

THE CHRISTIAN LEFT: THE INTRODUCTORY SEQUENCE.

My first serious introduction to the concept of Socialism and an awareness of any relationship between Socialism and Christianity--the latter other than in its ritualistic, Presbyterian form--came via a discussion circle which called itself "The Social Redemption Group", a title which, on account of its pretentiousness, I never failed to find rather embarrassing. (In the Group's newsletter which I edited I changed the title to the "S.R.Group").

This Group was started by the remarkable Norman Ridyard and held its week-end meetings at his home in Bricket Wood, located between Watford and St.Albans. Norman was a chemist at King's College, University of London, a devout and proselytizing Christian. His over-riding concern was, I expect, with "community". For him community in practice meant the full integration of social and personal living and, ideally and logically, would take the form of actually living in some form of organised community. Socialism was an essential element in this, because sharing meant socialism; it embraced Christian beliefs because these were the point of entry so far as he was concerned; no sharing was possible without the total commitment of the individual.

I did not find this by itself very convincing. But the underlying purpose of the Group was an examination of those forces in contemporary society that contributed to what was seen as the breakdown in the "community spirit". It was from this point that the wide-ranging nature of the discussion within the Group took place.

The organisation of the Group is of interest. Members were asked to introduce discussions by 20 minute papers (the only rule kept to). Subjects were selected informally by an ad hoc committee and participants were allowed some months to prepare their contributions. Subjects ranged over political, economic, social and religious matters: on any given week-end there might be a paper on the Marxist theory of surplus value or on dialectical materialism

or colonialism, the thinking of Evelyn Underhill or Niebuhr, or on the workings of the Stock Exchange!

Personally, I found the introduction to these discussion groups a revelation: an opening of a door to a hitherto unknown intellectual world. The Group was deliberately mixed: in political belief predominantly socialist but this was not a requirement of participation; it was, I expect, on the whole fairly orthodox in religious outlook but, again, this was no necessary requirement. By "orthodox" I mean in conventional belief but far from orthodox in application.

A measure of the Group's success was that, when it started, it involved an average of 16-20 people spending one week-end a quarter in discussion (Friday night to Sunday night); after a year or so it was necessary to have 12 week-ends in a year to accommodate all those interested.

The next effective link for me was "Q Camp". This represented a substantial, intellectual, step. It involved exposure to a wider range of ideas, set against a more purposeful, active, "executive" background. The S.R.Group was exploratory and educational and fun in its own right; Q Camps introduced the need to take specific action.

My own personal search at this stage was to understand society and the nature of the contemporary social crises, as evidenced by slump and unemployment, brought sharply home by lengthy periods of unemployment suffered by friends and close relations.

Inevitably, personal contacts were important: respect and regard for those individuals involved meant a greater sensitiveness to the ideas expressed.



For me the emphasis was on the political solutions offered, quite separate from any religious beliefs. I expect the reason for this was that Christianity and Christian thinking were linked to the established and formal patterns of one's upbringing, impossible to associate with the need for social change. I was therefore attracted to the Communist Party. Those views I had heard expressed by actual or near Communists impressed me as the nearest approach to a hard, clear, unambiguous commitment to a change in society. The growth of Fascism forced a stand on these matters and the CP programme of action was compelling in its certainty.

At this stage historical and social development appeared to be explainable most satisfactorily in Marxian, specifically in dialectical materialist, terms. Anti-Dühring and Plekhanov's "Fundamental Problems of Marxism" were two of the books that influenced me most. The C.P.'s emphasis on the unity of theory and practice completed the circle. Marx and Engels explained the nature of social development; Lenin demonstrated in tactical, political terms how this was translated into practice. Or so it seemed. The all-embracing combination of a theoretical explanation of the growth of society and the tactics required to change it was gripping. Someone said, Bernard Shaw I think, that there was no confidence to compare with that generated by the belief that one was the instrument of historical destiny. At that time and at that age that was how one felt!

Yet, I did not actually join the C.P. for some time. It is difficult at this interval to describe adequately my reservations. I did quite a lot of donkey work with the C.P. before finally signing up. I expect Spain was the final decisive influence.

I always regarded myself as an "unorthodox" member and, indeed, was known as such within the Party. I remember how hurt I was at being described as, at heart, a "liberal-radical". The reasons lay in the limitations as I saw it

of the the theoretical basis--as then interpreted in Party literature. To express it in non-technical terms and, I expect, over-simplistically, the dialectical materialistic explanation of social change was acceptable and the only explanation that appeared to make sense, but, too often, this was applied in a mechanical, materialist fashion--simple economic determinism--which did not make sense. For example, I came to the conclusion that the belief that the "social and ideological superstructure", (which embraced everything from abstract art to religious ideas) was to be explained by the underlying socio-economic relations in production was unconvincing. It was with some excitement, I remember, that I came across Plekhanov's "The Role of the Individual in History" (? title) which seemed to provide for the role of human personality as an independent force in social development. I found, too, that "democratic centralism" was in practice a constraint on full freedom of discussion at all levels: Branch, District and, presumably, National. Yet, with all these limitations the CP did seem to have a sound basis for action. I had long discussions I recall on some of these matters with Alfred and Jeannie Cannon. John Macmurray used the term "the super-organic factor". It was a refusal to recognise the existence of the "super-organic factor" that was the basis for my own uncertainties.

A socialist change of society it was believed (at least I, albeit mistakenly, was led to believe) would result from the following sequence: a careful analysis of social trends, leading to the development of class consciousness should be linked to the establishment of working class organisations; and then such organisations, led by the politically conscious and dedicated "vanguard", would take over. I came to think that this was too simple. In contemporary terms, and standing it on its head, it is a form of social monetarism.

John Macmurray wrote of the critical importance of dualism in political and religious thinking. The real world, the "world out there", ever-changing and developing, required interpretation before effective action



could result. But this world was viewed by individuals, in isolate and in aggregates, from the point of view of their own development: the development of their own personalities if you like. And this development, both as to rate and nature, was generated by the impact of their own relationship to people, things and events. Simple economic explanations of human action were inadequate.

I found the Christian Left position on these matters to be more acceptable. The progressive unfolding of human personality, the removal of obstacles-- socio-economic--to its development and concern to examine what was meant by human consciousness, as part of social and class consciousness, essential to a satisfactory answer to my own search.

At this stage I found the seminars at Pyecombe Corner and, later at St. Pancras, ~~so~~ stimulating. (Interestingly, I did not find the conference at St. Asaph's stimulating; enjoyable, yes, but not stimulating).

The much discussed "basis" of the Christian Left talked of religion being essentially about human community and that, therefore, the struggle to change society was at base a religious struggle. The dominant consideration for me was the transformation of society and it was the all-embracing nature of the outlook--the religious basis--of the Christian Left that was the attraction for me.

W.D. McClelland.

January, 1984