

Tony Benn on Revolutionary Christianity

On Christmas Day, we republish Tony Benn's classic lecture on the revolutionary social imperative of Christian teachings.



Born into a family steeped in the tradition of Christian non-conformism, Tony Benn would later go on to become Britain's best known socialist. Benn's mother, Margaret Wedgwood Benn was a theologian and founder member of the League of the Church Militant, the predecessor organisation to the Movement for the Ordination of Women. An inspiring force in Benn's life, Margaret would teach her young son that the story of the Bible was based on the struggle between "the Kings who had power, and the prophets who preached righteousness."

Later in his life, Benn would assert that he was a "Christian agnostic," unsure of the existence of God, but someone who believed in "Jesus the prophet, not Christ the King," the historical Jesus — "the carpenter of Nazareth" — who preached social justice and egalitarianism.

This is the main text of a lecture delivered in November 1980 at Mansfield College Chapel, Oxford in which Benn looks into the revolutionary history behind Christ's message and its relationship to socialist thought.

— Max Shanly

The Social Imperative

When Jesus was asked by one of the scribes “What commandment is the first of all?” St Mark’s Gospel (chapter twelve, verse twenty-nine) records his answer thus: The first is Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength. And the second is this. Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other Commandment greater than these.

Any serving student of the teachings of the historical Jesus — and I lay claim to be such a student and no more — must take that passage as his starting point in the search for their revolutionary consequences.

Few would question the use of the word “revolutionary” to describe the effect upon an individual of his or her conversion to the Christian faith with its sense of personal re-birth and the comforting certainty of eternal life.

Historically, many churches appear to have been, and to remain, more concerned with the task of preaching personal salvation than with the social imperatives spelled out in Jesus’s reply.

Generations of churchmen have formulated creeds and liturgies, discussed the mystical aspects of theology and have worked within ecclesiastical hierarchies to interpret the word of God for the faithful, supported by various disciplines designed to secure their compliance.

It has also been true that Ecclesiastical and Temporal power have often been fused into a combined establishment to secure the submission of the people to the authoritarian demands of church and state.

In such situations the social imperatives relating to our obligations to practice neighbourly love were shrunk into a vague and generalised injunction directed to the rich and powerful to express their love by being good and kind; and to the poor to return that love by being patient and submissive.

Both rich and poor, powerful and weak, were then reassured by the church that in the world to come each would have their just reward and all suffering and injustice would be swept away for all eternity.

Neighbourly Love

Not surprisingly, this interpretation of the teachings of Jesus did not commend itself to the poor and the disinherited who saw through this argument and rejected the role allocated to them in this world — of accepting injustice. Thus, outside the established churches, and in parallel with them, the practical commandment to practice true neighbourly love based upon an acceptance of our common humanity acquired an impetus of its own.

This radical interpretation of the teachings of Jesus spread wherever the Bible was available for study — and no doubt explains why the authorities were so anxious to keep it out of the hands of the laity. In this way the message reached and influenced a far wider audience — including those for whom social action was much more relevant and meaningful than the call to personal salvation.

H. G. Wells in his history of the world — himself an atheist — wrote this about the revolutionary nature of Jesus’s teachings:

In view of what he plainly said, is it any wonder that all who were rich and prosperous felt a horror of strange things, a swimming of their world at his teaching? He was dragging out all the little private reservations they had made from social service into the light of a universal religious life. He was like some terrible moral huntsman digging mankind out of the snug burrows in which they had lived hitherto. In the white blaze of this kingdom of his there was to be no property, no privilege, no pride and precedence; no motive indeed and no reward but love.

Is it any wonder that men were dazzled and blinded and cried out against him? Even his disciples cried out when he would not spare them the light. Is it any wonder that the priests realised that between this man and themselves there was no choice but that he or priest-craft should perish? Is it any wonder that the Roman soldiers, confronted and amazed by something soaring over their comprehension and threatening all their disciplines, should take refuge in wild laughter and crown him with thorns and robe him in purple and make a mock Caesar out of him? For to take him seriously was to enter upon a strange and alarming life, to abandon habits, to control instincts and impulses, to essay an incredible happiness.

This radical interpretation of the message of brotherhood and its clear anti-establishment agitation has surfaced time and again throughout our history. Wycliffe and the Lollards were engaged in it. So was the Reverend John Ball whose support for the Peasants Revolt cost him his life in 1381.

The belief in the “priesthood of all believers” which lies at the root of Congregationalism; or the Quakers “inner light” were all — and remain — profoundly revolutionary in their impact upon the hierarchies of the church itself. Nor was this revolutionary agitation confined to the church.

The “divine right of kings” asserted by King Charles I as a defence of his powers was overthrown along with the king himself and in the ensuing revolution a furious debate began about the legitimacy of the organs of both church and state power.

The Levellers asserted that “the relation of master and servant has no ground in the New Testament: in Christ there is neither bond nor free.” Expressing their political philosophy in Christian terms:

The relation of Master and Servant has no ground in the New Testament; in Christ there is neither bond nor free. Ranks such as those of the peerage and gentry are “ethnical and heathenish distinctions.” There is no ground in nature or Scripture why one man should have £1000 per annum, another not £1. The common people have been kept under blindness and ignorance, and have remained servants and slaves to the nobility and gentry. But God has now opened their eyes and discovered unto them their Christian liberty.

Gerrard Winstanley, the True Leveller or Digger, went further and defined the Creator not as God but as “Reason” and on that basis rejected the historical justification for the doctrine that “one branch of mankind should rule over another”:

In the beginning of Time, the great Creator, Reason, made the Earth to be a Common Treasury, to preserve Beasts, Birds, Fishes and Man, the lord that was to govern this Creation; for Man had Domination given to him, over the Beasts, Birds and Fishes, but not one word was spoken in the beginning, that one branch of mankind should rule

over another.

And the reason is this, every single man, male and female, is a perfect creature of himself; and the same Spirit that made the Globe dwells in man to govern the Globe; so that the flesh of man being subject to Reason, his Maker, hath him to be his Teacher and Ruler within himself, therefore needs not run abroad after any Teacher and Ruler without him, for he needs not that any man should teach him, for the same Anoynting that ruled in the Son of Man, teacheth him all things.

But since humane flesh (that king of Beasts) began to delight himself in the objects of the Creation, more than in the Spirit Reason and Righteousness . . . Covetousness, did set up one man to teach and rule over another, and thereby the Spirit was killed, and man was brought into bondage and became a greater Slave to such of his own kind, than the Beasts of the field were to him.

Christianity and Democracy

In this way a bridge was constructed that carried the message of brotherhood and sisterhood from Christianity to secular humanism, a bridge that carried the ethics across but left the creeds behind. Across this bridge there is now a growing two-way traffic of people and ideas. Christians involved in political action cross it one way. Humanists can cross it to go back to the teachings of Jesus and study them.

In a theological sense there is a great divide between the Christians on one side and the humanists on the other. But it is impossible to escape the conclusion that over that bridge revolutionary ideas deriving from the Bible and the carpenter of Nazareth have spread to influence hundreds of millions of people for whom the need for neighbourly love within a common humanity is immediately apparent in a way that the mysticism, liturgies, and arid screeds may appear to be less relevant.

It has also been along this route that many Christian values have travelled until they became embedded in our society as “sacred” human rights that ought to be upheld in our political life. Thus, did the American colonists proclaim it in their Declaration of Independence in 1776:

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed. There are many other examples to cite. Environmentalists and ecologists who assert that we are all stewards of the earth, on behalf of our brothers and sisters and our children and grandchildren, for whose right to live free from pollution we are morally responsible and politically accountable. They are revolutionaries too in their hostility to exploitation of the planet and its people by feudalism, capitalism, or any temporal authority.

The deeply held conviction that conscience is above the law — because conscience is God-given and laws are made by men and women, is also highly revolutionary, yet the struggles to assert it, and those who died to secure it are the true founders of our civil liberties — including the right to worship in our own way and to hold dissenting political views.

Perhaps the greatest inheritance that this country has derived from the teachings of Jesus has been the heritage of democracy itself— with all the political ideas that are associated with it.

If we are our “brother’s and our sister’s keeper” then an “injury to one is an injury to all” and from that derive most of our contemporary ideas about solidarity and the moral responsibilities of trade unions.

The right of each man or woman to vote in elections also stems from their right to be treated as fully human and equal in the sight of God. So too does the pressure for social justice and greater equality which the ballot box allows the electors to exercise through their vote. So too does the internationalism which is a part and parcel of socialism that has never accepted any divine authority for nationalism at the expense of others. All this was beautifully summed up in the words of the Great Charter issued by the Chartists in 1842:

The great Political Truths which have been agitated during the last half-century, have at length aroused the degraded and insulted White Slaves of England, to a sense of their duty to themselves, their children and their country. Tens of thousands have flung down their implements of labour. Your task masters tremble at your energy, and expecting masses eagerly watch this great crisis of our cause. Labour must no longer be the common prey of masters and rulers. Intelligence has beamed upon the mind of the bondsman, and he has been convinced that all wealth, comfort and produce, everything valuable, useful, and elegant have sprung from the palm of his hand; he feels that his cottage is empty, his back thinly clad, his children breadless, himself hopeless, his mind harassed, and his body punished, that undue riches, luxury and gorgeous plenty might be heaped in the palaces of the taskmasters, and flooded into the granaries of the oppressor. Nature, God, and Reason have condemned this inequality, and in the thunder of a people’s voice it must perish for ever.

These are some of the reasons why so many democratic socialists in this country look back to the teachings of Jesus as a major and continuing source of political inspiration over centuries of thought and effort. For many Christians such openly secular interpretations of the teachings of Jesus may seem to separate those who hold them completely from the creeds of Christian faith. It is argued that without the acceptance of a personal God whose fatherhood is ever present the brotherhood and sisterhood of men and women loses its meaning and the teachings of Christ degenerate into mere ethics.

In order to consider that argument it is necessary to look back into history and consider how, in the past, Christianity came to terms with the then equally threatening challenge of the natural sciences.

Christianity, Science and Socialism

In past centuries the faith of a Christian would have been defined in such a way as to require him or her to deny the validity of all scientific enquiry into the nature of the universe or the origins of man if they conflicted with the Book of Genesis. Galileo fell foul of the church.

Darwin was denounced for his *Origins of Species* and so were all those who

challenged the most literal interpretation of the words of the Old Testament. Indeed, Darwin was forced to admit in 1870: “My theology is a simple muddle. I cannot look upon the universe as the result of blind chance. Yet I can see no evidence of beneficent design, or indeed of design of any kind in the details.”

Darwin became an agnostic, was buried in Westminster Abbey, and today few Christians would find difficulty in reconciling his theories of evolution with their Christian faith.

Scientists who study the working of nature are now accepted as they are without being seen as heretics. Today Christian fundamentalism remains as a respected position to occupy, and since fundamentalists no longer have the political power to persecute science, science has no interest in discrediting fundamentalism. They co-exist in peace. That struggle is over. It was a struggle against the church and not against the teachings of Jesus.

But how should Christians respond to the challenge of completely secular socialism and Marxism which for over a century have consciously disconnected their view of brotherhood and sisterhood from the church and its creeds and mysteries? Such socialists believe that the continuing denial of our common humanity does not derive solely, or even primarily, from the sinful conduct of individuals but is institutionalised in the structures of economic, industrial, and political power which Christian churches may support, sustain, and even bless, while turning a blind eye to the injustices that continue unchecked.

Socialists argue that neighbourly love must be sought in this world and not postponed until the next one. They do not believe that priestly injunctions restricted to matters of personal conduct “Be good” or “Be kind” are any substitute whatsoever for the fundamental reforms that require collective political action.

The socialist interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan would cast many churches and churchmen in the role of the priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side; and would identify the socialist position with that of the Good Samaritan who was less concerned with the personal salvation of the traveller who was stripped and beaten than with his immediate need for medical treatment, accommodation, and food in this world here and now.

Unless Christians can respond institutionally and politically to that socialist challenge their faith can become an escape from reality and indeed an escape from the challenge posed by Jesus himself. In a world characterised by brutal repression and exploitation under regimes of all kinds, Christian escapism is no more acceptable than it was on the road to Jericho.

Teachings of Jesus, Writings of Marx

How should Christians answer this challenge? It is just not good enough to declare a holy war on socialism and Marxism on the grounds that they are atheistical. That is how, historically, the Catholics treated the Protestants and the Protestants treated the Catholics — burning each other at the stake. Yet that is the approach advocated by many Christian anticommunist crusaders which lies behind the harassment of Marxists in many Western capitalist countries including Britain; and in all countries

living under anticommunist military dictatorships.

But before adopting such a position it is necessary to consider other interpretations of the true meaning of Marxism.

Dr Nathaniel Micklem had this to say in his book *A Religion of Agnostics*: “Though he disguised his moral indignation under cover of scientific terminology, it was in response to the call of a higher and more lasting justice that Karl Marx repudiated the ‘bourgeois’ inequality of his day?”

This view was echoed by Ivan Svitak in his speech at Charles University during the Prague Spring on May 3, 1968:

Marx was not, and is not, and never will be, the inventor and theoretician of totalitarian dictatorship that he appears today, when the original meaning of his work, true humanism — has been given a thoroughly Byzantine and Asian twist. Marx strove for a wider humanism than that of the bourgeois democracies that he knew and for wider civil rights, not for the setting-up of the dictatorship of one class and one political party. What is today thought to be the Marxist theory of the State and the Marxist social science imply an ideological forgery, a false contemporary conception, as wrong as the idea that the orbits of heavenly bodies are circular.

Milan Machovec in his book *A Marxist Looks at Jesus* carried this argument a stage further forward in assessing the Marxist view of Jesus:

You can corrupt the heritage, overlay what is best in it, or push it into the background, but those who seek it out tomorrow will find life and new hope beneath the layers of dirt and the petrified outlines — simply because they are attuned to it. Thus, in Christianity the dogmatised image of Jesus Christ has never been able thoroughly to banish the image of the man, Jesus of Nazareth.

That view of the relationship between the teachings of Jesus and the writings of Marx merits very serious consideration. If that view prevails — as I believe it may — a century from now the writings of Marx may be seen as no more threatening to the teachings of Jesus than the writings of Darwin are now thought to be today.

I am not urging a political concordat between the hierarchies of the Vatican, the Kremlin, and Lambeth Palace — which if they merged, all their historical experience of centralised organisation and bureaucracy could pose — it might be argued — the greatest threat to freedom of conscience the world has ever seen.

But I am saying that as the ecumenical movement gathers momentum — and if it remains a mosaic and does not become a monolith — it should extend the range of its dialogue to embrace socialists and Marxists as well as Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Buddhists, and Muslims. And there is one compelling reason why it must.

The technology of destruction at the disposal of mankind in modern weapons and the rocketry to deliver them must now require us all to open our hearts and minds to the inescapable need for neighbourly love on a global scale and then build the social, political, and economic institutions that can express it, bringing together those who now marshal themselves under different banners of religious and political faith.

A holy war with atom bombs could end the human family for ever. I say all this as a socialist whose political commitment owes much more to the teachings of Jesus — without the mysteries within which they are presented — than to the writings of Marx

whose analysis seems to lack an understanding of the deeper needs of humanity. But untold numbers of people all over the world — and I am one of them — are now claiming the right to study all the sources of insight which they find meaningful, and reach their own personal conclusions about their significance, free from the threat of excommunication for failing to satisfy the tenets of faith laid down by any church or any party. In that sense too the teachings of Jesus can be seen as truly revolutionary and to have spread its influence far beyond the bounds of Christendom.