

## NO COMPROMISE

### Nonconformity and Politics

#### 1893 - 1914

#### INTRODUCTION

We have space only for a brief overview of a period during which Nonconformists were, other than in the seventeenth century, more intensely involved in the politics of the United Kingdom than at any other time in their history. The main argument, sustained throughout, is that this political engagement did not develop from, neither was it conducted on, theological principles. This was in contrast to political involvement by Christians elsewhere in Europe and reference will be made to this at the close of the paper. The subject is introduced by recalling the situation as it stood toward the close of the nineteenth century. A review is then offered of the Nonconformist/Liberal relationship. Closer attention is paid, finally, to Nonconformity and the rise of Labour politics.

#### POLITICAL EXPERIENCE GAINED

Nonconformists amassed considerable political experience as they agitated for the repeal of discriminatory legislation. Prior to the rise of the party system, the House of Commons represented community and economic interests within the nation. Largely due to the contribution made to the campaign by the Board of Dissenting Deputies, the Dissenting case against the Test and Corporation Acts was accepted in 1828: 'the badge of social inferiority and . . . barrier to political office' was thus removed. Lord John Russell's Solemnisation of Marriages Act in 1836 enabled Dissenting marriages to be contracted in their own chapels and be recognized as valid, and the two Burial Acts of 1852 and 1880 removed discriminatory practices relative to the interment of Dissenters. Church rates were ended under Gladstone's first administration in 1868, after a campaign of over thirty years. Three years later in 1871 the abolition of most ecclesiastical tests at Oxford and Cambridge opened the way for Nonconformists to gain degrees from those establishments. Prior to this 'London was the university for Dissenters. . .'.<sup>2</sup> All this, notes C. Binfield, 'kept Dissenters in political training'.<sup>3</sup> It was all very different from the political quietism of the previous century.

Nonconformists also played an important part in wider political reform. They engaged in 'agitation against the abuses and injustices which affected their countrymen as a whole'.<sup>4</sup> The 1832 Reform Act was regarded by Quakers as 'the charter of Dissent'.<sup>5</sup> It has also been described as 'the starting-point of modern British democratic politics . . .'.<sup>6</sup> John Stuart Mill's 'shopocracy', the supporters of Dissent, were entering their inheritance. The Act of Emancipation for all Slaves was passed within fourteen months of the Reform Bill. The Methodist MP for Preston, John Wilks, was a spokesman for the Anti-Slavery Society. Quakers, who had not participated in the campaign to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts, and who had disagreements as to the rightness of accepting municipal office, were prominent in the crusade to free slaves, especially in the West Indies. 'The question of slavery, above all others', writes R.

Cowherd, '... drew religious men into the heat of partisan politics'.<sup>7</sup> In 1838 the Anti-Corn Law League was formed, with the Quaker John Bright among its leaders. Bright was often distrusted by fellow-Quakers because of his outspoken political comments. He refused to become an Elder, wishing to retain his political interests. The campaign to repeal the Corn Laws was regarded by Nonconformists as much more than an economic and commercial issue. Cobden denounced the laws as opposed to the laws of God. They were anti-scriptural and anti-Christian. Politically, radicals opposed the laws, passed in 1815, when the bottom was dropping out of the market, as legislation designed to protect the landed gentry at the expense of the humble consumer. The campaign signalled the entry into national politics of many Nonconformist ministers. Their voice 'was heard in such strength upon affairs which seemed to be outside their province'.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, although bitterly fought campaigns over temperance, education and disestablishment did not bring success, it was undeniable that Nonconformity was a highly influential factor in political affairs at the close of the nineteenth century. The National Council of Evangelical Free Churches was formed in 1895, regarded by supporters as a veritable parliament of Free Churches; by others with less enthusiasm. Despite the difficulty of obtaining accurate statistics, Nonconformist numbers were high. A document presented by the NCEFC to the House of Lords in connection with the education debate of the early twentieth century, claimed to speak for 'at least eight million adherents'.<sup>9</sup> By dint, therefore, of experience, structures and sheer numerical strength, Nonconformity was a force to be reckoned with. Nonconformity, and not only Baptists, had been drawn 'into an active engagement with the murky world of politics'.<sup>10</sup>

#### NONCONFORMITY AND THE LIBERAL PARTY

There never was a formal alliance. Yet the Baptist *Freeman* declared in 1881, 'We are Liberals of Liberals'.<sup>11</sup> In January of the previous year the *Nonconformist and Independent* described the Liberal Party as 'the party of Christ'.<sup>12</sup> As late as 1910, the *British Congregationalist* claimed that if it 'avowedly identified itself with the Liberal Party it would be in agreement with 90% of its readers'.<sup>13</sup> The Liberal Party has been described as 'a coalition of continuing interests . . .'.<sup>14</sup> Nonconformity thus took its place as one 'interest' among others, and opinions vary as to its importance. What Nonconformity contributed to the Liberal Party was a frame of mind; a particular stance or attitude which later became explicit as the Nonconformist Conscience. The *Congregational Review* claimed that 'it did incalculable service to the cause of Liberalism . . .'<sup>15</sup> because it emphasized moral and not only political priorities. A more objective verdict was that Nonconformity provided 'an element of charity and humanitarianism . . . lacking in the grim egoism of utilitarian ethics'.<sup>16</sup> Support for the party varied with the likelihood or otherwise of measures amenable to Nonconformists being included in the party programme. Many, however, were primarily loyal to the party itself, and reminded their fellow Nonconformists that they did not have the right 'to direct the policy of the country in their own interests'.<sup>17</sup> That, however, was the nub of the issue, for many Nonconformists were convinced that their objectives *were* in the best

interests of the country. Such policies could, however, lose votes as well as attract them, and what was a high moral crusade to some, was 'faddist' crankiness to others. Yet in an era when party loyalties were often formed by community values, the priorities of the chapels undoubtedly brought enthusiasm and zeal to the aid of the party.

'Cause politics', or in today's jargon 'single issue politics', were dear to Nonconformist hearts. Thus causes were urged upon the party as battles worth fighting. Without a recognizable political philosophy undergirding it, the Liberal Party was always on the look-out for great causes. Its criterion, unlike that of the Nonconformists, was 'Will it find wide acceptance in the country?' Steady incremental change within stability was the hallmark of Conservative governments, but the Liberals as a reforming party always had a queue of supporters pleading a variety of causes. Thus the ethos was favourable for Nonconformity to stake its claims. The problem for the party leadership (mainly Anglican) was to retain valuable Nonconformist support, but also to assess the political popularity or otherwise of its causes. Sadly, as politics developed in the UK, some of these causes increasingly exhibited a sell-by date. In the years leading up to the Great War, Nonconformist causes became increasingly irrelevant and were overtaken by measures to relieve social deprivation, naval rearmament, industrial unrest, women's suffrage, and home rule for Ireland. No wonder that Dr John Clifford lamented, 'the Irish can have their Home Rule and the Welsh their disestablishment, but we Free Churchmen are to have nothing but words'.<sup>18</sup> Another difficulty was that enthusiasts for different causes competed with each other, and even within a cause there were sectional rivalries. Trying to get a temperance measure on the statute book in 1894 proved to be a nightmare for Sir William Harcourt. In a letter to Sir Wilfrid Lawson, leader of the UK Alliance, he wrote, 'I am dead sick myself of all this constant distrust . . . on the part of rival sections, and the sooner I find myself delivered from the odious and impossible task of reconciling and satisfying them, the better I shall be pleased'.<sup>19</sup> Such people as he complained of were lobbyists and not politicians. Yet, as has been pointed out, the Liberal Party 'could not live with sectionalism, but nor could they live without it'.<sup>20</sup>

The entry in *Chambers Biographical Dictionary* for William Ewart Gladstone includes the words, 'Probably no other English minister has left behind him so long and so successful a record of practical legislation. As a parliamentary debater he never had a superior - possibly never an equal'.<sup>21</sup> We may therefore begin to excuse Nonconformist adulation of the man who towered above all others during the second half of the nineteenth century in British politics. He had what has been described as an almost idolatrous appeal to Nonconformists. 'The devotion that Gladstone attracted . . .', writes D. Bebbington, 'was in fact beyond reason, an almost religious faith'.<sup>22</sup> Nothing in the churchmanship Gladstone espoused, to which most Nonconformists took the most intense exception, seemed to diminish the confidence they placed in him. Most felt that although one with Pusey in ritual, he was one with Spurgeon in salvation. One quotation from a Baptist minister who visited the great man at his Dollis Hill home in May 1894 will suffice to indicate the effect Gladstone had on his admirers. 'I felt I had been in contact for a few minutes with one of the greatest intellects the world has ever seen and one of the holiest of men in the true idea of holiness . . . I thanked my God for

the high privilege. This was a man not only to be revered, but to be loved. I hope to meet him again in heaven.<sup>23</sup> The dominance of Gladstone virtually ensured that the Liberal Party looked no further. Who needed a creed or a political philosophy with such a giant bestriding the narrow world like a Colossus? Gladstone, it has been claimed, 'was the best substitute for a creed; a system of thought that the party possessed'.<sup>24</sup> Nonconformity and the Liberal Party suited each other. The crusade and the cause were everything. They were not underpinned by a political theology or philosophy.

Although the Nonconformist Conscience burst on the scene with the downfall of Charles Stewart Parnell in November 1890, and the phrase caught on, it was typical of what George Bernard Shaw pilloried as 'middle class morality'. It was 'neither exclusively or even generally Nonconformist'.<sup>25</sup> What it represented had certainly characterized Victorian Britain, and was expressed, for example, in the flourishing of organizations like the National Social Purity Crusade, under whose aegis conferences were held with Anglican, Jewish and Free Church representatives present. In his presidential address to the April 1903 Baptist Union Assembly, Alderman (later Sir) George White addressed the issue of the Nonconformist Conscience. He claimed that it asserted positive truth and enunciated principles of supreme value to the nation.<sup>26</sup> Critics pointed out that it was only applied to 'a narrow set of problems that related to personal sin and secular political behaviour'.<sup>27</sup> Hugh Price Hughes *had* claimed that drink, impurity and gambling were the 'three deadly enemies of England'.<sup>28</sup> Yet the most vituperative expression of the Conscience was reserved for protests against the Armenian atrocities in 1895. It was reported that, when Dr Joseph Parker prayed for the damnation of the Sultan of Turkey, the congregation cheered. The *Freeman* described the Turkish government as 'weak, rotten and villainous' and wanted the Powers to combine against 'the Turk Abdul the Accursed and continue until he is hanged'.<sup>29</sup> Even Dr John Clifford, a doughty opponent of the Boer War which started four years later, said that if justice could only be obtained by war, then war it must be. Mention of the Boer War showed the limitations of guidance offered by the Conscience. Unlike the atrocities, events in South Africa revealed a deep division of opinion among Nonconformists. Clifford opposed the war. Hughes, after initially agreeing with Clifford, later supported it. The *British Weekly* approved but criticized the management of the campaign. The *Freeman* asked the army authorities to omit the name of God from telegrams announcing victories. Silvester Horne was against it, whilst his denomination, the Congregationalists, was divided. The NCEFC agreed not to discuss the war at its 1900 Assembly for fear of discord. Even the Quakers could not agree among themselves and, despite Keir Hardie's opposition, the Independent Labour Party was split on the issue. Patently, the Conscience offered no alternative to agonized thought and consequent disagreement. Neither, we may note, did it compensate for the absence of theological reflection on politics and Christianity.

Disillusionment with politics set in among Nonconformists when, after the euphoria of the 1906 Liberal landslide, four successive Secretaries of the Board of Education tried and failed to carry an Education Act to replace that of Balfour in 1902. Balfour, who was not initially hopeful about the success of his proposals, later became determined to see them through. Ironically, his first attempt at a legislative proposal, made in 1877,

concerned reform of the burial laws and was talked out because many of his colleagues saw it as 'an unnecessary concession to the Nonconformists'.<sup>30</sup> Despite passionate opposition and the passive resistance movement, the Balfour Act lasted until the Butler legislation of 1944. This failure, and the painful decline in Free Church membership (between 1906-10 the Free Church Year Book showed a decrease of 64,000), intensified the disenchantment. Biblical criticism, the decay of expository preaching, affluence and Socialism were all blamed. In 1909 a book entitled *Nonconformity and Politics* was published. It was a trenchant criticism of Nonconformist embroilment in politics, and the decline of spiritual power was ascribed to this. Letters began to appear in denominational journals, accusing them of being too political and connecting spiritual decadence with political involvement. Compared with the 1906 General Election, Nonconformist participation in the 1910 contests (there were two) was muted, and other issues dominated the hustings. The Lords' veto, strikes, votes for women and Irish Home Rule held sway, to say nothing of tariff reform. The *British Weekly* urged its readers to gird themselves for 'One Fight More', but the wording of an NCEFC Minute expressed the despair of many: 'We are defeated. We have laboured in vain and spent our strength for nought'.<sup>31</sup> After the tragic death of its secretary, the Revd Thomas Law, in 1910, the Council emphasized in its Report of 1914 that much more weight was now being placed on the spiritual side of its work. Disillusionment was accompanied by the increasing fragmentation of Nonconformist political loyalties. There had been an allegiance to the Conservatives by some Nonconformists for many years. Polls taken in 1887 and 1894, among Wesleyans and Congregationalists respectively, indicated 'some shift in Nonconformist allegiance away from Liberalism'.<sup>32</sup> Gladstone's commitment to Irish Home Rule in the mid-1880s divided Nonconformists. Most went along with it, loving the doctrine for the teacher's sake, and hoping that the conclusion of the issue would clear the road for more amenable measures. Increasing affluence and social climbing led many to the Tory fold. 'It is a matter for regret that the descendants of many wealthy Nonconformists left them because society gives them the cold shoulder unless they attend church. We respect persons who honestly differ from us, but we despise those who have not the manliness to remain members of the humble Congregational or Baptist churches, and become Churchmen as a short cut to gentility.'<sup>33</sup> By the time of the 1910 elections it was estimated that 15% to 20% of Wesleyans had voted Unionist in January, and more in December. There was a saying that 'a carriage never goes to a meeting-house for three generations', and it was proving to be true. Others, of course, were moving in the opposite direction. The founding of the Independent Labour Party in January 1893 and the Labour Representation Committee in February 1900, gave Nonconformists with Socialist sympathies somewhere to go. A new dimension was being introduced into British politics, and class was replacing community and chapel solidarity. Many Anglican clergymen now openly identified themselves as Socialists, and the claim that Socialism was the coming form of Christianity was convincing to some.

To relate, then, this brief and sketchy review of the Nonconformist-Liberal relationship to the main argument: it was conducted by Nonconformists without serious recourse to the development of guiding theological principles. In so far as Liberalism

had a basis, it had been formulated by the likes of Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and the philosophical radicals. It had some affinities with the principles of the French Revolution, albeit without the anti-clerical aspect exhibited on the continent. 'Nonconformity', it has been observed, '... was more important in England from 1870 to 1914 than in any other period since the seventeenth century...' <sup>34</sup> Precisely because of this, it needed a recognizable and coherent theological basis for its political involvement. When R. W. Dale complained, 'We have no theological system in the sense that Calvinism was the theological system of the Puritans...' <sup>35</sup>, he never spoke a truer word.

### NONCONFORMITY AND THE RISE OF LABOUR POLITICS

'Of all the issues which divided Nonconformists', it has been claimed, '... It was socialism which had the most fateful influence on Nonconformity as a political and religious force.'<sup>36</sup> The confrontational challenge of Chartism gave way, in the second half of the nineteenth century, to a period of consensus. The Chartists were seen as an aberration. Agitation and protest were replaced by earnest aspirations to self-improvement. What was consensus for some was social control for others, but many working-class leaders gladly acquiesced in the arrangement. To set class against class was regarded by supporters of the consensus as being unforgivable, and the chapels made a considerable contribution toward the upholding of this convention.

As the century drew to its close, however, the validity of questions posed by socialists began to challenge the consensus. Nonconformists insisted that chapels were democratically organized, and that if there was a place where 'the labouring classes of England... ought to feel at home... it is a Congregational church'.<sup>37</sup> So claimed the Chairman of the Congregational Union of England and Wales in 1894. The great mass of workers did not agree, and many young Nonconformists now began to transfer their allegiance from chapel to politics or trade union activity. This provoked Nonconformists into a number of initiatives in defence of the consensus. Consider, for example, the Pleasant Sunday Afternoon movement. Described as 'the most systematic attempt to attract... working-class worshippers'.<sup>38</sup> PSAs were enthusiastically supported by some, and viewed with suspicion by other Nonconformists. They were succeeded and gradually replaced by the Brotherhood movement. 'Brotherhood' was an important concept at this time, especially favoured by socialists. By 1909 F. B. Meyer claimed that 'nearly every Sunday afternoon... I address a gathering of a thousand men'.<sup>39</sup> Sadly, the Great War decimated the movement, though some Labour leaders continued to support it. A. V. Alexander was President in 1934. Within Wesleyan Methodism, the main effort in the same direction was the Central Hall thrust. Churches became 'Halls'. Pulpits gave way to platforms and pews to tip-up seats. The journalist, W. T. Stead, he of the bright ideas, wanted the Central Hall, Westminster, to include a cafe, a music-hall (alcohol-free), a variety show and a theatre. His suggestions were not implemented. Another effort, originating among the Anglicans, was the Settlement movement. To live among the labouring classes was thought to be more commendable than conducting missions and then retiring to a safe distance. Influenced by the teaching of T. H. Green at Oxford, Toynbee Hall opened in 1885. The Congregationalists had

Mansfield House (1890) and Walworth House (1895), and Scott Lidgett was the warden at the Methodist Bermondsey settlement, where the Dockers Union had its headquarters. By 1913 London had twenty-seven such settlements and there were twelve in the provinces. H. G. Wells lampooned these efforts as 'benevolent picknicking'. George Lansbury respected the work they did, but noted that they provided convenient jumping-off places for ambitious politicians or for those with an eye on the civil service. Perhaps he had Clement Attlee in mind, whose secretaryship of Toynbee Hall lasted only a year. Lansbury saw settlements as seeking to repair a system that should have been dismantled. Despite all these efforts, the consensus broke down. Many claimed that the Nonconformist Conscience was being replaced by the Social Conscience.

Yet just as contemporary claims made by third parties to have broken the mould of British politics, so in the period under review the two dominant parties, Liberals and Conservatives, proved difficult to dislodge. A number of factors delayed the arrival of a realistic third way, and Nonconformists were involved in them. The Lib/Lab phenomenon, for example, remained a real force in British politics until 1914. An electoral pact had been concluded between Herbert Gladstone and Ramsay Macdonald for the 1906 election. The new electoral partners of the Liberals were described by Asquith's daughter at this time as 'the mild and gentle Labour Party'.<sup>40</sup> Many Free Churches supported Liberal or Labour candidates, but the latter were what might be described as 'safe' Labour men: John Burns, Arthur Henderson (converted under Rodney 'Gipsy' Smith) and David Shackleton, with Primitive Methodist connections, were typical examples of those who, according to the *British Weekly*, were 'parted only by stages in a journey'<sup>41</sup> from Liberals. The same was true of many trade unions. The Miners Federation was strongly Lib/Lab until 1908. A second feature of this transitional period was what became known as 'New Liberalism'. Described later as 'the quest for a new morality',<sup>42</sup> it sought to replace the old individualism, which rejected governmental intrusion, with a judicious use of interventionist policies to cushion the damaging effects of untrammelled *laissez-faire* economics. Scholars are divided as to how much influence it had on the social reform measures promoted by Lloyd George and Churchill prior to the Great War, but its ethos appealed to many Nonconformists who saw its aims as an antidote to unacceptable state socialism. The pre-war measures were accordingly welcomed by Nonconformists, albeit not without caution, and were seen as a sort of acceptable socialism. The owner of the *Manchester Guardian*, the Unitarian J. E. Taylor, was critical of New Liberalism, claiming that it had no time for the old Nonconformist shibboleths which he held dear. His editor, the influential C. P. Scott, however, had no such qualms and, despite tenuous links with the New Liberals, Nonconformists went along with the new approach. A third factor at this time was the involvement of some leading Nonconformists in 'Progressive' politics. John Clifford and Hugh Price Hughes openly supported Progressives at London County Council elections. Both the Baptist Revd John Wilson of Woolwich and Silvester Horne of Whitefield's Tabernacle in the Tottenham Court Road were Progressive councillors, as was J. Scott Lidgett of the Bermondsey settlement. Progressives were an amalgam of Liberals, radicals, Labour and Trades Council members. Their unity lay in opposing a common enemy, the 'Moderates', a local government term for the Conservatives. London was

their main sphere of influence, and for a time it was by no means certain that Labour would assume an identity of its own.

We pause here to note the fears expressed by many Nonconformists about what was called the Social Gospel, an all-embracing term which sometimes meant whatever its critics took exception to. Objections were not denominational but doctrinal, and were voiced by Tractarians as well as by Evangelicals. It was felt that the basic gospel message was being diluted and that the sufficiency of conversions on a wide enough scale to change society was being questioned. An undue emphasis on the kingdom at the expense of the Church, and on society rather than on individuals, was at the heart of the anxieties. Many Free Church ministers were at risk if they embraced these concepts too enthusiastically. Few were in the powerful position of the Revd R. J. Campbell who, whilst minister at the City Temple, expressed surprise, in a letter to Keir Hardie, at the absence of criticism among his congregation for his socialist views.<sup>43</sup> Yet it has to be noted that the livings of many Anglican parishes were in the gift of patrons who took exception to the Social Gospel and some parsons were forced to move on, finding it difficult to get incumbencies.

The debate on socialist theory intensified as some electoral success was achieved. No longer was it enough to dismiss the vision as hopelessly utopian. A number of issues arose, one of which was the validity or otherwise of collectivist initiatives to combat poverty, bad housing, unemployment, and the like. Gas and water socialism was accepted, but socialists wanted collectivism on a national scale. Some Nonconformists were not averse to this, but others argued that the state was but the secular counterpart to the established Church. Opposition to both in the name of the individual conscience was therefore justified. Both Dr R. F. Horton and Dr John Clifford spoke favourably of collectivism and questioned the *laissez-faire* approach. Others feared the threat of compulsion, and some foresaw the creation of a huge and oppressive bureaucracy.

Another burning issue was the relationship between personal and societal regeneration. The Methodist socialist, Philip Snowden, was well versed in both, and regarded personal salvation as only half the truth. It is interesting to see how the concept of 'full salvation', often linked with pentecostal experience, was for some at this time a matter of preaching and believing that salvation is both personal and communal. Early socialists believed that their creed could transform persons as well as communities. By far the most serious question in this debate, however, was the claim, made by many socialists, that their movement was a religious one. There was little, if any, anti-religious propaganda, although, from the other side, socialists were often identified with atheists and proponents of free-love. Many socialists claimed not a new religion but that socialism was Christianity in its modern industrial form. Philip Snowden was adept at using biblical quotations and applying them to socialism. Thus it was the spirit of all truth leading to truth. Under its influence old men were dreaming dreams and young men seeing visions. It would go forth conquering and to conquer until the new Jerusalem came on earth. Fenner Brockway argued that, whilst socialism could not be equated with Christianity, it was the most convincing form of the Faith. Nonconformists countered with the assertion that environmental change would not accomplish personal reformation; that socialism was, at heart, no more than an economic theory, and that it



did not take human wickedness seriously enough.

Nonconformist opposition to socialist claims can be summed up under three heads. First, there were those who saw no common ground whatever: the two movements were incompatible. Secondly, some advocated co-operation. Third, and probably most widespread, were those who claimed that Christianity subsumed socialism. A true application of the gospel would leave socialism far behind.

The name of the Revd John Reginald Campbell has been noted. He was minister of the City Temple, London, from May 1903 to October 1915. Campbell was a socialist and a prominent member of the Independent Labour Party on whose platforms he often appeared with Keir Hardie. He claimed that his theology, which became known as the New Theology, and his socialism were, in fact, the religious and political expressions of one and the same movement. Socialists generally had little time for theology. It distorted the simple message of Jesus which was the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God. With the conversion of Campbell, a theologian had entered their ranks. Keir Hardie welcomed parsons into the party, but only, he reminded them, as fellow socialists, not as moralisers or preachers. Campbell's stated aim was to preserve socialism from the taint of continental secularism. He was convinced that his theology, if observed, would result in a return to primitive Christianity, which state he interpreted as socialist. Campbell represents an attempt, not to develop a political theology as such, but to furnish a party that had already established its aims, beliefs and objectives, with a theological rationale.

There were some Nonconformists who took their socialism seriously enough to found or join Free Church socialist societies. For the most part these were ephemeral. Between 1877 and 1906 Anglican socialists formed no fewer than four socialist societies. Perhaps taking their cue from these Christian socialists, Nonconformists began in 1894, under Dr John Clifford, the Christian Socialist League. It lasted for only four or five years and was Fabian in ethos. Some meetings were held on the fringe of denominational assemblies. Pamphlets were published and rallies organized. In 1909 came the Free Church Socialist League, inspired by the Baptist Revd Herbert Dunnico. The most prominent member was Philip Snowden. The longest-lasting Nonconformist socialist society was the Socialist Quaker Society. Formed in 1898 it was 'finally laid down to rest by Friends . . . ' in 1924.<sup>44</sup> It got up again, however, and reappeared as the Quaker Socialist Society. Perhaps all three societies encountered problems with the formation of denominational Social Unions. These took social problems seriously, but were less radical in the solutions they proposed. They were social but not socialist, and were the forerunners of later Citizenship committees and departments of Social Responsibility.

Throughout the period under review there were Labour churches. A reference must be made to them because many were started and staffed by disgruntled Nonconformists. The founder of the Labour Church movement was the Revd John Trevor, brought up in Johnsonian Baptist circles. He became a Unitarian minister in Manchester, but was disappointed in that working people did not attend. He accordingly held the first Labour church service in Chorlton Town Hall in October 1891. The church grew and moved to the People's Hall, Manchester, where attendance settled down to 600-700. Within

three or four years there were fourteen other such churches in Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire. Trevor was a keen ILP man, but tried to prevent politics from swamping religion in his movement. He failed, and Labour churches became catch-alls for politicians and speakers on subjects ranging from anti-vivisection to Esperanto. Formally, the movement was guided by Five Principles, but in reality, although it was easy to recognize what Labour churches opposed, it was difficult to discern what they stood for. In fact, the workers he wanted to attract rarely came. At that time, probably only the Salvation Army and the Primitive Methodists could claim the allegiance of members of the labouring class who attended church. Like the ILP and the later Labour Party, the leadership of Labour churches was middle-class and the movement, which was almost exhausted by the time of the Great War, proved to be no more than a bridge, facilitating transference of chapel people keen on socialism out of the Nonconformist world and into the ethos of the ILP. It was yet another attempt to relate religion to one brand of politics.

'The appearance of the Independent Labour Party', writes an observer, '... posed a dilemma which neither Nonconformity nor Liberalism was ultimately able to solve'.<sup>45</sup> The founding of the Independent Labour Party in January 1893 was not mentioned by the *Freeman*. It was briefly noted by the *British Weekly*, and treated with disdain by the *Methodist Times* whose correspondent reported, 'The whole thing has a Socialist flavour, I do not expect much to come out of it'.<sup>46</sup> What eventually came out of it was the destruction of the Liberal Party. The three leading figures, Keir Hardie, James Ramsay Macdonald and Philip Snowden, were all Nonconformists, and each in different ways drew inspiration from religious beliefs for political activities. It is not surprising that the simple, home-spun concepts they preached had an immense appeal to working people who were familiar with, if not involved in, the chapel ethos. The early ILP members were mission-minded. They were evangelists for socialism. In its pristine state, the ILP was not so interested in political power as in gaining individual converts to the cause. There was a touchingly naïve belief that brotherhood *would* bind workers into fellowship, that competition would be replaced by co-operation, and that, if this could be achieved internationally, wars would cease. It was often remarked that there were striking similarities between them and the early Christians. Further, in addition to a common ethos, there were several issues wherein the ILP and the chapels shared the same convictions. Temperance was one. The ILP fought hard to prevent liquor being sold in its clubs. Hardie had been an official of the Good Templars, and Snowden was a lifelong teetotaler. Gambling was another area where there was common ground, albeit for different reasons. Socialists could not bear to think of all that hard-earned money going to swell the profits of capitalist bookmakers, and Nonconformists deprecated getting a lot for investing a little. Not so prominent, but often showing some similarity of approach, was the thorny question of education. The *Labour Leader* protested against support for sectarian schools via the rates,<sup>47</sup> and the Trades Union Congress condemned Balfour's bill as it went through Parliament. Nonconformity and the ILP often spoke the same language about international peace. Denominational journals agreed that money for social reform came before the building of Dreadnoughts,<sup>48</sup> and the roll-call of those responsible for jingoistic militarism bore a strong resemblance to the people blamed by

the ILP.<sup>49</sup>

That said, there were sharp and bitter differences. Broadly they can be summed up by the socialist charge that the chapels had an inadequate social conscience. Nonconformist rhetoric, already noted, against the Turkish government as responsible for the Armenian atrocities was seized upon by Keir Hardie. Instead, he claimed, 'of teaching other nations how to live, you should teach England how not to let her sons and daughters die'.<sup>50</sup> The ILP heavily criticized the Nonconformist alliance with the Liberals, and also weighed into the chapels for sending so much money overseas on missionary work whilst thousands were starving at home.<sup>51</sup> There was disappointment, not restricted to Nonconformists, that the churches did not support workers during strikes, although many appeals for money and clothing to help the families of those on strike were made by ministers in denominational papers. As industrial unrest became more acute in the years preceding the Great War, a significant change in the stance adopted by the Nonconformist press is apparent. Increasing sympathy is expressed for strikers and a more critical attitude is taken toward employers. It has to be said that such a development was partly motivated by the fear that unyielding employers would drive workers by the thousand into the socialist camp.<sup>52</sup> The *British Weekly*, referring to the coal dispute of 1912, admitted 'The Churches have no clear and direct message for this crisis'.<sup>53</sup>

Theology, as has been noted, came in for harsh criticism. The charge was that the theologians and churches had made the teaching of Christ into a complicated cult far removed from the lives of the common people. Socialists inevitably asked why the Brotherhood of Man had been neglected by the chapels. 'Christ proclaimed the Brotherhood of Man; the theologians have distorted His gospel and have justified inequality'.<sup>54</sup> The ILP made frequent reference to Acts 4.32-35, claiming that this passage portrayed the lifestyle adopted by true believers in Jesus.

It may come as a surprise to learn that the Salvation Army incurred intense socialist criticism. The Army was viewed as a 'gigantic trading concern conducted on the worst sweating system imaginable'.<sup>55</sup> Booth's success was ascribed to his personality, and his support for the social *status quo*. His work was seen as buttressing a system that should have been replaced. As with the chapels, some socialists left the ranks of the Army, but others took their stand under both the Red and the Blood and Fire flags.

Much criticism by socialists was, of course, levelled against Anglicans as well as Nonconformists, but it was accompanied by an edge of bitter disappointment when aimed at the Free Churches. Nonconformists had been regarded as radicals, the champions of the ordinary people. Now, after achieving first-class citizenship for themselves, they failed to show a similar concern for others who, because of social rather than religious disablement, were denied their true freedom.

## CONCLUSION

Several reasons are adduced by scholars for the failure of Nonconformists to sustain their political importance. This is correct, for the fact that they lost it cannot be ascribed to one cause. Some show that political development overtook the old Dissenting determination to wring legislation from a reluctant establishment. Others note that the

political agenda changed, leaving Nonconformists high and dry with issues no longer relevant to national priorities. The numerical decline was undoubtedly a factor, as was the breakdown of old community and chapel values, overtaken as they were by social and economic interests. E. R. Norman claims that 'Nonconformists were only really out to end the legal ascendancy of one denomination over another'.<sup>56</sup> E. Routley viewed the ecumenical movement as 'the great Dissent of our time' and asserted that it has displaced Nonconformist political zeal.<sup>57</sup> All such explanations are worthy of our attention, but we do well to remember that we are analysing what happened to a religious movement. Nonconformity was not a secular movement. Its basic beliefs were theological, not cultural or sociological. To forget this is to give an incomplete picture of what happened. It also fails to take into account the experience of politically involved religious traditions in other European countries. On the continent, efforts were made by Protestants and Roman Catholics to develop theological guidelines that would inform and underpin their political participation. The development of Roman Catholic social teaching in Europe is well documented<sup>58</sup> and the advance in many countries of Christian Democracy (a term not approved by the Papacy until 1901) has also been exhaustively treated.<sup>59</sup> Two decades before the Pope's decision, the work of van Prinsterer (1801-1876) and Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) in the Netherlands had brought to birth the Anti-Revolutionary Party, now the Protestant wing of the Christian Democratic Appeal. Whilst Nonconformists in this country were passionately fighting the battle over education, Kuyper, himself resisting attempts to secularize schools, joined with Roman Catholics in successfully repelling the attack. He attempted to relate classical Calvinism to the political state of his day, and evolved the theory of 'Sphere sovereignty', which is still the theological basis for current political activity for many Protestants in the Netherlands today. L. Newbigin notes that there is 'an area here that has been worked over by Dutch theologians, but little noticed (as far as I know) by Anglo-Saxon theology'. With some reservations he regards it as 'an important line of thinking that avoids post-Enlightenment ideas of the total autonomy of those spheres, and the medieval idea that all these spheres should be under the authority of the Church'.<sup>60</sup> The political party founded by Kuyper celebrated its centenary in 1979. At the celebrations one speaker said that the history of the party had been 'a process of almost uninterrupted reflection . . . on the problem of how to relate the Bible to politics'.<sup>61</sup> Would God that it had been so among Nonconformists in our own country.

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