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NONCONFORMITY AND THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

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In 1921 the Wesleyan and future Labour MP, C. G. Ammon, told a Brotherhood meeting that 'A working man founded the Church'.¹ The speeches of many of the founders of the modern British labour movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries indeed regularly assured their audiences of the concern of the Carpenter of Nazareth for the lot of working men, or even that Jesus was the first socialist. The Wesleyan journal, *The Watchman*, protested in the 1850s that this was to 'degrade our Lord into a Socialist model man' (quoted in M. Edwards, 1943: p.166). For Keir Hardie, however, this is exactly what the churches should have been doing: Christ's teaching in his interpretation was focused upon salvation in this world through a re-ordering of human society. This was because late nineteenth century *laissez-faire* destroyed human dignity. Arguing that Christ did not preach competition the Quaker Alfred Salter complained that the churches nevertheless unquestioningly accepted the existing economic order and its un-Christian consequences. In language borrowed from the pulpit he and his fellow Nonconformists in the labour movement lambasted the churches for failing to practise what they preached (Salter, 1912: p.27).

On the other hand, however, the subsequent rise of the Labour party led Nonconformist historians and commentators to suggest the Free Churches played a prominent role in the origins of the new movement. In a series of books published on labour and Methodism from 1937-59 R. F. Wearmouth wrote extensively about the personnel his church contributed to the development of the trade unions (see Catterall, 2009: p.132). 'The Labour Movement in this country, claimed Harry Jeffs, 'was cradled in our little Free Church chapels – Methodist, Baptist and Congregationalist'.² Such views reflected ideas both of the relative prominence of the working classes in Nonconformity and that the chapels provided opportunity for them to develop their speaking talents in the pulpit and their organisational skills in the diaconate. The chapel inculcated service, self-discipline and study: this working class autodidacticism made men like the Primitive Methodist George Edwards the obvious people to turn to for Norfolk farm labourers seeking to protect their livelihoods by forming a union in the 1870s (N. Edwards, 1998: chaps.2-4). Accordingly, long-time Labour party secretary, the Wesleyan Arthur Henderson

¹ *Southampton Times* 12 December 1921.

² *Brotherhood Outlook*, September 1928.

(1929: pp.144-6), reflecting in 1929 on his own origins in the trade union movement fifty years before recalled:

[T]he majority of the leaders locally and nationally were actively engaged in religious work as lay-preachers, church deacons, Sunday School superintendents and teachers, Bible-class teachers, Band of Hope workers, etc....I found in all parts of the country that many of the most active religious workers were often also the most influential leaders of the local trade union branches.

Such a contribution became something of a historiographical commonplace down to the 1960s, at least as applied to the leaders of the founding generation of the Labour party such as Henderson. Nor, it was suggested, was this confined to lay involvement in the development of the trade unions. Individual Nonconformist activity in most of the Socialist movements which began to emerge around the 1880s may have been less noticeable. Nevertheless, some leading lights of the Fabian Society – such as Beatrice Webb – were of Unitarian background, whilst its long-term secretary, E. R. Pease, was a Quaker. Walton Newbold (1920: p.82), even claimed that the Independent Labour Party (ILP), founded in Bradford in 1893, was shaped by Nonconformity.

In this he was suggesting that the relationship between Nonconformity and such organisations was more than one merely of personnel. Nonconformity was felt, not least by German observers, to have given the British labour movement distinctive characteristics (Catterall, 2009: p.138). Elsewhere in Europe socialist organisations developed marked anti-clerical tendencies in response to Erastian churches or Catholic hierarchies felt to be pillars of established order. In Britain Nonconformity was relatively strong, whilst its traditional witness for religious liberty was itself mildly anti-clerical. This helped to produce an atmosphere in which the emergence of the British labour movement was less shaped than on the Continent by conflict with organised religion. Indeed, in the midst of a war for the liberty of Europe, W. G. Symons could in 1941 conclude his remarks on the Nonconformist roots of British labour with ‘It is not fanciful to connect the failure of political democracy on the Continent with the absence there of a strongly religious tradition of the Free Church type’ (quoted in Payne, 1944: p.151).

Since the 1960s, however, the idea that the labour movement was nurtured by the Free Church tradition has come under critical scrutiny. The exemplary lives cited by Wearmouth have been shown by David Hempton to exaggerate the numerical contribution Methodism made to the nascent trade union movement in the early nineteenth century (Hempton, 1984). Paul Stigant (1971) revisited the Halévy (1913) thesis that Wesleyanism provided forms of social control to contain radical political movements during and following the French

Revolution. And Stephen Yeo (1976), Stanley Pierson (1979) and Leonard Smith (1993) all argued that any mantle labour inherited from Nonconformity in the closing decades of the nineteenth century was lightly worn. A close relationship for them was generally brief, and only at the level of personnel essentially moving from Nonconformity towards a new religion of socialism.

Meanwhile, K. S. Inglis's work (1963) prompted examination of the hitherto relatively neglected issue of how the Free Churches as organisations responded to the rise of the labour movement in 1880-1900. Stephen Mayor's study (1967) of the Nonconformist press in that period suggested that increasing coverage of the issues which concerned the labour movement did not lead to close alignment with their cause. Peter d'A. Jones (1968) instead argued that the small proportion of Nonconformist ministers who were so converted set up inward-looking denominational Socialist societies. In the face of the conflicts between capital and labour at the end of the century these were in turn subsumed into Social Service Unions. In place of the pulpit policy entrepreneurs of the nineteenth century these organisations bureaucratised Nonconformist political witness into broad statements on social questions designed in large measure to maintain consensus within denominations increasingly characterised – certainly by the inter-war years – by divided partisanship amongst the people in the pews. This divided partisanship was by then also equally marked in the pulpits. It had, J. D. Jones argued in 1938, sapped the assertive self-confidence of the late nineteenth century Nonconformist Conscience. Accordingly, R. Tudur Jones lamented in 1962 (p.425), Congregationalism could speak with unanimity on Premium Bonds, but not on nuclear weapons.

The Nonconformist Conscience had been closely aligned with the Liberal party at the very moment that Labour began to emerge politically. However, even though many of the leading ministers associated with it were sympathetic to Labour's aspirations and the needs of the working classes, like C. Silvester Horne, they tended to regard it as a junior partner of the Liberal party he represented in parliament in 1910-14. From the point of view of those in the new party, Nonconformity's relationship with Liberalism in general however created a sense of rivalry that was partly political and partly theological.

It is no coincidence that the literature on Nonconformity and the labour movement concentrates on the period 1880-1914 when these rivalries were at a height. Responses to labour are still generally treated as peripheral in works on the earlier period of mid-nineteenth century Nonconformity and politics (see, for instance, Larsen, 1999; Floyd, 2008). Engagement with the needs of the labouring poor hitherto had largely been local, such as the Unitarian Rev. Robert Robinson's involvement in Lancashire weavers' combinations in the 1740s (Holt, 1938: p.204). The fact that Robert Hall felt required to defend supporting such combinations in 1819 suggests, however, that they remained

frowned upon (Payne, 1944: p.99). Trade unionism was treated with distrust as an alternative source of authority, discipline and socialisation, the Calvinistic Methodists of Wales going so far as to ban members from joining such organisations in 1831 (Pope, 1998: p.4).

National developments were however changing such attitudes by the time R. W. Dale became Chairman of the Congregational Union in 1869. Improving communications and denominational development meant that the Free Churches increasingly presented a corporate and, by the close of the century, national voice. The franchise reform of 1867 ensured that this voice now spoke for greatly enhanced numbers of Nonconformist voters often noisily aligned with the Liberal party. It also, for the first time, enfranchised many working class voters. This led, in turn, to growing interest in working class representation either through or in opposition to the Liberals. The rise of labour was also marked in 1867 by the Royal Commission on Trade Unions, before which union officials challenged the notion of a reciprocity of interests between masters and men so redolent of mid-Victorian (and contemporary Nonconformist) political economy (see Kynaston, 1976; Lovell Cocks, 1943: pp.30f). The following year the Trades Union Congress was founded. This and the contemporary emergence of socialist organisations on the Continent prompted Dale to warn his audience that the questions working people were now discussing ‘with the keenest interest affect the whole structure and order of society’ (quoted in Binfield, 1999: p.105).

Following the Royal Commission, in 1871 the trade unions acquired a much improved, if still insufficiently clear, legal status. With state legitimisation went greater Nonconformist condoning of lay involvement in trade unionism.³ Meanwhile, Nonconformist employers responded to the rise of labour in ways ranging from the profit-sharing introduced by the Congregationalist Theodore Cooke Taylor of Bradford to the model towns and workplace conciliation machinery promoted by, for instance, the chocolate-manufacturing Quakers, the Cadburys and Rowntrees.

Conciliation rather than class conflict was also a characteristic emphasis of their Nonconformist counterparts in the trade unions.⁴ Industrial conflict was however to become more common from the late 1880s, prompted partly by growing international competition. In such circumstances the self-help and conciliation – which fitted well with the ethos of the chapel and its alignment with Gladstonian Liberalism – of an older generation of trade unionists came to

³ On 1 January 1892, the *Nonconformist and Independent* noted ‘our churches....have extended a welcome to labour questions and to labour leaders which twenty years ago would have seemed incredible’.

⁴ *The Christian Witness and Congregationalist Magazine* n.s. 3, (March 1867), pp.127-8 for instance observed, ‘It is the object of Christianity to teach all classes to behave properly to each other – to teach employers to be just, and workmen to be conscientious’.

be challenged by those, such as the Congregationalist Fred Jowett, who felt that the industrial system did not need to be managed but transformed. The lock-outs in Bradford in 1892 in response to American textile tariffs, for instance, were an important backdrop to the founding in that town of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) by Hardie the following year (Laybourn, 1980).

Such circumstances helped to undermine traditional Nonconformist opposition to interference by an Erastian state in the sphere of personal responsibilities. For instance, concerns about housing (and immorality) highlighted by the 1883 Congregationalist pamphlet, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, led the *Congregationalist* to proclaim 'there is a certain socialism which Christianity sanctions....the State may lawfully be called upon to deal with a mass of evil which is....beyond the capacity of private benevolence' (quoted in Wolfenden, 1954: p.33). Similar concerns led the eminent Wesleyan, Hugh Price Hughes, to call in 1884 upon the churches 'to do their long-neglected duty in caring for the social welfare of the people', not least because in so doing they might 'bring back the alienated masses to the social brotherhood of Christ' (quoted in Oldstone-Moore, 1999: p.114). Attempts to reach out to those alienated masses included in 1875 the founding of Pleasant Sunday Afternoon (later known as Brotherhood) meetings in a Congregationalist church in West Bromwich, and in the 1880s, the inner city central halls and settlements established in order to reconnect with the urban poor. To do so, however, the *Nonconformist and Independent* warned, the churches 'will certainly have to enlarge their conception of Christianity'.⁵ The challenge was to address matters of more than individual salvation. John Clifford, for instance, set up a committee on social questions at Westbourne Park Baptists in 1885, the year after he became one of the first members of the Fabian Society (Marchant, 1924: p.63; Wolfenden, 1954: p.67).

A fellow Baptist and early Fabian was J. C. Carlile, who ran the short-lived Christian Socialist journal, *Duty*, before going on to join Clifford in 1887 in setting up the Christian Socialist League (CSL) (Carlile, 1935: pp.49-51). The CSL lasted into the 1890s, thereafter gradually being replaced by various denominational social service departments. Carlile, meanwhile, as a docklands minister, was amongst a number of Nonconformists prominently involved in supporting the 1889 London Dock Strike, culminating in his becoming one of the joint trustees of the new dockers' union. Many of his colleagues were, however, scandalised by his presence on a strike committee, reflecting concern that ministers who become so involved might drift off into purely secular activities (Carlile, 1935: pp.88-93).

⁵ *Nonconformist and Independent*, 3 January 1884.

This certainly happened – as demonstrated by Pope's (1998: pp.39f) analysis of the subsequent careers of several Welsh Nonconformist ministers who committed to Socialism – though not in Carlile's case. It might be supposed that this reflected the attenuated nature of his Socialism: notwithstanding the CSL's support for nationalisation of natural monopolies, Carlile and Clifford were primarily motivated to demonstrate a Christian concern for social issues. It was, however, no less true of figures like the Wesleyan Samuel Keeble, one of the few English socialists to read Marx in the original German, whose 1896 tract *Industrial Day-Dreams* began with an attack on the immorality of competitive capitalism.

The handful of Nonconformist ministers who were self-ascribed Socialists at this time could be found in all denominations. They included Carlile's fellow CSL member, Bruce Wallace, the Congregationalist founder of the anarchist Brotherhood Church in north London. This was an early example of a congregation moving leftwards, in some cases establishing agrarian communes. Leonard Smith gives examples of several others, but shows that this movement was often resisted by Liberal-supporting chapel stalwarts. For instance, H. Bodell Smith was effectively driven from the pulpit at Beech Road Unitarians, Crewe in 1895, a year after he founded the local ILP branch (Smith, 1993: chap.6). Similar political divisions were palpable in the Bradford chapels during the labour disputes of the early 1890s. Rev. R. Roberts, a Congregational minister who played a leading role in the early ILP, was the most prominent to be ejected from his pastorate (Laybourn & Reynolds, 1984: pp.34, 80). Most of his colleagues, however, were conspicuous in their support instead for the Liberal millowner and Congregationalist Alfred Illingworth in his successful election fight with the dockers' leader (and Congregationalist lay preacher) Ben Tillett in the 1892 general election (Diggle, 1984: pp.30-1). Such hostility towards Labour candidates long continued (see, for instance, B. Turner, 1930: p.175). As the erstwhile Ulster Quaker, S. G. Hobson, later recalled, 'I soon realised that the ILP had appeared at a moment in time when Yorkshire Nonconformity was in a process of disruption [and]...accordingly set out to capture the soul of Nonconformity' (Hobson, 1938: pp.38-9). These social tensions within the chapels helped to create a sense of conflict between Nonconformity and labour which, as Pope's work on Wales shows, was by no means confined to Yorkshire.

Tillett had warned the Unitarians' triennial conference in 1891 that, unless Nonconformity provides 'churches where the people could get what they needed....the workers would provide churches for themselves'. In his audience was John Trevor, who the following year responded by founding the Labour Church movement. Jowett, severing his connections with Congregationalism, became the first President of the Bradford Labour Church (Pierson, 1960:

pp.465-7). These Labour Churches, however, have been subjected to disproportionate historiographical scrutiny. Few thrived for long and the movement was moribund by the First World War (J. Turner, 2009: p.168).

In part this may be because the ILP to some extent replaced religion, and indeed the Labour Church. This was not least because it was able to tap in to existing immanentist theological trends to which Trevor was also responding (Bevir, 1997). An exclusive stress upon personal salvation was diminishing in all the denominations. T. Rhondda Williams (1938: pp.23, 44-6) later reflected on his early ministry: 'I did not hesitate to promise heavenly mansions to the good, without even seeing any duty in regard to the hovels in which they lived on earth'. For him such attitudes were undermined by the higher criticism of the Bible of the late nineteenth century; its focus upon the historical Jesus leading to a growing stress on God's activity in the world. His position as minister of the City Temple gave R. J. Campbell a particular platform to launch the most celebrated example of this trend when he published *The New Theology* in 1907. Its association of sin with the selfishness seen as producing the un-Christian slums and sweatshops of capitalism also provided an obvious link to the growing, if still small, socialist movement.

For Leonard Smith (1993: pp.170-1) this theological modernism was resisted in chapels dominated – not least financially – by middle-class Liberals, leading to a growing gap between Nonconformity and the labour movement. A possible exception was the Brotherhood: 'Here at any rate has come into being a movement that is bridging the gulf that for so many years has existed between the churches and the working classes' claimed its former President, William Ward (1911: p.181). Yet, Smith (1993: pp.68-9) maintains that the linkage Ward saw the Brotherhood as providing was often weak. Certainly, many chapels remained cool towards the Brotherhood down to the First World War.⁶ It was, however, strongly supported in others, serving as an arena wherein people like Ammon could express the intimate relationship between their politics and their faith. The ILP's newspaper subsequently commented that in the Edwardian period the Brotherhood was substantially a religious counterpart of the labour movement.⁷ Brotherhood branches helped to distribute Labour propaganda in the run-up to the 1918 election. It was a different Brotherhood movement, however, which emerged from the Great War. Two-thirds of its membership enlisted, a figure not unadjacent to the 65 per cent drop in subscriptions reported in 1919.⁸ Over the next twenty years the Brotherhood was much smaller, more ecumenical and much less political than it had been before 1914.

⁶ *Brotherhood Year Book*, 1913-14, p.26.

⁷ *Labour Leader*, 18 September 1919.

⁸ *Methodist Times*, 13 June 1935; *Baptist Times*, 16 May 1919.

Strains of theological modernism, in contrast, continued to advance. In 1918 its President, E. Griffith-Jones, told the Congregational Union that, in contrast to the simple evangelicalism of his youth that 'redemption is a social as well as an individual fact'.⁹ His predecessor in 1917, B. J. Snell, responded to the common challenge presented by total war by calling for fellowship, observing 'The first Labour government can be trusted to see to the laws that impede fellowship'.¹⁰ The Liberal Party split from 1916 onwards perhaps helped to make Labour identification amongst ministers both more common and more acceptable than had often been the case before 1914. Theological modernism also became more acceptable, exemplified when in 1929 Rhondda Williams, who had previously denied a platform at the Congregational Union, now became its President.

The significance of theological modernism, however, should not be misrepresented. Rhondda Williams may have argued that people 'cannot be saved from their sin until they are saved from their systems', but he still recognised the need to do both.¹¹ Nor should liberal modernism be overstated, coming under challenge as it did from Barthianism in the inter-war years (Pope, 1998: chap 6). Furthermore, it was not the only route for Nonconformist ministers to socialism. A sacramental sense of a common life could also lead in the same direction. This was perhaps particularly significant amongst Wesleyans: several leading figures in the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship such as Donald Soper became ardent socialists, whilst R. J. Barker (1936: pp.30-1, 81-110) at Tonypany Central Hall in 1928 established Community House both to express this sacramental vision and to provide an alternative to the then widespread Communist activity in the valleys. There were, however, other examples, such as W. E. Orchard's ministry at King's Weigh House before his eventual conversion to Catholicism (Kaye & Mackenzie, 1990).

Earlier Orchard had been amongst the few Nonconformists to attempt a detailed refutation of Marx and Lenin in response to the Bolshevik revolution and the 1920 founding of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).¹² The Marxist challenge was expressed thus by a former Wesleyan turned Communist: 'Dope and hope are poor substitutes for vigorous action'.¹³ A desire for such vigour, in the form of class conflict, led Walton Newbold to leave the Quakers to become Britain's first elected Communist MP in 1922. He was an exception, though there was little Nonconformist enthusiasm for British intervention in the 1918-21 Russian civil war, some radical chapels even contributing to famine relief funds (Ackers, 1994: p.14). The atheism of Soviet Russia ensured that the CPGB never acquired the religiosity of tone that had made the ILP a rival

⁹ *Congregational Year Book* (1919), pp.26, 36.

¹⁰ *Congregational Year Book* (1918), p.36.

¹¹ *Socialist Christian*, August 1929.

¹² *The Crusader*, 2 February 1923.

¹³ *Methodist Times*, 21 December 1922.

before 1914. This atheism drew considerable Nonconformist hostility in the 1920s, particularly amongst Baptists.

In the 1930s, however, there was a spate of books and articles on the relationship between religion and Communism, including the Left Book Club volume on *Christianity and the Social Revolution* edited by the Unitarian minister, John Lewis, in 1937. Some even became Communists, such as Unitarian P. N. Harker, attracted in part by the activism of the CPGB in the face of mass unemployment and the perceived international need to combat the rise of fascism.¹⁴ Similar influences seem to have led to the Free Church support for Communist candidates in the 1935 election lamented by Barker (1936: p.60). Active Free Church involvement in the CPGB, however, remained very limited, held in check by its antipathy to religion and emphasis on class conflict.

There was, in contrast, by the 1930s a considerable Free Church presence in the Labour party. The Quaker, C. H. Wilson, even organised a short-lived Nonconformist parliamentary group of fellow Labour MPs in 1931 (Catterall: 2009, p.141). This consciously aped the similar group of Liberal MPs convened by Robert Perks in the Edwardian years. Free Church Labour MPs portrayed their party as having succeeded to the historic witness of Liberalism (and Nonconformity) in other ways as well. As the Congregationalist, Somerville Hastings, put it in 1934:

We who are Free Churchmen must never forget the debt we owe to our forefathers for the measure of political and religious liberty that is ours But civil and religious liberty can never be complete without economic liberty as well.¹⁵

The mechanisms adopted to achieve that economic liberty, however, did not always appeal to Free Church leaders. Liberal businessmen, such as the Congregationalist Angus Watson, could agree (in debate with Ammon) that industry should be primarily for service not profit.¹⁶ This did not mean that there was general Nonconformist agreement on the benefits of nationalisation. There was great Nonconformist and Brotherhood interest in the ultimately fruitless Mond-Turner talks about better industrial relations following the 1926 General Strike.¹⁷ That event, however, for Carlile (1935: p.242) indicated the rise of a different kind of Labour man motivated by class conflict. By now the editor of the *Baptist Times*, in the 1930s, in common with many Nonconformist leaders, he supported the National government.

¹⁴ *Bolton Evening News*, 2 November 1932.

¹⁵ *Free Churchman*, December 1934.

¹⁶ *Free Church Year Book* (1923), p.53.

¹⁷ *Brotherhood Outlook*, November 1927; May 1928.

A lack of enthusiasm for nationalisation was still apparent after 1945 (Machin, 1998: p.142). Nationalisation was often seen as redolent of a doctrinaire (and potentially illiberal) view of economic order to which Nonconformity had by no means been wholly converted. The Nonconformist Conscience had been, at its best, a revolt against injustice, oppression and vested interests. Traditionally Nonconformity reflected a search for a moral order established by people striving for betterment, rather than a belief that a moral order can be established by particular economic measures. The planned social perfection Keeble sketched out in his vision of a Socialist society in 1936 only worked because 'Everyone controls himself'.¹⁸ To those Marxists who argued that all that needed for a good society was good conditions, Salter had therefore replied in 1931:

We may equalise wealth and abolish all kinds of wrongs and injustices so that there will be plenty for each and for all, and yet these changes in themselves will provide no guarantee at all that people will be happier than they are now, unless spiritual progress attends progress in material things.¹⁹

The appeal of nationalisation to the labour movement originated in the idea that it would provide greater job security and a better distribution of social goods than the seeming chaos of late nineteenth century competitive capitalism. The Nonconformist Labour MPs George Thomas led in singing *Cwm Rhondda* as they trooped through the division lobbies to vote for the nationalisation and welfare state measures of the post-war Attlee government certainly believed that these were righteous measures that would enlarge the economic liberty of which Hastings had written. Yet, as Thomas (1959: p.50) subsequently noted, there was a risk that 'Social security is treated as an end in itself, rather than as a means to enable men to give greater service to their fellows'. It became an entitlement, rather than a Christian duty.

Many of the welfare services now nationalised by central government had been started by the churches. Indeed, a number of the architects of the Welfare State in the 1945-51 Attlee government, both Anglican and Nonconformist, had started their public lives in such work. Since around 1900, when Clifford transferred the adult education work founded by his church to his local authority, the idea that the state had greater resources to deliver these services had gathered ground. In the process, state welfare was imbued with the idea that it delivered the common brotherhood encapsulated by much contemporary theological modernism. In other words, the welfare formerly provided by the churches was increasingly seen as the Christian duty of the state. In the post-war years accordingly, remaining church-based welfare became increasingly

¹⁸ *Methodist Times*, 3 December 1936.

¹⁹ *Christian World*, 15 January 1931.

professionalised, regulated, secularised and financially dependent upon government funding (Catterall, 2012). This undermined the social Christianity which, as Pope (1998: chap.2) has shown, was a key element in the Free Church response to the rise of the labour movement. Social Christianity helped to pave the way for the Welfare State, but after 1948 it became in attenuated form more associated with that State than any of the churches. The result was to weaken the social significance of the Free Churches and blunt their message.

Meanwhile, once established, the Labour party became its own training ground: it no longer needed the chapels to train its speakers and organisers. Accordingly, the distinctive Nonconformist presence in the Parliamentary Labour Party still so discernible throughout the inter-war years had virtually disappeared by the end of the twentieth century.

Claims about the relationship between Nonconformity and Labour nevertheless arguably reached their peak in the 1950s in the various speeches the party's Methodist general secretary, Morgan Phillips, gave (usually abroad) about Labour owing more to Methodism than Marx. Since, however, Labour clearly owed little to Marxism, this was not necessarily as much of a claim as first met the eye. Meanwhile, at the start of the following decade, Christopher Driver (1962: p.37) suggested that any debt to Nonconformity was likely to be a positive disadvantage to Labour. Methodist trade union dinosaurs with puritanical attitudes, he argued, prevented the party responding effectively to the liberalising social and personal morals of the 1960s. Tony Crosland, in contrast, having thrown off his Brethren upbringing, was urging Labour to embrace these developments. Post-war affluence led to a growing search for cultural liberalisation and moral relativism that did not sit easily with the historic message of Nonconformity.

Certainly, Wertheimer linked the cultural conservatism he discerned as particular to the British labour movement in the 1920s to Nonconformity. He also linked its righteousness of tone to the same source. Unlike the Marxists of his native Germany, Labour found a ready form of political communication in the religious idealism of Nonconformity already made familiar to electors through its exposition on late Victorian Liberal platforms. This illustrates that the relationship between Nonconformity and the labour movement was complex, operating on levels from the electoral to the rhetorical (Catterall, 2009: pp.136-8).

It also operated within a wider context. For instance, Nonconformity was already numerically in decline before confronted by the rise of labour in the late nineteenth century. The latter, notwithstanding some commentators, seems to have had little influence on this process. Furthermore, whilst Leonard Smith rightly draws attention to the role of theological modernism in creating an

atmosphere conducive to the rise of labour, he overstates the extent to which it became merely a stepping stone for leaving the Free Churches altogether. Many, shared Rhondda Williams' view that there remained a need to transform both people and systems. As Ammon warned in 1948 'Advances in education and standards of living....tend to obscure the dangers arising from spiritual decline....It is right that such things be sought and gained; but by themselves they are not enough'.²⁰ Without committed and converted individuals how could better systems be maintained?

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²⁰ Hull History Centre: Ammon Papers, U. DMN/9/1, 'Whither?', draft article c.1948.

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