Introduction

This project began as a bit of unfinished business. When I was a student at the Virginia Theological Seminary, one of my teachers mentioned the fact that a number of Anglo-Catholic priests in the Church of England who had been influenced by what came to be called Christian Socialism were heavily involved in ministries to London's poor. Nothing more was said of them during the remainder of my time at Virginia, but I wondered who these people were and why they had given themselves to what I assumed (falsely) was an iteration of what we Americans understood to be the Social Gospel. The question remained, but I did nothing to answer it until I retired from my position as Dean of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale. In response to this event, a friend and colleague wrote a piece on the ethics of growing old.[1] In that essay, he made many wise remarks about aging, but one that stood out for me was this: in this time of withdrawal we call retirement, it is important to attend to unfinished business. I was arrested by his comment and realized that the remark of my teacher had remained with me though the years. So I began reading about the Christian Socialists. The chapters that follow comprise the results of my attempt to attend to unfinished business. I am immensely grateful for my friend's moral advice, and I am glad that I have followed it because I have discovered the riches of what in my title I have called "an almost forgotten tradition."

As my studies progressed, I saw ever more clearly that the issues addressed by the Christian Socialists are remarkably similar to those that now confront the churches not only in England and America but also throughout the world. They were confronted with the fallout of the Industrial Revolution. We are confronted by the fallout of the digital revolution. They were confronted by what was then called "political

1. O'Donovan, "The Practice of Being Old."

economy," a view of economic relations that allowed no room for moral considerations. We are confronted by "neoliberalism," many of whose devotees hold very similar views. They were confronted, as are we, with vast inequalities of wealth existing alongside of grinding poverty and social disorder. Most of all, they were confronted, as are we, by the inability of the church to respond in an adequate fashion to these challenges.

This study begins not only with a sketch of the social conditions that occasioned the rise of the Christian Socialist movement, but also with an examination of the nature of their response. Increasingly, the response of the churches has focused on policies designed to remedy social conditions. The churches, through their instruments of governance and service, have become advocates of social policy. There were exceptions, of course, but the response of the Christian Socialists had as its aim not institutional reform but reform of the religious and moral foundations of the nation and of the role of the church in restoring those foundations. They were interested in foundational ideals from which they believed would spring a renewed national life. It is this sort of reform that, for them, defined the social mission of the Church of England.

Contemporary readers may be tempted to dismiss this view of the social mission of the church as utterly inadequate, but easy dismissal will prove unwise. The reasons the Christian Socialists give for reluctance to assign the governing structures of the church (though not its individual members and their voluntary societies) this focus for social mission are highly instructive. Furthermore, their criticism of a more activist stance is telling. In this case, the point is the difference! It is in confronting difference that new understandings emerge. This difference in understanding the role of the governing structures of the church provides precisely an opportunity to see the role of the church in a different way. It also provides an opportunity to see socialism in a different way. Generally speaking, socialism calls to mind public ownership of the means of production. For the Christian Socialists, socialism meant something entirely different. It meant challenging the individualistic and competitive view of human nature and social life that provided a basis for political economy and for that view substituting another that saw human nature as essentially social and human society as essentially cooperative. When the Christian Socialists spoke of socialism they did not refer to state control of the economy. They spoke of cooperative efforts to improve social relations in ways that produce human flourishing and harmony.

The question they faced was what must be done to restore the religious and moral foundations of British society, and to give an account of the role of the church in this effort. Their prescription for the disease was first to diagnose the source of the "rot" they saw in the life of the nation. In his well-known book *The Acquisitive Society*, R. H. Tawney posited greed as the chief expression of England's disease, but greed was only a symptom of the real illness. The Christian Socialists believed the ground from which greed grew was a mistaken conception of human nature and human society. To their minds, the ills of society were caused by a false individualism that exalted competition and denied the social and cooperative nature of human beings. As a result of this false account of human nature and society, people tended to place rights before duties. The result of this reversal of proper moral order, they held, was an incessant struggle to establish the rights of contending individuals and social groups.

Their diagnosis of the sickness was individualism, competition, and greed. Their prescription for a cure was reestablishment of the social and cooperative nature of human beings, the priority of duties over rights, and the inculcation of the ideals suggested by the life of Jesus and the social/cooperative nature of humankind. They believed that the health of society depends upon the guiding presence of these ideals; of primary importance to them were community, love, equality, fellowship, duty, service, personality, character, freedom, and property. Community, love, equality, fellowship, duty, and service are rather easily understood. Personality, character, freedom, and property are less so. They become clear, however, once it is understood that, according to the Christian Socialists, the very purpose of social life is the nurture of "persons" (human beings with a fully formed personality) who develop as they should and have sufficient freedom and means to undertake such a journey.

Everything the Christian Socialists struggled to accomplish depended upon establishing these ideals in the minds and hearts of their fellow countrymen. Much of what this book contains is an account of their successes and failures. Theirs was no small task. Idealism, well meant as it may be, is full of challenges. Idealists are prone to utopian visions. They can easily be blinded by the very ideals they profess and so become quite fanatical. They can proceed without providing a sound foundation for their commitments or cogent arguments for their conclusions. The Christian Socialists faced all these charges and many others, the last being the most immediately pressing. They had to provide a Christian warrant for their views and intentions. In the nineteenth century, Evangelicals were

the dominant force in the Church of England. They did hold poor relief to be a primary Christian duty. Nevertheless, their focus was on the state of individual souls rather than the general state of society. In his seminal work *The Kingdom of Christ*, F. D. Maurice provided an alternative perspective. His focus switched from the atoning sacrifice of the cross to the incarnation of God in Christ. He argued that by becoming fully human God showed his concern and care for all aspects of human life. Further, by entering fully into the life of the world, God established his dominion over all people, whether they acknowledge that fact or not.

To a contemporary reader foregrounding the incarnation as a warrant for a Christian social ethic seems an obvious move. Nonetheless, serious, often unaddressed questions remain. Is a single Christian doctrine, even one as central as the incarnation, an adequate foundation upon which to build a social ethic? This question, the answer to which is certainly not self-evident, prompts several others. Is the account Christian Socialists give of the ideals they champion adequate? Even if adequate, given the limits of human sin and finitude, do these ideals, in the end, do any real work or do they simply idle in a transcendent ether, having no real contact with life as we know it? Or again, what is the role of the governing structures of the church in spreading these ideals and pointing out their practical implications? More important still, what is the role of the body of people who comprise the membership of local congregations and parishes in forming believers on the basis of these ideals? Further, how are these ideals to be lived out in the everyday and morally compromised world they inhabit?

These are a few of the questions addressed in the following pages, but there is one other of particular importance not as yet mentioned. Is the tradition of Christian Socialism, as it developed in England, still alive and still making its voice heard? The answer to this question is yes. The voice of the Christian Socialists echoes throughout the works of Rowan Williams and John Milbank. Each in his own way has immersed himself in this tradition, and each in his own way has carried it forward and developed it. They have addressed both liberals and conservatives out of this tradition and, in so doing, pressed them to take a close look at the state of their society and the character of their common life. They have also offered an alternative vision of another form of life that Milbank terms "the postmodern alternative." This book is an invitation to take a fresh look at their work and that of their predecessors in the hope that its readers can find a way to live together that leads not to further social

conflict but to a postmodern form of life built upon friendship, cooperation, harmony, and human flourishing.

Philip Turner
Austin, Texas
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