded ‘the confiscation of capital as an act of madness’, asked his friend and suffragan bishop, a theological scholar, to state the position of the Church on the major questions of the day.⁶

Barry’s lectures, delivered in February and March 1890, were well attended, with each meeting registering more than one thousand present and all reporters in agreement that the majority of these were workingmen, Bishop Thorold’s stated target audience. The underlying themes of the lectures, doubtless following Thorold’s guidelines, were that while the Church needed to engage seriously with the advance of socialism, it could not accept the socialist critique of private property or the insistence on the incompatibility of the interests of capital and labour, which Barry believed to be exemplified in ‘the violence of language, the intolerance of opposition, and the unreasonable and even arrogant pretensions, of some prominent representatives of the “new trade unionists”’.⁷ Barry called on the Church to engage ‘the whole human life in all its social relations, and bring the moral principles of the Gospel [...] to bear more effectively upon a civilized society’.⁸

After each lecture contributions from the floor were invited with those wishing to speak submitting a note to the chairman in advance. According to Barry the discussion after each lecture was marked by ‘a vehement and often passionate,

denunciation of the whole existing condition of society, showing a deep-seated discontent, indicating again and again an impatience of gradual development, involving distrust of purely moral influences, and a desire to right all supposed wrongs, either by despotic law, or by revolutionary violence. The hostility manifested was not to Christianity as such. In fact, some few distinctly anti-Christian attacks fell very flat. It was the existence of property, especially in land, and to social superiority of all kinds. It was loudly asserted that capital and labour were irreconcilable enemies; that the condition of the unskilled workmen was one of slavery [...] and that the country in which they had no proper stake could not claim from them loyalty or patriotism.⁹

Although detailed reports of these discussions are not existent, we know that a number of participants criticised the Church for an historic failure to stand against injustice, a position Barry was accused of upholding. The Christian Socialist reporter of *The Church Reformer* wrote that the bishop ‘denied that anything fairly to be called industrial slavery now existed in England [...] he had no complete answer to the speaker who said that, face to face with starvation for his family, he must, like a horse, take the work he did and that in that work he was considered a “thing”, number “so and so”, a machine for turning out so much work, of the most monotonous and mechanical kind’.¹⁰ Similarly, when the bishop advised workmen to consider the interests of their employers it was greeted with ‘an outburst of derisive laughter’.¹¹

It is likely that the Socialist League made a planned intervention in the discussions, with Charles Mowbray, a leading anarchist among the League’s activists, travelling from his Shoreditch home to Lambeth to contribute to the first four debates.¹² The locally prominent Fabian and Social Democratic Federation member Nelson Palmer also spoke on a number of occasions, claiming in an earlier debate that ‘Jesus was a Socialist; his Gospel was socialist and his early disciples were communists – having all things in common’.¹³ Clearly hostile to the socialists, the reporter of the local Liberal-leaning newspaper contrasted the bishop’s contributions to those of his opponents thus: ‘His polished manner and conciliatory style stood out in strong contrast on Tuesday with the manner and style of his word-protagonists, who said many unpleasant things in a very excitable and unpleasant way. Bishop Barry is a man of considerable embonpoint with a happy, beaming face as though he has “slept o’ nights”, whereas the advocates of Atheism and Socialism were thin and raspy in speech and person, as though “tired nature’s sweet restorer”, balmy sleep, “ne’er lighted their lids”’.¹⁴

Morris himself turned up at Barry’s fourth lecture on ‘Christianity and Trade’ on 25 February, where the bishop connected his previous remarks on the sanctity of private property with the need to trade and for self-interest to be the legitimate motivation of individuals engaged in this process. Morris, who was stricken with a long-standing bad cold so that ‘his voice had lost some of its natural kindness’, was

first into the debate saying he believed the lecture was ‘an entire evasion of the whole subject, as the bishop had not told them what he meant by property. Morality, he admitted, was necessary for any society not resembling wild beasts; but why preach morality to a society founded on robbery? The bishop’s arguments were good if he was addressing a society of equals; but his morality, ethics, economics and religion were those of the middle-classes. Free competition was also possible among a society of equals who would not desire to compete with one another. The union of capital and labour was that of a tiger and the lamb. The contract as to wages was not a free but compulsory one. Wages were from beginning to end a piece of oppression, and the rations of a slave.’¹⁵

At this point, the chairman Arthur Arnold, a Liberal Alderman on the London County Council and former MP, intervened and stopped Morris speaking on the grounds that he had run out of time. Several others joined the debate including a member of the local branch of the Guild of St. Matthew, the Christian Socialist group, after which Arnold’s announcement of the next speaker caused ‘uproar’ in the hall, as socialists objected to what they believed to be biased chairmanship in favour of Barry’s views. The protest was seemingly led by Mowbray who, amid the confusion, was allowed to address the audience when the designated speaker waived his right to speak. Mowbray’s words, however, were drowned out by cries from Barry supporters and so with ‘a perfect babel of confusion prevailing’, lasting some forty minutes, the chairman and the bishop left the hall and the audience dispersed.¹⁶

Predictably, the socialists were blamed by some for the disruption, none more so than by H.H. Champion, who in the SDF split had remained loyal to the Federation’s leadership but subsequently operated independently through his own publications, among them *Labour Elector*, launched in 1888.¹⁷ It was in this weekly that Champion asserted that at the Lambeth meeting there had been a denial of free speech by ‘Mr Morris and his “comrades”, communication with whom had apparently corrupted not only his good manners but his ideas of fair play. They attend these meetings in force, bait and interrupt the speaker, and finally bring the meeting to a close in wild confusion. A pretty occupation, truly, for one of the first men of Europe.’¹⁸ Writing in defence of the socialists in *Commonweal* under the byeline ‘S’, almost certainly the sub-editor Henry Halliday Sparling who was at the Lambeth meeting, explained why it had been necessary to correct the bishop on points of socialism he did not understand. In response to this, Sparling wrote, the ‘soup and blanket brigade tried to howl down the daring socialists who ventured to criticise the bishop, while the sympathisers with the latter retorted in kind. But it was not the socialists who began.’¹⁹

Although Rickarby was present at the meeting he did not mention it specifically in his letter to *Commonweal*, preferring instead to stay on theological ground in a call

for greater understanding by socialists of Christianity. In particular, he wished socialists would understand that Christianity ‘puts no bar whatever to the amplest scheme of socialism; and although, an essentially spiritual revelation, and a revelation addressed to all time, the New Testament is necessarily neutral in regard to particular institutions of society which, of course, must always be adjusted according to the natural development of the age, yet the political scheme of the Mosaic Code is certainly of a socialistic nature’. Rickarby further noted that as some socialists claimed Christ’s teaching in their favour, they also needed to recognise that ‘real Christianity and actual Christianity are not necessarily the same’.

Morris’s courteous reply to Rickarby rejected the assertion that Christianity could be neutral to political and social institutions, because it was inevitably founded on a system of morality. If major societal change was to occur, Morris wrote, it could not rest on a discredited Christian morality whose ‘explanations of natural facts or theory of life [...] people have ceased to believe’. Similarly, Morris believed Rickarby’s dichotomy of ‘real’ and ‘ideal’ Christianity to be erroneous because it never existed in ideal form. Christianity developed in ‘historic sequence’ under which it had been conditioned by social, economic and political circumstances, as in its most recent form where it was shaped by ‘the sordid commercialism of modern capitalism’, which in turn resulted in the ‘bundle of hypocrisies which [...] Mr. Rickarby and other Christian Socialists condemns’. Morris went on: ‘When this beggarly period has been supplanted by one in which Socialism is realized, will not the system of morality, the theory of life, be all-embracing, and can it be other than the Socialistic theory? Where then will be the Christian ethic? – absorbed in Socialism. No separate system of ethics will then be needed...’

At the time of the correspondence Alfred Truland Rickarby was in his early forties, working as the chief clerk to Thomas Graham Jackson, the Arts and Crafts-influenced architect who was on friendly terms with Morris.²⁰ In Jackson’s office since a boy in the early 1860s, Rickarby attended evening classes at King’s College, London where he was taught divinity by Alfred Barry, who had been appointed principal in 1868.²¹ The College’s award of Associateship was made with special distinction to Rickarby in 1871 and was followed by Church of England ordination as a deacon.²² He did not, however, become a priest in a parish, opting instead to stay with Jackson, whose reminiscences of the early 1900s describe ‘a venerable grey-haired person who dresses in a semi-clerical garb and is sometimes supposed to be my chaplain’.²³ Living in the Vauxhall and Clapham areas of south London, Rickarby was active in the local branch of the Anglo-Catholic English Church Union and a regular correspondent to *The Church Times* and *The Tablet* and occasionally in the mainstream national press in the 1890s, offering views on liturgy, ritualism and priesthood. Only

once, in 1885, did he write explicitly with views on social and political matters when defending the Church of England's spending on art and architecture and asserting that answers to social problems 'must come from society at large. The individual must be protected from the scramble of competition. Workhouses must be transformed into workshops, where the unemployed may obtain honourable and adequately paid work. And, if employers cannot be got to pay their employees enough to cover the cost of decent lodging, clothes, and food, a proper supplement to their earnings must be obtainable in the form of out-door-relief.'²⁴

Although probably influenced by the Christian Socialism that had had a presence at King's since F.D. Maurice's arrival in the 1840s, Rickarby appears not to have followed those clergymen who joined the Guild of St. Matthew where, given his High Church preference, he would have found a congenial environment. Had he done so, he would have joined a thriving branch in Lambeth with a number of prominent clergymen in membership, but his name is absent from the extensive reports published monthly by *The Church Reformer*. On retirement from Jackson's office in or around 1908, he moved to Steyning and then Ifield, West Sussex where, although known locally as Reverend Rickarby, he held no religious office in the local church or the Chichester Diocese. His death in April 1924 went almost unnoticed.²⁵

The short but illuminating correspondence with Rickarby in *Commonweal* and the intervention at the Lambeth meeting are of interest because Morris rarely commented on matters of theology, yet here he was dealing with first principles and making his position clear. Whilst undoubtedly an admirer of the commitment and integrity of Christian Socialists such as those led by the Rev. Stewart Headlam in the Guild of St. Matthew, Morris deplored the hypocrisy of the established church, which he believed to be compliant in the subjugation of the working class.²⁶ The episode is also of significance because it confirms that Morris held atheist views, about which he had become convinced by the end of his time at Oxford and which he was to hold for the rest of his life.²⁷

NOTES

1. *The Manifesto of the Socialist League* was published in the February 1885 edition of *Commonweal*. The *Manifesto* was adopted with some amendment by the League's first Conference in July but retained the concluding phrase including the reference to the 'religion of Socialism'. It is reproduced in E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1955), pp. 849-57.
2. Quoted in John Cowley, *The Victorian Encounter with Marx: A Study of Ernest Belfort Box* (London: British Academic Press, 1992), p. 63.
3. Stephen Yeo, 'A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1896', *History Workshop Journal*, 4: 1 (Autumn 1977), 5-56 (6).
4. Morris to Rev. George Bainton, 2 April 1888, in *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. by Norman Kelvin, 4 vols in 5 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984-1986), II, p. 736. (Afterwards Kelvin).

5. 'M.M.', 'Notes on News', *Commonweal*, 5: 206 (21 December 1889), 404-5; A.T. Rickarby, 'Correspondence: Christianity and Socialism', *Commonweal*, 6: 216 (1 March 1890), 67; Morris, 'Correspondence: Christianity and Socialism', *Commonweal*, 6: 217 (8 March 1890), 77. Morris's contribution is reproduced in William Morris, *Political Writings: Contributions to 'Justice' and 'Commonweal' 1883-1890*, ed. by Nicholas Salmon (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), pp. 467-68. (Afterwards Morris, *Political Writings*).
6. C.H. Simpkinson, *The Life and Work of Bishop Thorold* (London: Isbister & Co, 1897), p. 284; for Thorold's conservatism, see Jill Durey, 'The Evangelicalism of Bishop Anthony Wilson Thorold (1825-1895)', *Churchman*, 118: 2 (Spring 2004), 151-164; see also A.R. Buckland, 'Thorold, Anthony Wilson (1824-1895)', rev. by Triona Adams, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2006) [www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27370, last accessed 4 August 2015]. For Bishop Barry, see E.H. Pearce, 'Barry, Alfred (1826-1910)', rev. by David Hilliard, in Matthew and Harrison, eds, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30621, last accessed 4 August 2015].
7. Alfred Barry, *Lectures in Christianity and Socialism: Delivered at Lambeth Baths, February and March 1890* (London: Cassell, 1890), p. xv.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. xv-xvi.
9. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
10. 'Bishop Barry's Lecture', *The Church Reformer*, April 1890, p. 80. *The Church Reformer* also carried a critical review of Barry's views when the content of the lectures were published in November 1890. Interestingly, the book was reviewed by Thomas Chapman Collings, Evening Theological Dean at King's College, London. 'Bishop Barry and Christian Socialism', *The Church Reformer*, January 1891, pp. 17-18.
11. 'Bishop Barry's Fourth Lecture', *South London Press*, 1 March 1890, p. 1.
12. For Charles Mowbray, see Florence Boos's biographical notes to 'William Morris's Socialist Diary', *History Workshop Journal*, 13: 1 (Spring 1982), 1-76 (69).
13. 'Pick Up Notes', *South London Press*, 15 February 1890, p. 4.
14. *Ibid.*
15. 'Our London Correspondence', *Manchester Guardian*, 27 February 1890, p. 5; 'Bishop Barry's Lecture at Lambeth', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 26 February 1890, p. 6.
16. 'Bishop Barry and the Socialists', *South London Observer*, 1 March 1890, p. 3.
17. For Champion, see John Barnes, *Socialist Champion: Portrait of a Gentleman as Crusader* (Melbourne: Australia Scholarly Publishing, 2006).
18. *Labour Elector*, 3: 62 (8 March 1890), 1.
19. 'S.', 'Notes', *Commonweal*, 6: 220 (29 March 1890), 100.
20. Morris, *Political Writings*, pp. 467-68; for Jackson and Morris, see William Whyte, *Oxford Jackson: Architecture, Education, Status and Style, 1835-1924* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
21. F.J.C. Hearnshaw, *The Centenary History of King's College London 1828-1928* (London: G. Harrap, 1929), pp. 318-324.
22. *Calendar of King's College, London, 1868-1872*, King's College, London; King's College Archives KA/E/EV22.
23. Basil H. Jackson, ed., *Recollections of Thomas Graham Jackson 1835-1924* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 86.
24. 'Religion and Art', *The British Architect*, 16 October 1885, p. 171.
25. 'Crawley and Ifield', *Sussex and Surrey Courier*, 22 May 1924, p. 8; Norman Kelvin's meticulous annotation of Morris's correspondence accurately gives Rickarby's year of death and clerical title as 'Reverend' although he did not publish with that title – always as 'A.T. Rickarby'. Kelvin, III, pp. 146-47.
26. Headlam served with Morris on the Executive of the Law and Liberty League, established to defend those protesting the closure of Trafalgar Square to demonstrations in the winter of 1887. See John Richard Ovens, *Stewart Headlam's Radical Anglicanism: The Mass, the Masses and the Music Hall* (Urbana:

University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 91. See also Morris's comment on Headlam's speech at the Law and Liberty League's founding meeting held on 18 November 1887. William Morris, 'Insurance Against Magistrates', *Commonweal*, 3: 98 (26 November 1887), 377; and reprinted in Morris, *Political Writings*, pp. 307-8. Headlam was a regular speaker at Socialist League meetings and following Morris's departure from the League he, and other leading figures from the Guild of St. Matthew, lectured to the Hammersmith Socialist Society.

27. See Morris's remarks made in 1895 to John Bruce Glasier in J. Bruce Glasier, *William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement* (London: Longmans, 1921), p. 171.