

The Organ of Theopathy: John Ludlow & the Emergence of British Christian Socialism, 1848-54

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ABSTRACT

Christian Socialism in the United Kingdom did not spring out of nowhere, but was deeply enmeshed within not only 19th-century European socialism and the British labor movement, but also the history of radicalism in the English church and within English Christianity more generally. Indeed, for many centuries radical political and social movements—as well as thought—in Britain were inextricably linked with religious underpinnings. In the early 19th-century, however, Robert Owen became the spokesman for British socialism, and his arguments for the necessity of co-operation were accompanied by a harsh indictment of the intolerance and blindness of religious beliefs (most starkly expressed in his 1817 “Denunciation of All Religions”). By the 1830s, Owenite socialism was losing its impetus in the United Kingdom, and into this void stepped a man with a calling—to re- evoke the true spirits of Christianity as well the true meaning of Socialism, by combining the two. This man was John Ludlow (1821-1912?). This short paper is an analysis and reflection on Ludlow’s life and work in the context of the first wave of Christian socialism in the United Kingdom, from 1848-1854.

Socialism, the latest born of the forces now at work in modern society, and Christianity, the eldest born of those forces, are in their nature not hostile, but akin to each other; or rather, the one is but the development, the outgrowth, the manifestation of the other.

– John Ludlow

Despite appearances, British Christian Socialism did not spring out of nowhere, fully armed, like Athena from the head of Zeus, but was in fact deeply enmeshed within not only 19th-century European socialism and the British labor movement, but also the history of radicalism in the English church and within English Christianity more generally—from the holy triumvirate of 14th-century peasant revolt, John Ball, Jack Straw, and Wat Tyler, through Thomas More’s communistic *Utopia* in 1516, to the Diggers of Winstanley and Everard, who in 1649 came into conflict with an unsympathetic Lord Protector. Indeed, one cannot begin to understand this movement without some knowledge of these particular incidents along with the difficult period following the Industrial Revolution in Europe, the so-called “Iron Age” which caused such upheavals in all aspects of life and precipitated a wave of social criticism on numerous fronts, even or especially the poetic, where William Blake railed:

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,
The mind-forg’d Manacles I hear.

While it is undeniable that radical political and social thought in Britain was inextricably linked with its religious roots, this connection was one fraught with tension. In the early 19th-century, Robert Owen became the spokesman for British socialism, and his arguments for the necessity of co-operation were accompanied by a harsh indictment of the intolerance and blindness of religious beliefs (most starkly expressed in his 1817 “Denunciation of All Religions”). Thus, though initiated by an attempt to “purify” the Christian spirit, British socialism in the early Victorian period became largely atheistic, unlike some continental visions (such as Saint-

Simonism) but akin to the various forms of Marxism that would overwhelm the left at the end of the 19th century and into the 20th. Owenite socialism, however, was, by the 1830s, losing its impetus, and into this situation stepped a man with a calling: to re- evoke the true spirits of Christianity as well the true meaning of socialism, by somehow combining the two. This man was John Ludlow.

Early Life & Influences

John Malcolm Ludlow was born in 1821—in the same year as Baudelaire and Dostoevsky, and three years after Karl Marx—in India, where his father, a British colonel, was stationed. His early years were spent in Paris, where he lived with his mother and sisters following his father’s death, and it was in the French capital that he received his education at the Collège Bourbon, an elite school in the period of the Second Republic. Though he moved to London as a young man, to study for the Bar, Ludlow kept in close contact with France throughout his life, and the shaping of his mind, especially in terms of his radical political views, was steeped in this Parisian connection.

One man with whom Ludlow maintained contact was Alexandre Vinet, an evangelist Protestant who, it is said, was the first to use the term *socialisme* in its modern sense. Ludlow felt challenged and invigorated by the work of Vinet and Louis Meyer, a Lutheran pastor who founded the Society of Friends of the Poor. In London, Ludlow determined to do something for the poor, whom, in his day, were mired in the miasma of rampant industrialization so well documented in Friedrich Engels’s *Condition of the Working-Class in England*, a work published in 1844, when Ludlow was twenty-three. In this bitter exposé, Engels notes “the deep wrath of the whole working-class, from Glasgow to London, against the rich, by whom they are systematically plundered and mercilessly left to their fate.”¹ But how was Ludlow to remedy these ills, while promoting Christian brotherhood as a channel for the wrath of the poor? He saw, like Engels, the overwhelming brutality of the effects of urban poverty under capitalist industrialism, and recognized that personal charity, whether framed in terms of Christianity or aristocratic virtue,

was not enough to stem the tide of squalor and misery. He concluded that, in fact, with charity “[n]o serious effort [i]s made to help a person out of his or her misery, but only to help him or her *in it*.”² That is, charity and good feelings only perpetuate the dependence and servility of the receivers, without touching on the deeper levels of the problem; i.e., without transforming the entire system in which the poor were enslaved.

The Founding of British Christian Socialism

With these ideas spinning in his head, upon coming to the English capital, Ludlow lost no time in contacting the popular if slightly unorthodox chaplain of Lincoln’s Inn (where Ludlow was studying for the Bar): Frederick Denison Maurice. Their meeting, though at first inconclusive, would prove to be a seminal event in the history of Christian Socialism in Britain. Eventually, Ludlow was to persuade Maurice to embrace “socialism” as the fulfillment of the true Christian message—embodied in relief for the poor and solidarity with the workers.

Frederick Maurice was a charismatic figure, generally adored by those with whom he had any contact. His own religion was based in the Christian spirit of humility, which was infused in his life and blood. Charles Raven says that it was this “complete drenching of his whole being in Christianity” that forced him to apply religion socially.³ Maurice’s theology was largely Johannine, influenced by the *Logos*-theology of the Greek fathers; he stressed in particular the spiritual and moral over the intellectual aspects of the human-divine relationship. Such a stance enabled Maurice to espouse the “progressive” and “educative” nature of historical revelation, which, through the guiding light of fellowship, brings people closer and closer to God. Ever fearful of partisanship and schism, Maurice embraced the principle of Unity, calling for such in terms of both nation and church. Ludlow’s verve and crusading spirit roused Maurice to ever-greater heights of eloquence, but he never abandoned these principles, often to the dismay of the more direct and combative Ludlow. Like John Wesley’s Methodists, he aspired to be “the friend of all and enemy of none.”

The year 1848 proved crucial for Ludlow and Maurice, as it was, indeed, for Europe as a whole: revolutions broke out all across the continent, and a short tract was published by two young Germans living in England called *The Communist Manifesto*. Ludlow, however, was more influenced by the political rumblings in France than in the printed exhortations of Marx and Engels. He hurried to Paris and imbibed the ideas of association and worker co-operation that filled the air. It was at this point that Ludlow became convinced that it was his calling to “Christianize Socialism”—out of, if nothing else, the realization that, if Christianity were not to meet the challenges of the day, it would soon be swallowed up by socialism, which, he proclaimed, “appealed to the higher... instincts of the working-class.”⁴

It was on April 10 of that year, 1848 that Christian Socialism was officially born as a movement in Britain. Maurice introduced Ludlow to Charles Kingsley, a young and energetic Anglican minister (and soon to be popular novelist), and the three produced a leaflet addressed to the “Workmen of England,” which they distributed among the crowds returning from the dispersed Chartist protest at Kensington Common on

that day. The Chartist labor movement, which developed in response to the Reform Bill of 1832 that restricted the franchise, and the repealing of Elizabeth’s Poor Laws in 1834 (which eliminated all outdoor relief), demanded in their *People’s Charter* universal suffrage, annual parliaments, voting by ballot, equal electoral districts, and the elimination of property qualifications for voters. The established Church of England turned a deaf ear to Chartism, and the Chartists in turn, following Owen, cut themselves off from Christianity and the Church. April 10 was a dark day for Chartism: at Kensington Common they were rudely dispersed by the police, signaling, for at least one continental socialist (Engels) the end of the early British labor movement.

But others saw light amid the gloom. It was this split, between the Chartists and the Church, that Ludlow, Morris and Kingsley sought to heal. Though their political sympathies may not have been identical (Maurice and Kingsley were more traditional Tory critics, whereas Ludlow was a French socialist), they proclaimed their collective solidarity with the workers. Unfortunately, despite their laudable intentions, their first edict was mired in a rather patronizing and somewhat naïve call to temperance on the part of the agitators: “[T]here will be,” it states, “no true freedom without virtue, no true science without religion, no true industry without the fear of God, and love to your fellow-citizens.”⁵ In time, Ludlow especially came to see that such lofty, and very *bourgeois* intentions would not suffice, and that the Christian Socialist movement must make direct contact with the labor movement, the remnants of the weakened Chartists in particular, if it were to progress.

To this end, the three began a weekly paper entitled *Politics for the People*, a short-lived project (lasting only 17 issues) that nonetheless set forth the basic principles of Christian Socialism. Most significant for the Christian Socialists, and perhaps the most important aspect of their legacy, is their expanded conception of politics, which, they argue, cannot be restricted to the narrow world of political emancipation and economic self-determination, but must reflect upon all levels of existence, particularly, as can be seen in the extract from an article on the National Gallery, the aesthetic (see Appendix A). Ludlow soon, however, split from his colleagues in his refusal to be, as he put it—“carried away by Platonistic dreams about an Order, and a Kingdom, and a Beauty, self-realized in their own eternity.”⁶ Such, he wrote to Maurice, is neither true Christianity nor true Socialism.

Ludlow’s Vision: Politics and Christianity

Ludlow, of course, had the benefit of a French education and an upbringing in a society at the time much more in tune with ideas of democracy, freedom and equality; principles engrained in the French psyche with a hammer (or, one could say, more cynically, with a guillotine) from 1789. His socialism, and thus his Christian Socialism, did not rely nearly as much upon the Tory critics such as Edmund Burke, Thomas Carlyle and later, John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold. The peculiarity of British socialism is due in large part to the influence of these men, who criticized the industrial system and its effects, not from the side of equality and rights but rather from the side of stability, tradition, and obligation. Besides Ball, Straw, Tyler, the Diggers and Robert Owen, British socialism and the Christian Socialism of Maurice and Kingsley relied

very much upon these “conservative” figures, as well as the writings of two Romantic poets—Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Southey, though influenced by Owen, hated the anti-aesthetic soulessness of capitalist industrialism above all, and proclaimed that Owen’s failure was due to his lacking “the organ of theopathy.”⁷ Coleridge, friend of Wordsworth and Southey, extended this theme, deepening it through a study of German philosophy; it was he who persuaded John Stuart Mill to turn away from strict Benthamite utilitarianism, and who prepared the way for Carlyle and his followers. These men were not Jacobite radicals like Shelley or Byron (who mercilessly blasts Southey as a reactionary turncoat in *Don Juan* and *Visions of Judgement*), but rather Tory philanthropists who stressed order, morality, beauty, temperance, and, to a varying degree, religion in social reform. Raven says that Christian Socialists in Britain “owed their inspiration to Carlyle and their opportunity to the Chartists.”⁸

Ludlow, however, could not accept the aristocratic elements inherent in such a stance, however critical of the existing state of things. Though he did emphasize duties over rights (a classical Tory preference), he was not ready to become a Carlylean hero-worshipper or a Ruskinian aesthete. Whereas Maurice cautioned against democracy as setting the Will of the People in place of the Will of God, Ludlow saw in monarchy a usurpation of the Will of God into the Will of One Man. Democracy, full democracy, was imperative as “the interior self-control of individuals” over their lower nature, as well as for self-government, the “giant self-control of a nation.”⁹ Furthermore, he continues, “the truest democracy appears to me to be—Socialism.”¹⁰ Trade and industry had become tyrannical because they had lost touch with God and the love of humanity; religion had fallen from glory through forgetting its true mission—to save, not *itself*, but *the world*. Thus, humankind was faced with a double task: political and economic emancipation on the one hand, and individual reform and spiritual liberty on the other. These must, Ludlow insisted, be carried on simultaneously.

Here Ludlow evokes a young Marx, for whom communism meant *spiritual* and *moral* as well as political and economic liberation. Like Maurice, whose theology Ludlow imbibed (if not his politics or views on the means of reform) it was *fellowship* that would root and guide all revolution: “When [the sense of fellowship] is once rekindled, it will be found that its sphere is all-embracing.”¹¹ This rekindling he saw coming in a “great religious awakening” among the workers, whose disdain for priest- or preacher-following was a clear sign of their readiness for true Christianity.

In some ways, the Christian Socialists reacted to the Oxford Movement (which Ludlow despised, associating it with his own experience of French Catholicism), writing a new set of “tracts for the times” that purported to be much more in touch with the needs of the age in the light of revealed truth. But it was only with the inclusion in the Christian Socialist weekly meetings of a journeyman tailor and Owenite Chartist, Walter Cooper, that the movement began to establish a real connection with the people, and a turn away from middle-class niceties. At the Cranbourne Coffee tavern, their new “neutral” meeting place, Cooper invited many of his Chartist brethren to listen to the eloquence of Maurice, orator and spiritual father of Christian Socialism. Working with Cooper further radicalized Ludlow, who after a trip to Paris in 1849 during which he studied workers’ co-operatives being set up

there, established with the Chartist leader the Society for the Promotion of Workingmen’s Associations in order to provide financial, legal, and technical assistance to labor associations. Though slowed by Maurice’s wary hand, Ludlow organized a Central Board with which to oversee the workings of the Society. Christian Socialism seemed to have healed the split perpetuated by Owen and the Church. No longer was the choice to be either/or between Revelation and Revolution—for Ludlow it could, indeed must be, both/and.

Decline of British Christian Socialism

The innate conservatism of Maurice proved, however, to be fatal to Ludlow’s dreams. Repeating the strange reluctance of Erasmus, the Dutch humanist who, when given an opportunity to mediate between Rome and the Reformers in the early years of the Reformation inexplicably passed up on a golden opportunity, Maurice, in similar fashion, declined to attend a meeting called by the ASE, a major trade union, who offered a full reconciliation of Chartism and Christian Socialism via a pledge of joint action against the employers in the name of “the realization of associated labour.”¹² Maurice’s reluctance was to the Chartists a firm rebuff, and an admission that Christian Socialism, for all Ludlow’s claims, could not be reconciled with class struggle and the realities of English industrial life. Though Ludlow tried to pick up the pieces, it was too little too late, and the movement fizzled. The last meeting of the Society took place in January of 1855.

For a time, a bitter Ludlow blamed Maurice, only later coming to see that the man whom he once called “the Master”—the Maurice he had devoted himself to—“was a Maurice of my own imagination.”¹³ Maurice, who wanted to make Anglicanism into a “rational faith,” could never fully shake his Toryism—insisting that the Kingdom of God was *already in existence* on earth, and need only to be called forth by a return to righteousness on the part of the people.¹⁴

Yet the blame cannot be placed entirely upon the head of Maurice, the Father of the movement; some must also devolve upon its Son and would-be-Redeemer, John Ludlow. Though he despised biblical rigorism, Ludlow was too much of a Puritan iconoclast to accept the aesthetic and idealist calls of the Tories and later socialists like William Morris. He could not fully accept the (Tory-inspired) “guild socialism” that was to become the most frequent face of the British labor movement in its later phases. This form of socialism, which resembles anarcho-syndicalism more than statist Marxism, rejects state ownership as central control in favor of worker control, functional democracy, and decentralization. In England, influenced no doubt by the Romantics, Tractarians, pre-Raphaelites, and the neo-Gothicism of John Ruskin, guild socialism was tinted with a mediaevalist ethos—a call to reclaim a lost Golden Age in the face of Industrial squalor. Ludlow could not abide Ruskin (who was a colleague of his at Maurice’s Workingmen’s College), he loathed the Oxford Movement leaders, and he dismissed Dante Gabriel Rossetti (also a colleague at the College) and his PRB brethren as being hopelessly “morbid”—including fellow Socialist agitator and PRB affiliate William Morris, with his “peculiar” (as Ludlow called it) brand of socialism.

Peter Jones claims that guild socialism had much to offer the Christian Socialists that collectivism did not: a decentralized system which would preserve individual choices and

freedoms; a guard against the secular excess of centralized administration, and an opportunity for more direct worker participation in government and the economy. "In its pluralism, Guild Socialism offered protection for the churches in a secular world and seemed to vindicate the decentralized society of the medieval ideal, naturally attractive to the Anglican [particularly post-Tractarian] religious mind."¹⁵ Eventually, guild socialism was itself swallowed up by the "scientific" variety of Marxist collectivism, to the despair of some 20th-century Marxian revisionists.

Ludlow avoided such a course, and this may have been his failing. In rejecting Toryism, Ludlow escaped the idealistic and aristocratic elements of Maurice and Kingsley's brand of socialism, but he also cut himself off from the moral and aesthetic emphasis that filtered from Tory critics into guild socialism. Steeped in French socialism, which, especially in the works of Fourier and Saint-Simon, spoke a language of enforced and rigorously systematized collectivism (e.g., Fourier's famous *phalanxes* so derided by one Tory critic as "parallelograms of paupers"), Ludlow may be an equal target to Marx and Engels in neo-anarchist Murray Bookchin's remark that the "attempt to find a haven in fixed dogma and an organizational hierarchy as substitutes for creative thought and praxis is bitter evidence of how little many revolutionaries are capable of 'revolutionizing themselves and things', much less of revolutionizing society as a whole."¹⁶ Like Marx and Engels, Ludlow was a committed centralist, as his overseeing "Central Board" demonstrates—a stance much feared by the British, for whom the memory of the French Reign of Terror was ever-present (a fear evoked throughout the 19th-century, from Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* to Hillaire Belloc's *The Servile State*.) Ironically, his rejection of the paternalism of the Tories in favor of French collectivism led to a different sort of paternalism all-too-familiar to 20th-century Marxism: that of a vanguard (Christian) elite who were to lead the masses out of their darkness to Atonement.

In another sense, Ludlow was too much of an evangelical to be able to pull off his syncretistic dream: even his principle trope of "co-operation" was only useful insofar as it promoted the "Christianization" of society. His Puritan ideals could accept neither the anarchic idealism of Morris nor the Tory gradualism of Maurice. Any deviation from the confession of faith in his Society was to him tantamount to apostasy—a stance that no doubt alienated those of his Chartist colleagues less religiously inclined. As heir to both the French and Puritan Revolutions, two radical movements not always the most democratic, Ludlow may have been fated to believe that only an imposed faith and a strong overall control could produce a Christian Socialist society. He predated Lenin in his insistence upon a vanguard that must direct, govern, and train the people in their own interests. But whereas for Lenin such uncompromising rigor was an advantage in the chaos of late-Tsarist Russia, the relatively pacific condition of England in the 1850s, combined with characteristic British wariness to revolution, ultimately rendered Ludlow's approach self-defeating.

Conclusions

John Malcolm Ludlow was the lynchpin of the Christian Socialist movement in Britain, as its creator and developer. "If it be given to us," he proclaimed in the first edition of the

Christian Socialist, "to vindicate for Christianity its true authority over the realms of industry and trade, [and] for Socialism its true character as the great Christian revolution of the nineteenth century... then indeed we shall have achieved our task."¹⁷ Unfortunately, for various reasons, some of which I have tried to elucidate above, Christian Socialism in Britain effectively died in 1855 and remained moribund until a revival in 1877 in which Ludlow was to play a symbolic if secondary role as *éminence grise*.

Looking back in later life, Ludlow laments:

It would have been a great achievement if Christian Socialism could always have been, as it was at first and was meant to be, something above and beyond the worker's aspirations, a spiritual ideal and vision only partially and imperfectly embodied in the worker's movement... But partly owing to those [conservative, cautious] aspects of it in 1848-54... it is often supposed to be something—not better and more than the Socialism of the workers, but something different, something less.¹⁸

Indeed, Ludlow could not abide a Christian Socialism in which the "Christian" part did not dominate (after all, Christianity was for him the "elder brother," or even the "father" of socialism, not its equal partner), and his perhaps naïve and uncompromising views on the essential compatibility of the two, combined with the opposite feeling—of reluctance and caution—on the part of Maurice, led to the demise of the first phase of the Christian Socialist experiment. One could say that Ludlow, in the end, was not in tune with the spirit of either the Church of England or the English labor movement of his day. Despite his failings, however, John Ludlow remained throughout his long life (he lived to be 91) an influential voice on the British left, and a figurehead of the first wave of Christian Socialism in Britain. He will no doubt be long remembered by those who do not see the Christian spirit as antithetical to human emancipation.

Appendix A: Extracts from *Politics for the People* #1 (May 6, 1848)

Prospectus

Politics have been separated from household ties and affections – from art and science, and literature. While they belong to parties, they have no connexion with what is human and universal; when they become POLITICS FOR THE PEOPLE, they are found to take in a very large field: whatever concerns man as a social being must be included in them.

Politics have been separated from Christianity... So long as politics are regarded as the conflicts between Whig, and Tory, and Radical; so long as Christianity is regarded as a means of securing selfish rewards, they will never be united.

But POLITICS FOR THE PEOPLE cannot be separated from Religion... The world is governed by God; this is the rich man's warning; this is the poor man's comfort; this is the real hope in the consideration of all questions, let them be as hard of solution as they may; this is the pledge that Liberty, Frater-

nity, Unity, under some conditions or other, are intended for every people under heaven.

Article #1 – The National Gallery

[P]icture-galleries should be the workman's paradise and garden of pleasure, to which he goes to refresh his eyes and heart with beautiful shapes and sweet colouring, when they are wearied with dull bricks and mortar... For believe me; many a sight, and sound, and scent, even, of which we have never *thought* at all, sinks into us, and helps to shape our characters... *Never lose an opportunity of seeing anything beautiful.* Beauty is God's hand-writing – a way-side sacrament...

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Notes

1. Engels, *Condition*, 55.
2. Raven, *Christian Socialism*, 82.
3. Raven, *Christian Socialism*, 85.
4. Masterman, *John Malcolm Ludlow*, 8.
5. Cort, *Christian Socialism*, 142.
6. Cort, *Christian Socialism*, 143.
7. Raven, *Christian Socialism*, 48-49.
8. Raven, *Christian Socialism*, 54.
9. Binyin, *The Christian Socialist Movement*, 80.
10. Raven, *Christian Socialism*, 62.
11. Ludlow and Jones, *Progress of the Working-Class*, 277.
12. Cort, *Christian Socialism*, 149.
13. Christensen 364.
14. Jones, *The Christian Socialist Revival*, 11.
15. Jones, *The Christian Socialist Revival*, 290.
16. Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, 175.
17. Raven, *Christian Socialism*, 156.
18. Quoted in Binyin, *The Christian Socialist Movement*, 81.

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