

## ARTICLE

# In Service of the Lowly Nazarene Carpenter: The English Canadian Labour Press and the Case for Radical Christianity, 1926–1939

**Christo Aivalis**

A theology which teaches that God is Mammon's silent partner would necessarily be suspect in an age of folk upheaval.... Property needs not God to protect it. It is the people who need a divine protector. Jesus announced "Good News"[.] namely, that Heaven is passionately on the side of the people against the despotic tendencies of property; and under that leadership a messianic passion for men is announcing itself. The trouble is the working people at large have not yet come to behold The Carpenter.<sup>1</sup>

SO RAN ONE ARGUMENT OF THE FAR LEFT about the social gospel: one that argued for the end of the "despotic tendencies of property" in the name of "a messianic passion for men." As Richard Allen brilliantly demonstrated in his 1971 study, *The Social Passion*, within Canadian Protestantism there was a burning critique of capitalist social relations – one that figures such as J.S. Woodsworth and A.E. Smith employed to envisage the complete destruction of a capitalist civilization, to be replaced by a cooperative commonwealth.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the source of our opening quotation should give pause. It appeared in a 1930 issue of the *Trades and Labor Congress Journal*, the voice of Canadian craft unionism, often deemed a bastion of the conservative labour movement. And this was by no means an isolated instance of a Christian critique of the social order. Looking at four mainstream labour newspapers – *The Canadian Unionist*, *Trades and Labor Congress Journal*, *Canadian Railway Employees'*

1. J.J. Holmes Jr., "Christianity and Industry," *Trades and Labor Congress Journal*, July 1930, 38.

2. Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada, 1914–1928* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971).

*Monthly*, and *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier* – in this article I argue that radical Christian thought was pervasive throughout many of the widely circulated Canadian labour papers in the 1920s and 1930s. Discovering an efflorescence of radical Christian opinion in four of Canada’s most influential labour papers, reaching as many as 30,000 readers per month<sup>3</sup> – I draw from a corpus of 195 articles<sup>4</sup> from 1926 to 1939 found within the official organs of the All Canadian Congress of Labour (no fewer than 42 articles), the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada (no fewer than 60 articles), the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees (no fewer than 25 articles), which was Canada’s single largest free-standing industrial union, and the widely read bilingual labour paper from Montréal (no fewer than 66 articles).<sup>5</sup> In this article I challenge suggestions made by some historians that by the 1930s links between organized labour and Christianity had withered.<sup>6</sup> Looking at the years from 1926 to 1939 – ones embracing both capitalism’s ostensible late-1920s prosperity and its Depression-era crisis – I find that there was a thriving “Trade-Union Gospel” in the mainstream Canadian labour press. Sometimes, unlike the 1930 call for an anti-despotic Messiah standing against property, this gospel took on a reformist cast, but often its implications were radical, even anti-capitalist. Situated within publications from a movement supposedly suffused with Gompersism, content to demand “More!” for the workers who made consumer capitalism possible,<sup>7</sup> these articulations of the trade-union gospel

3. It is difficult to determine precise circulation figures. The best source is *McKim’s Directory of Canadian Publications* (Montréal: A. McKim Limited, 1926–1939). The *LW/MO* and *TLC Journal* ranged from about 3,500–5,000 issues per week and month respectively, while the *CREM* and *Canadian Unionist* ranged from 13,500–20,000 a month.

4. The corpus of articles drawn upon is large, but its exact size is difficult to determine clearly. When I state that I drew upon no fewer than 195 pieces, I am articulating that while many more pieces may have held religious tones, be they implicit or explicit, there were at least a couple hundred items fitting the larger theme of this article.

5. While *LW/MO* is a bilingual paper located in a province with a francophone majority, it merits inclusion because the paper served a substantial anglophone population in Montréal. And while it was located in a Catholic province, this paper like the others approaches the question of religion in the Protestant social gospel traditions. This is likely due in part to *LW/MO*’s connections to the *AFL-TLC*.

6. See Herbert Gutman, “Protestantism and the American Labor Movement: The Christian Spirit in the Gilded Age,” in Herbert Gutman, ed., *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Knopf, 1976); Clark D. Halker, *For Democracy, Workers, and God: Labor Song-Poems and Labor Protest 1865–1895* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Ken Fones-Wolf, *Trade-Union Gospel, Christianity and Labor in Industrial Philadelphia, 1865–1915* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

7. For an analysis of social thought inspired by Samuel Gompers, see Bruno Ramirez, *When Workers Fight: The Politics of Industrial Relations in the Progressive Era, 1898–1916* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978); Paul Buhle, *Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland, and the Tragedy of American Labor* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999). For an examination of Gompers’ influence on Canada, see Robert Babcock, *Gompers*

are surprising. Nor do they jibe with many accounts of working-class experience that exclude or otherwise dismiss religiosity and spirituality from their accounts of working-class culture.<sup>8</sup>

Conceding the difficulties of taking the labour press to be direct reflections of working-class beliefs, I think it is also unrealistic to believe that interwar labour editors would have given so much prominence to religious arguments and images had they not been convinced that such messages appealed to their readers. The scope of left Christian articles in the labour press suggests, I submit, something interesting about the continuing religiosity of many Canadian workers.<sup>9</sup> Following a path charted by Melissa Turkstra, who looked at an earlier cohort of labour publications, I think Christianity and Christian imagery were key parts of Canadian labour thought in interwar Canada.<sup>10</sup>

These interwar years were ones during which the capitalist order was deeply disturbed, when ruling class common sense and the capitalist historical bloc were exposed to severe strains.<sup>11</sup> Yet many labour intellectuals – men and women who took it upon themselves to educate workers in their present-day economic realities with a view to creating a more cooperative social order – continued to look to Christianity to articulate their sense of anger at an irrational and exploitive system, and to find more equitable and democratic alternatives to it. In charging capitalism for being irrational and malignant, these religious writers were paralleling secular works in the labour press, especially those that developed two themes inherent in much Depression-era working-class economics: underconsumption and overproduction. Underconsumptionists believed the economic crisis was aggravated by the

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*in Canada: A Study in American Continentalism Before the First World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974). For a stimulating recent treatment of transformations in labour's economic thought, see Rosanne Currarino, *The Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy in the Gilded Age* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

8. For sources that diminish the importance of a labour Christianity, or argue that it was more a strategic use of public discourse than sincere conviction, see Craig Heron, "Labourism and the Canadian Working Class," *Labour/Le Travail* 13 (Spring 1984): 45–75; James Naylor *The New Democracy: Challenging the Social Order in Industrial Ontario, 1914–1925* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991). One should also consider the work of E.P. Thompson, who was highly critical of the religious, specifically Methodist, element of the English working class. See his *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: V. Gollancz, 1963).

9. See Michael Gauvreau and Nancy Christie, "'The World of the Common Man Is Filled with Religious Fervour': The Labouring People of Winnipeg and the Persistence of Revivalism, 1914–1925," in G.A. Rawlyk, ed., *Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 337–350. The article illustrates the religious element in the working class, but argues that it differed substantially from not only the middle classes but also Christian leaders in the socialist and labour movements.

10. Melissa Turkstra, "Constructing a Labour Gospel: Labour and Religion in Early 20th-century Ontario," *Labour / Le Travail* 57 (Spring 2006): 93–130.

11. Antonio Gramsci, *An Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916–1935*, David Forgacs, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 427–428.

socioeconomic inequalities that prevented workers from buying what they produced. Overproductionists emphasized over-investment in fixed capital in general, and irrational mechanization in particular, as integral factors to the crisis. Some labour intellectuals sought to combine both themes.<sup>12</sup> Although neither camp was necessarily on the road to revolution – indeed, some might end up in Social Credit or Keynesianism, and many others in positions of “Buy Canadian” protectionism<sup>13</sup> – there was implicitly in both forms of reasoning an understanding that capitalism was a contradictory phenomenon, one that bore little resemblance to the competitive, rational system praised in mainstream textbooks on political economy. And there were many explorations of capitalism in crisis in the mainstream labour press that culminated in visions of total change almost as messianic as that resounding from the *TLC Journal* in 1930:

The economics of industry and finance [announced the *Canadian Unionist* in 1936] is still geared to the old condition of scarcity, of shortage, of penury. Economy still means saving to most people, whereas it properly means management or administration. Plenty upsets all the careful calculations of the pessimists, exorcises all the fears of population-pressure, actually makes possible the abundant life which religious teachers have dared to prophesy....

12. The debates between proponents of these theories are deep and long-running. For just a sample of key works on the matter, see Michael Bleaney, *Underconsumption Theories: A History and Critical Analysis* (New York: International Publishers, 1976); James M. Devine, “Underconsumption, Over-investment and the Origins of the Great Depression,” *Review of Radical Political Economics* 15 (June 1983): 1–27. Rick Kuhn, “Labour Movement Economic Thought in the 1930s: Underconsumptionism and Keynesian Economics,” *Australian Economic History Review* 28 (September 1988): 53–74; Ian McKay, “A Third Kind of Marxism: Colin McKay, Socialist Political Economy and the Great Depression,” *Studies in Political Economy* 55 (Spring 1998): 127–154; Simon Clarke, “The Marxist Theory of Overaccumulation and Crisis,” *Science and Society* 54 (Winter 1990/1991): 442–467; Jonathan Penzner, Harry Magdoff, and Paul M. Sweezy, “Capitalism and the Fallacy of Crude Underconsumptionism,” *Monthly Review* 64 (January 2013): 45–48; Paul Sweezy, *Four Lectures on Marxism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981); Paul Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development* (London: D. Dobson, 1946); J.C.L. Sismondi, *Nouveaux principes d'économie politique; ou, de la richesse dans ses rapports avec la population* (Paris: Delaunay, 1827).

13. “Patronize Canadian-Made Goods,” *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 5 January 1929, 3; Bernard Rose, “‘Empire Shopping Week,’” *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 18 May 1929, 3; Bernard Rose, “Buy Canadian-Made Goods,” *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 19 April 1930, 3; William C. Brewer, “Union Label Improves Conditions,” *The Trades and Labor Congress Journal*, December 1929, 20–22; “Union Label Page,” *The Trades and Labor Congress Journal*, October 1939, 27–28. For some scholarship on the historical importance of labour and working-class consumer activism, see Lawrence B. Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Thomas A. Stapleford, “Defining a ‘Living Wage’ in America: Transformations in Union Wage Theories, 1870–1930,” *Labor History* 49 (February 2008): 1–22; Wendy Wiedenhof, “Consumer Tactics as ‘Weapons’: Black Lists, Union Labels, and the American Federation of Labor,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 6 (June 2006): 261–285; Donica Belisle, “Exploring Postwar Consumption: The Campaign to Unionize Eaton’s in Toronto, 1948–1952,” *Canadian Historical Review* 86 (December 2009): 641–672.

The one great fact which stares humanity in the face is that plenty is here; all that is needed is that the fact of plenty be faced, and the evils which beset the race, the evils of war and of poverty, of competition, of exploitation, of fear and hate, will be abolished forever.<sup>14</sup>

One had to reject the irrationality of capitalism *tout court*: over-expansion, the useless duplication of plants, the pervasive lack of planning were all “universal evils of competitive capitalism.”<sup>15</sup> Frank Wheatley, writing for the *Canadian Railway Employees’ Monthly* agreed, “it is notorious that unemployment is greatest just when wealth is greatest and waiting to be consumed – a state of things arising from the alternate booms and depressions that are essential to the capitalistic method of production.”<sup>16</sup> The Christian radicals who crop up with such frequency in the labour press often presented similar denunciations of capitalism, yet implicitly they went even further. Secular arguments focused on capitalism’s irrationalities might well culminate in partial reforms. Religious critiques focused on capitalism’s inherently anti-Christian and inhumane nature were more difficult to assuage. Moreover, unlike their drier secular counterparts, such messianic statements often had a zeal and artistry to them. They not only denounced the present-day world but also imagined the Kingdom of God that might replace it.

The evidence suggests that many trade unionists were committed to a radical vision of the Carpenter of Nazareth, and rather than rejecting Christianity, which was the stance adopted by a minority in the labour press,<sup>17</sup> they saw in it a way of highlighting the contradictions of capitalism and tracing the outline of a more just, egalitarian, and at least in some cases, post-capitalist future.<sup>18</sup>

14. A.C Campbell, “Facing the Fact of Plenty,” *The Canadian Unionist*, December 1936, 168.

15. Frank Wheatley, “Canada’s Coal Problem,” *The Canadian Unionist*, January 1929, 129–131; Frank Wheatley, “Mining Conditions in Alberta,” *The Canadian Unionist*, February 1930, 113; “Industry Must Support Its Reserves,” *The Canadian Unionist*, June 1931, 9.

16. John Elson, “The Idle Poor: Part II: The Rise of Unemployment,” *The Canadian Railway Employees’ Monthly*, April 1929, 32–33.

17. The *One Big Union Bulletin* would often portray religion as a tool of capitalism. Yet even in the *Bulletin* we find defences of clergy who supported working people, and assertions that Christianity’s historical essence is intertwined with a working-class identity. See Quo Vadis, “Jesus and the OBU,” *OBU Bulletin*, 12 July 1928, 3; John Rowland, “Capital and Labor,” 26 July 1928, 3; J.S Woodsworth, “Recent Expressions of a Number of Clergymen,” 9 February 1928, 2; “Good Will,” 25 December 1930, 4. For the OBU, see David J. Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1978) and Michel Beaulieu, *Labour at the Lakehead: Ethnicity, Socialism, and Politics, 1900–1935* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011).

18. For a work analyzing the Depression with a theoretical approach similar to my own, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997). Ian McKay has argued that the period of leftist religion extends to 1939, and that the interwar period was one in which leftist and labour Christians offered “strikingly post-capitalist” interpretations. *Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada’s Left History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2005), 42–43. See also chapter 4 of McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the Peoples’ Enlightenment in Canada, 1890–1920* (Toronto:

If anything, some of the interwar writers went beyond the earlier social gospel to articulate positions drawing upon a deeper and more systematic critique of the existing social order and all that underpinned it. They were clearly drawn to religious currents, often placed under the rubric “Radical Christianity,” and articulated by groups such as the Student Christian Movement (SCM) and the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order (FCSO) which sought to ground ethical and theological objections to capitalism in a thorough understanding of its objective tendencies. As Richard Allen remarks,

If one accepted the proposition that prophetic religion required a reconstruction of the social order, it was of fundamental importance that one understand the structure of the existing order, where power and interest reside, what forces and movements are currently in play, and the direction of economic and social change. It was not enough to take up good causes in a spirit of goodwill in a generalized hope of belief that the good would triumph.<sup>19</sup>

In *Towards the Christian Revolution*, FCSO thinkers often appealed to a Marxian analysis of capitalist society.<sup>20</sup> The preface called for Christianity’s recasting in a radical light:

As Christians we believe that our historic faith has revolutionary resources. We acknowledge that religion has often functioned as an opiate, and is so functioning in large areas of the world to-day. But we see within religion the same dialectic of reaction and revolution that marks other phases of the social process. We affirm the faith of the prophets and of Jesus as a disturbing, renovating force.<sup>21</sup>

Historian and CCFer Eugene Forsey, not yet a renowned constitutional expert, argued that “capitalism’s beatitudes are not those of the Sermon on the Mount.”<sup>22</sup> There could be, he said –combining Christian and Marxist imagery

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Between the Lines, 2008). For a discussion that has strongly influenced my own, see Richard Allen, “Religion and Political Transformation in English Canada: The 1880s to the 1930s,” in Marguerite Van Die, ed., *From Heaven Down to Earth: A Century of Chancellor’s Lectures at Queen’s Theological College* (Kingston: Queen’s Theological College, 1992), 127–144.

19. Allen, “Religion and Political Transformation in English Canada,” 140–141.

20. On the FCSO, see Travis Kroeker, *Christian Ethics and Political Economy in North America: A Critical Analysis* (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), 45–90; Roger Hutchinson, *The Fellowship for a Christian Social Order: A Social Ethical Analysis of a Christian Socialist Movement* (Toronto: Toronto School of Theology, 1975).

21. R.B.Y. Scott and Gregory Vlastos, “Preface,” in Scott and Vlastos, ed., *Towards the Christian Revolution* (Chicago: Willett, Clark, 1936), ix.

22. Eugene Forsey, “The Economic Problem,” in *Towards the Christian Revolution*, 102–103. For more on Forsey, see *A Life on the Fringe: The Memoirs of Eugene Forsey* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990); Helen Forsey, *Eugene Forsey: Canada’s Maverick Sage* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2012); Frank Milligan, *Eugene A. Forsey* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004); and J.E. Hodgetts, ed., *The Sound of One Voice: Eugene Forsey and his Letters to the Press* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000). Both Forsey and the FCSO’s outreach campaign in the 1930s are discussed in Eileen R. Janzen, *Growing to One World: The Life of J. King Gordon* (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013), 125–159. That Forsey’s views in the 1930s were pro-Marxist is confirmed by the repentant tone of his discussion in his memoirs,



– “no escaping the cross” of social reconstruction: “The devil of social injustice goeth not out but by grappling with the fundamental issues. This generation seeketh after a sign, and there shall be no sign given it but the sign of the prophet Marx. Until Christians learn to understand and apply the lessons of Marxism they cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.”<sup>23</sup> This was much the same proto-revolutionary message broadcast in 1930 by the *TLC Journal*. To transform the current social order in a Christian manner, it was necessary to strike at the citadels of capital’s power.<sup>24</sup> To build a better world, the sincere Christian was obliged to challenge capitalism and bolster the emancipatory, solidaristic, and egalitarian ideals of the labour movement.

FCSO intellectuals – and those in the League for Social Reconstruction, to which many of them belonged<sup>25</sup> along with the SCM, which they also supported<sup>26</sup> – sought to combine Christian ideals, social scientific techniques, and economic planning to solve the problems of a system in crisis.<sup>27</sup> Many sought this synthesis in the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). In the mainstream labour papers, this hoped-for synthesis was more often achieved through the trade union movement. In both cases, the goal was to educate a social group – trade unionists in the one case, middle-class intellectuals and “experts” in the other – to perform its historic function: the construction of the Kingdom of God on earth, an entirely new Christian social order.<sup>28</sup> And

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published after he became a Liberal senator. He urges that they be placed in the context of anti-Fascism. Apart from stump speeches given across the country by FCSO militants such as King and his comrades in the SCM, there are a few direct links between the FCSO and one of these papers: see, for example, “Towards a More Christian Social Order,” *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 24 November 1928, 4; R.B.Y Scott, “The Fellowship of a Christian Social Order – The Chastisement of Our Peace,” *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 5 October 1935, 7.

23. Forsey, “A New Economic Order,” in *Towards the Christian Revolution*, 139.

24. Forsey, “The Economic Problem,” in *Towards the Christian Revolution*, 102.

25. See Sylvie Lacombe, “Le socialisme Coopératif ou la ‘Jérusalem terrestre’ de la League for Social Reconstruction,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 38 (Fall 2004): 101–121; Sean Mills, “When Democratic Socialists Discovered Democracy: The League for Social Reconstruction Confronts the ‘Quebec Problem,’” *Canadian Historical Review* 86 (March 2005): 53–82; Michel Horn, *The League for Social Reconstruction: Intellectual Origins of the Democratic Left in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980); League for Social Reconstruction Research Committee, *Social Planning for Canada* (Toronto: T. Nelson & Sons Limited, 1935).

26. On the SCM, see Margaret Eileen Beattie, *A Brief History of the Student Christian Movement in Canada, 1921–1974* (Erin, ON: The Porcupine’s Quill, 1975); Catherine Gidney, “Poisoning the Student Mind? The Student Christian Movement at the University of Toronto, 1920–1965,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 8 (1997): 147–163.

27. Some, like King Gordon, Graham Spry, and Eugene Forsey, were much impressed by the Soviet model; others were more reticent. See Janzen, *Growing to One World*, 99–102.

28. Gramsci, *An Antonio Gramsci Reader*, 425. For an important assessment of Gramsci, intellectuals, and the working class, see Jerome Karabel, “Revolutionary Contradictions: Antonio Gramsci and the Problem of Intellectuals,” *Politics and Society* 6 (June 1976): 123–172.

in both cases, radical Christianity was associated with a critique of the established church as a disseminator of capitalist assumptions and values. For both groups, to be a Christian meant to be a staunch supporter of an alternative social order.

In the labour press, writers organized their Christian critique of capitalism in three primary ways. The first was the argument that, should He return, Christ would deplore the inequitable status quo. A second approach documented in a more factual and secular fashion the inequities of the age, and placed these empirical findings in a religious framework which held that a vast ethical and rational gap separated businessmen from Christ.<sup>29</sup> A third approach suggested that crusading Christian traditions of activism should be redirected away from their historic paths – of social purity, temperance, and evangelical awakening – and toward movements bent on overthrowing poverty, avarice, and exploitation. This three-part schema establishes the structure of the argument that follows. The core point is this: although the ideological intensity of the respective articles varied from writer to writer, their consistent message, either implicitly or explicitly, was that there exists a fundamental contradiction between capitalism and Christianity.



THE THEME OF CHRIST THE TIME TRAVELLER – imagining Him as a revolutionary tourist, aghast at the deformities of a world caught up in a capitalist crisis – resounded again and again in the mainstream Canadian labour press. Christ was, in effect, made to ventriloquize the sentiments of particular writers who essentially put into His mouth what they themselves believed about capitalism. Were Christ to visit Montréal, working-class polymath Colin McKay had said decades earlier, He would be heartbroken by its sweatshops.<sup>30</sup> This theme of Christ-the-Horrified-Tourist was adopted by many others. I.S. Henri, writing in *LW/MO* at a time when many in Montréal were gravitating to the romance of Mussolini, thought in 1927 that Christ would not only be

29. On the links forged between Christianity and capitalism, see Virginia Gerde, Michael Goldsby, and Jon Shepard, “Moral Cover for Capitalism: The Harmony-of-Interests Doctrine,” *Journal of Management History* 13 (January 2007): 7–20; Ginger Stickney, “The Nineteenth Century Roots of Modern Prosperity Gospel,” in Sean McCloud and William A. Mirola, eds., *Religion and Class in America: Culture, History, and Politics* (Boston: Brill, 2009), 159–174; Kyle Murray, “Christian ‘Renewalism’ and the Production of Global Free Market Hegemony,” *International Politics* 49 (March 2012): 260–276; and Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009). For a left-wing exposé of the capitalist/Christian nexus that many Christians were reading in the 1930s, see R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York: Penguin Books, 1938).

30. Colin McKay, *For a Working-Class Culture in Canada: A Selection of Colin McKay's Writings on Sociology and Political Economy, 1897–1939*, Ian McKay ed. (St. John's, NL: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1996), 1–79.



disgruntled by Fascist Italy but would himself be a likely candidate for Fascist persecution: "if [Jesus] held a meeting of twelve men in Italy to-day, Mussolini would have them all arrested."<sup>31</sup> Henri went on to elaborate how Christ, a man he felt Mussolini would describe as a "philosophic vagabond," would fare: "What chance would an outspoken man like Jesus have in Italy if he refused to accept fascism and tributes as brotherhood? Exactly the same chance as he had in Judea. Mussolini is handing out more crosses to that type of man than Herod or Pontius Pilate ever did."<sup>32</sup>

Christmastime was, perhaps predictably, a time when many labour writers stepped back to reflect on the world around them. They often intertwined a bracing critique with hopes for a new, social Christianity emerging from the chaos of the interwar order.<sup>33</sup> As Bernard Rose asked in his 1930 *LW/MO* piece (he was a frequent and often ideologically enigmatic contributor), "What Would the Master Say if He Were Here Today?" He implored readers to recognize suffering, injustice, and hypocrisy during the holidays, especially from those who "proclaim themselves as followers of the Man from Nazareth."<sup>34</sup> The idea that Christ would oppose the inequality wrought by capitalism could be brought home by noting how the festival that bore His name, Christmas, was often celebrated in ways that directly contradicted His teachings. Here was a stark illustration of the injustice pervading the season, according to Rose:

On every hand they see riches in abundance. Well-dressed men and beautifully gowned women pass before them in an endless procession, conveyed in cars that cost what to the worker is quite a fortune. The stores into whose windows they gaze, hungrily and helplessly, contain everything that adds to the enjoyment of life.... Unclad and poorly nourished children with eyes that sadly look into those of the parents who gave them birth, would seek to unravel the riddle of want in the midst of so great and generous plenty.... They remember the message of the Great Commoner and ask whether, if He was alive today, His voice would be heard and His message answered.<sup>35</sup>

There was democracy as well as description in this critique of Christmas crowds, with Jesus the "Great Commoner" a standing rebuke to those who rejoiced in being above the common run of humanity. Depression-era display mocked the despair and disparity that underwrote Canada's inequitable social order.

31. I.S. Henri, "Mussolini and Capitalistic Consolidation," *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 15 January 1927, 3.

32. I.S. Henri, "Mussolini and Capitalistic Consolidation," 3.

33. For a discussion on social critique and holidays, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

34. Bernard Rose was a labour lawyer in Montréal. See Sean Tucker and Brian Thorn, "Railing Against the Company Union: The State, Union Substitution, and the Montréal Tramways Strike of 1943," *Labour/Le Travail* 58 (Fall 2006): 49–50.

35. Bernard Rose, "What would the Master Say if He Were Here Today?" *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 20 December 1930, 3.

Cartoon from *The Canadian Unionist*,  
December 1930.



Articles from *The Unionist* sounded similar notes. Christmas, the ACCL organ urged, had become an empty, almost insulting holiday under capitalism. A *Unionist* cartoon made the point with unmistakable venom. In its foreground, wealthy people are shown napping after a feast. Behind them, however, are ghosts of children, elderly, and the sick, ignored amid the gluttonous plenty.<sup>36</sup>

Christmas was a time for sharing, but it was equally a time for juxtaposing Christian ideals with the entrenched capitalist civilization: "We have become aware of the need to do our good deeds more regularly, more systematically. Not without warrant is there a general suspicion that the contrast between Christmas benevolence and the starvation of body and soul which darkens civilization at other times reflects sadly upon our intelligence."<sup>37</sup> Holiday-makers could nonetheless be of good cheer, for the critical intelligence exemplified by the *Unionist* was spreading throughout the labour movement and society as a whole: "Society has almost got to the point where it will recognize the duty of making collective use of its material achievement. That is the change for which

36. "The Midwinter Festival," *The Canadian Unionist*, December 1927, 104; "Christmas," *The Canadian Unionist*, December 1930, 174; "The Ghosts at the Christmas Feast," *The Canadian Unionist*, December 1930, 175.

37. "Good Will," *The Canadian Unionist*, December 1935, 179.

the labour movement is striving. Peace on earth, good will to all men, can be realized by the means now at mankind's disposal. The era of plenty, of redemption from poverty, which Christmas symbolizes, is within reach."<sup>38</sup>

For the *Unionist*, the holiday season between Christmas and the New Year could be drawn upon as a down-to-earth, practical illustration of the possibilities for transcending the existing socioeconomic order. In important ways, in this time period, "the wage system is abolished."<sup>39</sup> It thus constituted a form of anticipatory socialism. Year after year, a few more people came to see the hollowness of life as it currently existed: "Every year a few are added to the minority who recognize a flaw in the social system in which desperate poverty rubs shoulders with opulence. Every year brings recruits to the army of idealists who declare that the fruits of labour belong to those who produce them."<sup>40</sup> Once workers held, as the quote articulates, that which belonged to them, the special atmosphere of Christmas – of sharing and compassion – might become something much more than "an isolated event in the calendar."<sup>41</sup> If Christ came back to so fundamentally transformed a social order, he would find it in something far nobler than the heartbreaking sweatshops and grotesquely wealthy exploiters of a happily bygone age.



A SECOND VEIN OF RADICAL CHRISTIANITY that we find in these mainstream labour papers was the argument that social science, drawing upon mountains of empirical evidence, offered support to the project to transform the capitalist system. Now Christ was not so much a visiting tourist as he was an accredited social scientist, who might well want to tie his own social teaching to the labour theory of value and other approaches, often underconsumptionist or overproductionist, favoured by many a radical Christian. Rooted in the discourse of earlier periods, a particular phrase used by labour and socialist Christians to challenge the ties between capitalism and Christianity was "Ye Cannot Serve God and Mammon."<sup>42</sup> A wealthy Christian was one pulled away from God and humanity, and labour intellectuals emphasized both the personal and collective pitfalls of a capitalistic Christianity. The *Railway Employees' Monthly* often carried pieces on the inherent moral contradiction

38. "Good Will," 179.

39. "Christmas," *The Canadian Unionist*, December 1930, 174.

40. "Christmas," 174.

41. "Christmas," 174.

42. Labour historians Greg Kealey and Bryan Palmer have noted that this language was popular with Knights of Labor activists in the nineteenth century, who would often critique the social order and the orientations of existing churches by pointing to their worship of Mammon. See their book, *Dreaming of What Might Be: the Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 311–312.

of capitalism, like this 1930 letter that implied a form of the labour theory of value: "We need a new point of view if we would have a new spirit in the world. For it is written, 'thou shalt not steal.' Unhappily, our modern idea is based more truly on the idea 'thou shalt steal.' The whole system of Profit is theft."<sup>43</sup> Another article in the same source, responding to charges that Christians were naïve and out of touch, retorted that this perception existed only because Christianity had never been given a chance: "It was Christianity against capitalism, and capitalism won for the simple reason that it was practiced the most. Any time we start giving six days a week to Christianity and one to capitalism, the capitalists will all go out of business.... Evidently the only way Brotherhood is ever going to amount to anything is by much practice."<sup>44</sup> Christianity was only "irrelevant" because capitalism had made it so. For one writer in the *TLC Journal*, Christianity pointed to the necessity of

fundamental changes to our social order; to protest against the selfish desires for wealth as the principle motive of industry; to insist upon the creation of an industrial society which shall have as its purpose economic security and freedom for the masses of mankind; to strive for the development of a social order which shall be based upon the teachings of the Great Founder of Brotherhood, in accordance with the code of rules laid down by Him two thousand years ago.<sup>45</sup>

In a May 1931 *Canadian Unionist* article, Canada's leaders were imagined to be continually building their ill-fated "Tower of Babel" in honour of Mammon and "the gods of capitalism," whose principle was that "the glory and power of material wealth is an end to which all should strive to attain." A dark view of the current state, to be sure, but it was the author's desire that "true brotherly spirit" and "the golden rule" would come to "govern the actions of individuals and nations," forging a world in which a happy life was not the birthright "of only one class of people, but of all people."<sup>46</sup>

In October 1926, the unlikely radicalism of the *TLC Journal* surfaced in a commentary on the decision of Detroit churches, facing pressure from wealthy parishioners, not to allow AFL leaders to speak to congregations. Churches and unions, declared the *Journal*, had too much in common for the former to be dominated by financial tyrants: "The control of their policies is in the hands of those who have nothing in common with the teachings of the 'Carpenter

43. L. Eric Wethey, "Thou Shalt Steal," *The Canadian Railway Employees' Monthly*, March 1930, 62.

44. "Long John," "The Spirit of Brotherhood," *The Canadian Railway Employees' Monthly*, November 1929, 218. The term "Brotherhood" has both a Christian and labour meaning, often indistinguishable in the press. When speaking of the Brotherhood of Man, the implication is that all of humanity is equal under God, and that solidarity, equality, and the actions of Christ exemplified the notion.

45. Charles Dickie, "The Brotherhood of Labor," *The Trades and Labor Congress Journal*, March 1934, 22–24.

46. H.A Hooper, "The Counsel of the Great," *The Canadian Unionist*, May 1931, 291–292.

of Nazareth.' Rather do they worship Mammon, and use their church connections to hypocritically try to cover up their economic misdeeds."<sup>47</sup> More pointed was the critique of capitalism found in the *LW/MO*, which was more specific than the *TLC Journal* in targeting usurers and industrialists who had stolen the fruits of labour's production with "billions of figures written on cheap paper." They were condemned as anti-Christian.

Our ideal must be brotherhood or tributes. It cannot be both. We have tried both. For 2000 years and more we have slobbered about brotherhood while practising government by tributeeering.... We hoped to serve God and Mammon. We hope still. But the old philosophy of fraternal service still hangs out its shingle in quaint old characters in spite of all our duplicity and experiment. Poetically it reads, "Ye cannot serve God and Mammon."<sup>48</sup>

The point here was not merely biblical (although it was surely that) but logical: there was a scientific contradiction inherent in any attempt simultaneously to elevate the values of community and those of competition. In 1931, flatly declaring that "business ethics are not in accord with Christian ethics," the same source asserted that the social order must be scrapped for one "based upon the teachings of the Great Founder of Brotherhood whose birth we are commemorating."<sup>49</sup> While they forced "men and women to work for a wage wholly inadequate to enable them to purchase even the barest necessities of life," capitalists who called themselves Christians were unfit for inclusion "in the category of the followers and disciples of the Great Reformer."<sup>50</sup> The paper even offered readers a prayer:

By the anguish of our prayers for our own children, that they may be saved from sin and may grow in grace and goodness. Do Thou make us ashamed of our toleration of the slums, which in disproportionate measure continue to make criminals and prostitutes of many boys and girls who never had a chance. O God of love and justice, we acknowledge before Thee our personal and corporate responsibility for the sins of such perverted lives.<sup>51</sup>

After detailing the horrific working conditions, joblessness, and wretched retirement years of workers, *LW/MO* in another piece proclaimed that churches had a duty to "call attention to the men and women who labour on the farms, down the mines, and in the factories and in the name of Him who is the Head of the Church to declare the unalterable opposition to conditions which are

47. "The Churches and Labor," *The Trades and Labor Congress Journal*, October 1926, 33–34.

48. I.S. Henri, "Where Does Our Production Go?" *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 15 March 1927, 3.

49. I.S. Henri, "What Is a Great Man?" *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 21 May 1927, 3; "Peace on Earth, Goodwill Toward Men," *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 21 May 1927, 3. A later article from the *TLC* turned its yuletide attention to the miserly old Ebenezer Scrooge from Charles Dickens' 1843 tale, *A Christmas Carol*. The author hoped that capitalists, like Scrooge, could change, once they embraced true Christianity and the cause of organized labour. Thomas Wayline, "Christmas Dawning," *Trades and Labor Congress Journal*, December 1936, 17–18.

50. Bernard Rose, "Depression vs. Exploitation," *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 21 July 1934, 7.

51. James Myers, "Prayer for Slum Clearance," *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 11 July 1936, 6.

blighting the inalienable rights of its members."<sup>52</sup> Armed with the knowledge of these conditions – one that might be attained through Christian sociology – the church was thus to play the part of a collective social scientist.<sup>53</sup>

Capitalistic individualism was not, then, merely anti-biblical: it was irrational. This was a theme that at least one labour publication picked up directly from the United Church, a source of many Christian radicals. Reprinted in the *LW/MO* was an article from *The New Outlook*, the church's weekly publication. Written by Reverend R.E. Gosse, it argued emphatically that human potential was wasted in a capitalist social order:

As Christians we must set ourselves against any system ... that is false to man's potential greatness, and that thwarts his power to achieve his best. Capitalism, with its rugged individualism and profit motive, has fostered selfishness, greed and avarice.... It gives the lion's share to the unscrupulous. It is unfriendly to the Christian spirit of social service.... Its underlying philosophy has well-nigh become an uncritical part of our mental make-up. It uses Christian labels to profit thereby.<sup>54</sup>

Gosse thus came to the messianic conclusion that "we have worshipped long at Mammon's shrine. Some day we shall cry, 'Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.'"<sup>55</sup>

Bernard Rose argued in a 1934 article that the current social order disgraced both man and God. In his opinion, humanity must never waver in its attempts to honour the "Great Reformer of Nazareth": "Does real brotherhood as He sensed it exist, even after nineteen hundred years? The answer to this must be decidedly in the negative.... If the workers were organized, Christmas 1934 would be a real day of rejoicing, and Christ's brotherhood of man a fact, rather than a hope."<sup>56</sup> Perhaps even more important than the (somewhat vaguely defined) reforms Rose suggested was the identity of the agents of such basic redefinitions of the social world. In a fine example of imagining the World Turned Upside Down, Rose claimed that workers must educate their capitalistic masters on economics and Christian ethics: "the workers ... follow the teachings of the outspoken Nazarene much more closely and faithfully than those who, while professing to be His disciples, fail to follow His teachings in all that relates to applying their wealth to noble and just uses."<sup>57</sup> The workers and their organizations, with a mastery of economics lacking among

52. "The Church and Labor," *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 21 October 1939, 6.

53. For the links between Christianity and social science in Canada, see Marlene Shore, *The Science of Social Redemption: McGill, the Chicago School, and the Origins of Social Research in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

54. Rev. R.E. Gosse, "Standards and Incentives of a Christian Social Order," *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 31 August 1935, 5.

55. Gosse, "Standards and Incentives," 5.

56. Bernard Rose, "A Christmas Message," *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 22 December 1934, 3.

57. Bernard Rose, "Educating Our Masters," *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 1 August 1936, 7.



employers, were thus uniquely positioned to transform society. A 1935 article, quoting Isaiah 40:4 – “Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough places plain” – identified workers as those who would accomplish this renewal of the entire world.<sup>58</sup> The citation of such Old Testament prophets was, as Richard Allen notes in his work on Salem Bland, a venerable social gospel tradition.<sup>59</sup> Here the Old Testament was used in the mainstream labour press to support a new economic order – one that would place the workers at its heart. Religiosity and proletarian identity were combined. Christianity, one *Unionist* article exclaimed in July 1938, was the “universal solvent” capable of transforming economic relations, if only the “fear and antagonism” that had limited its influence for two thousand years were actively fought.<sup>60</sup>

There was an expansiveness to the labour newspapers’ sense of what a united working class could and should accomplish. The *Railway Employees’ Monthly* in 1931 declared a worldwide struggle against capitalism: “Here is a crusade compared with which the earlier crusades were local and petty enterprises. Certainly there should arise from the ranks of the organized workers ... those who are enlightened and intelligent, who have vision and imagination, and who can lead humanity to the New Jerusalem, the glorious, golden city of man’s highest dreams and noblest aspirations.”<sup>61</sup> The *TLC Journal* was a bit more cautious. In its rhetoric, labour’s role in forging a new society was linked to the union label, whose legitimacy and even holiness were warranted, declared one letter writer, by the Bible itself:

All of our work is based on some precedent established at some time or another. Our Label movement, and particularly the co-operative instinct through label patronage, is exemplified in Ecclesiastes IV, 9 and 10: Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him that is alone when he falleth, for he has not another to help him up.<sup>62</sup>

58. “Good Will,” *The Canadian Unionist*, December 1935, 179.

59. Richard Allen, *The View From Murney Tower: Salem Bland, the Late-Victorian Controversies, and the Search for a New Christianity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008) xxix–xxx. Bland, a Methodist minister, is a key figure in the landscape of socialist Christianity. For one of his most important works, see Salem Bland, *The New Christianity or the Religion of the New Age* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1920).

60. “The Universal Solvent,” *The Canadian Unionist*, July 1938, 32.

61. “The Crusading Spirit,” *The Canadian Railway Employees’ Monthly*, April 1931, 74, 77. The term “New Jerusalem” indicates a connection with progressive social gossellers and radical Christianity. While Christian labour intellectuals did not reject perceptions of the afterlife, they focused on reforming earthly society, sharing the view of Christian socialists like Tommy Douglas, who felt the New Jerusalem must be built in the material world. For a modern treatment, see Lorne Calvert, *Beyond the Social Gospel*, November 2009, [http://www.knowledsworth.org/docs/LorneCalvert\\_BeyondtheSocialGospel.pdf](http://www.knowledsworth.org/docs/LorneCalvert_BeyondtheSocialGospel.pdf).

62. Leon Worthall, “Union Label – A Divine Inspiration,” *Trades and Labor Congress Journal*, September 1926, 31.

It was a religious line of argument the *Journal* itself endowed with the authority of an article in 1929: “The union label aspires to be the emblem of humanism, even as the cross is the symbol of Christianity. The one speaks to us of the world beyond and of the fatherhood of God; the other speaks to us of this world, this stern, rough-shod world in which we live, and of its redemption by the brotherhood of man.”<sup>63</sup> The “humanism of the union label” was a distillation of this thrust of radical Christianity: it built upon an economic analysis of the collective strength of the workers to effect tangible change – however reformist – in the economic order. As explained in a 1939 article by Reverend Raymond Sanford, “the church says it is against the heartless tyranny of predatory groups – the union label gives assurance that the power of the heartless wage slavery ... has been thwarted.... The church stands for justice, fraternity, and humanity. The union label is the emblem of all three.”<sup>64</sup> The union label, still tied to what many may understand as class collaborationism, here emphasizes a deeply rooted, even biblical injunction to the entire working class, united in solidarity, to improve its collective position in life. “Organized labor does not ask: ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’” the *TLC Journal* proclaimed in 1934. “It accepts wholly ... the dictum that brotherhood – and all the social responsibilities of one towards another that this work implies – is the foundation of a true civilization.”<sup>65</sup>



A THIRD EMPHASIS IN INTERWAR radical Christianity as manifest in the mainstream labour press focused on the future that Christians and trade unionists might build, if they together created a new movement and if Christians in particular could be diverted from old, now largely played-out paths of social purity and pietism, to more challenging and creative avenues of social transformation.

Given the rhetoric resounding in so much of the religious writing in the interwar mainstream labour press, how did these labour writers imagine future relations with the established churches? Were they to be condemned as fossilized remnants of an exhausted social order, or welcomed as labour’s allies in the struggle for a better Canada? On the whole, the mainstream labour press was cautiously optimistic about the churches. Some writers even hoped that they were living in a time when labour/clergy alliances would acquire a strength and importance not yet seen, and they continued to publish pieces by prominent clergymen and from religious publications. Yet these labour papers also often preferred to speak of “the church” in general – a strategy

63. P.H. Shevlin, “The Union Label,” *Trades and Labor Congress Journal*, February 1929, 28–29.

64. Rev. Raymond Sanford, “The Union Label and General Welfare,” *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 15 April 1939, 7.

65. “Federated Charities Appeal,” *Trades and Labor Congress Journal*, October 1934, 7–8.

that, while minimizing any potential denominational offence, also made their observations rather nebulous. Like Colin McKay decades earlier, they drew a distinction between the established church as an institution (“churchianity”) and the Christian faith that it imperfectly served.<sup>66</sup> While the papers surveyed spoke of Christian churches in a general sense, they often seemed to have Protestantism in mind – this was unsurprising, given the backgrounds of many of the radical Christians in the era of the Depression.

This is not to say that Catholicism was absent, however. There were numerous instances in which the newspapers expressed their distrust of Catholic unions with their alleged propensity to conspire with clergy and employers to accept lower wages.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, Catholic social teachings were positively referenced. Sayings from the pope, both within and outside encyclicals, were praised for their appeals to social justice and as antidotes to totalitarianism.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the labour press often singled out promising moments in which the Catholics seemed to be not trapped in the fossilized world of the past, but harbingers of a better world to come. One such piece came from Bishop Robert E. Lucey who, while conceding one could find within the labour movement Communist elements anathema to Christian values, also maintained that the church in general had been guilty of misrepresenting labour. In the end, he called not simply for dialogue with unions, but for the church to walk with the workingmen:

As organized labor marches down the highway of its destiny, we seem to stand by the roadside offering comment and criticism.... When the Holy Father said to all his priests “go to the workingmen ... go to the poor,” he surely did not mean that we should stand aside to view the working people with a critical eye, looking for mistakes to condemn, finding fault

66. McKay, *For a Working-Class Culture in Canada*, 56–59. Turkstra notes a similar approach to use of the term “church,” but concedes that it often referred to the umbrella of mainline Protestant churches. Turkstra, “Constructing a Labour Gospel,” 97–98.

67. The claim of Catholic unions being dominated by conservative clergy came primarily from the TLC, as it was located in similar industries. See “Socius,” “Un Nouvel Ukase: Hors des Syndicats Catholiques, point de salut,” *The Trades and Labor Congress Journal*, March 1926, 53–54; J.A.P. Haydon, “The Labor Movement in Canada,” *The Trades and Labor Congress Journal*, August 1926, 19–20; R. Hachette, “Les Bas Salaires et les Syndicats Catholiques,” *The Trades and Labor Congress Journal*, May 1930, 51–53; and John W. Bruce, “The International Trade Union Movement,” *The Trades and Labor Congress Journal*, December 1934, 19–21. For a more nuanced approach that defends Catholic unions but still notes the limitations of denominational unionism, see “The Québec Labour Enclave,” *The Canadian Unionist*, April 1935, 275–276. On the Catholic labour movement in Québec, see Jacques Rouillard, *Histoire de la CSN, 1921–1981* (Montréal: Boréal Express, 1981); *Le syndicalisme québécois: deux siècles d’histoire* (Montréal: Boréal Express, 2004).

68. See, for instance, “A New Pope is Elected,” *The Canadian Unionist*, March 1939, 242; Bernard Rose, “The Pope’s Courageous Denunciation of Racism,” *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 6 August 1938, 6; Bernard Rose, “The Popes, Property, and Poverty,” *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 5 January 1935; and Bernard Rose, “Religion and Humanity,” *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 10 September 1938.

... I think we ought to get into the parade and go down the road with labor. We should be with them, for them, of them. They belong to us and we belong to them!<sup>69</sup>

Another piece had a more radical tone. Rather than focus on an over-pondered question – can a Catholic be a Communist? – this article, republished from Catholic periodical, *The Social Forum*, asked whether a true Catholic could in fact be a capitalist. It argued that capitalism and religion were anathema, as the former wished to separate, through “a four-century revolt against religion,” economics from moral laws. Thus, Catholics were required to live their religion to the fullest, inspiring all aspects of society with the social justice evident in church teachings. Conversely, capitalism demanded individualism, rejected common good, confined religious observance to Sunday mornings, and embarked on a “foolish and un-Christian struggle for wealth and social position.” The solution was in part an organized working class, but the ultimate answer to the moral dilemmas of the world lay in a new social order. Catholics had no choice but to join this world-transforming movement, for “to hold aloof from reform of the social order is to assume an un-Christian attitude.”<sup>70</sup> To currents within Catholicism emphasizing working-class solidarity and activism, the mainstream labour press turned a sympathetic ear.

Some of the most interesting pieces regarding church–labour alliances deal with the commemoration of Labor Sunday, observed before each Labour Day.<sup>71</sup> On this day, the Commission on the Church and Social Service of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America released reports that dealt with issues of low wages, unemployment, unsafe conditions, and over-work.<sup>72</sup> The 1929 message, for instance, proclaimed that unions did Christian work in defeating child labour and other atrocities, and urged churches to support workers’ organizations by studying labour history, understanding the material needs of parishioners, and bringing the message of Christ to all: “the churches must be more aggressive, more informed, more willing to take

69. Bishop Robert E. Lucey, “‘Get into the Parade – Go Down with Labour,’ Says Bishop,” *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 11 February 1939, 7. Lucey eventually became the archbishop of San Antonio, Texas, and was known for his social justice work, including provisions that all workers hired or contracted by the archdiocese be paid a fair wage. See Franklin Williams, *Lone Star Bishops: The Roman Catholic Hierarchy in Texas* (Waco: Texan Press, 1997), 361–365.

70. “Can a Catholic be a Capitalist?” *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 8 May 1937, 7. For Catholics and the left more generally, see Gregory Baum, *Catholics and Canadian Socialism: Political Thought in the Thirties and Forties* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1980). For recent work on Catholic social teachings and the Canadian left in the Depression, see Robert H. Dennis, “Beginning to Restructure the Institutional Church: Canadian Social Catholics and the ccf, 1931–1944,” *Historical Studies* 74 (2008): 51–71.

71. For more on Labour Day, see Craig Heron and Steve Penfold, *The Worker’s Festival: A History of Labour Day in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

72. For more on the FCCCA, see Elizabeth and Ken Fones-Wolf, “Lending a Hand to Labor: James Myers and the Federal Council of Churches, 1926–1947,” *Church History* 66 (March 1999): 62–86.

hazards for righteousness, more swift to come to the help of the oppressed, if they are to fulfill the mission of Christ, and are to make that contribution to social welfare which can be rightfully expected of them.”<sup>73</sup>

The *Canadian Railway Employees' Monthly* was especially taken with the Labor Sunday messages. That of 1931 was hailed as a genuine “expression of a new and significant viewpoint, and a powerful appeal for reforms designed to bring about the establishment of a new social and economic order.”<sup>74</sup> Yet, the publication’s tone was not always so warm. It used one Labour Day piece to condemn the church’s excessive focus on the afterlife. Workers, it proclaimed – echoing a conventional anti-clerical position that enjoyed considerable traction among leftists – had rejected this notion of a “pie in the sky when you die.” They wanted to know why religious institutions were not following Christ in targeting economic inequality:

[The worker] cannot reconcile the attitude of the church with the teachings of brotherhood and justice proclaimed by the founder of Christianity. And he had therefore been inclined to regard the church as a supporter of the capitalistic institutions, which live by exploitation. For the most part, the labor movement has had to fight this battle alone, and the church has been, if not an enemy to the working class, very largely neutral, in a cause where neutrality is a moral crime.<sup>75</sup>

The magazine commended clergymen who were changing their minds and their ways, and declared that times had never been better for a labour–church alliance.

The church is beginning to re-discover the principles of Jesus, and to adopt as its objective the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth, instead of in the skies.... There have always been Christian ministers who made effective protest against the abuses of capitalism, but they were voices crying in the wilderness. Now the spirit of protest against social injustice is spreading amongst the clergy, and the labor movement may find in them potent allies in its work of bringing in a new order.<sup>76</sup>

This balancing act was typical of the mainstream labour press in English Canada throughout the interwar period. It seemed to be anxiously scanning “the church” for evidence of either support or resistance. One notable *LW/MO* piece commended Montréal’s Anglican Bishop John Cragg Farthing for “courageously” critiquing the “greed and selfish competition which lie at the bottom of our system.”<sup>77</sup> The newspaper’s words were enthusiastic indeed:

73. “Labor Sunday Message, 1929,” *The Canadian Railway Employees' Monthly*, August 1929, 136, 139.

74. “Labor Sunday Message, 1931,” *The Canadian Railway Employees' Monthly*, August 1931, 177–178.

75. “Labor Day, 1929,” *The Canadian Railway Employees' Monthly*, August 1929, 133–134.

76. “Labor Day, 1929,” 134.

77. Bernard Rose, “Bishop Farthing Speaks Out,” *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 21 November 1931, 3; Farthing was the Anglican Bishop of Montréal, 1909–1939. See John Cragg Farthing, *Recollections of the Right Rev. John Cragg Farthing, Bishop of Montréal* (Montréal: Anglican

not only did it approvingly reference Farthing's scathing chastisement of those "chameleon Christians" who claimed fellowship with Christ whilst profiting from the Depression but also it noted the importance of his stance: "The Bishop's address was a clarion call to action.... The workers who read the Bishop's address should feel encouraged to go forward. They should organize stronger than ever. They should, through their leaders, speak out as frankly and as courageously as the Anglican head of this district. He asks us to 'look at the present suffering. It is the result of the evil of war, of speculation, of greed, and dishonesty.'"<sup>78</sup>

The paper would also publish in detail a 1933 address by Reverend D. Victor Warner, which argued that the current social and economic order required substantial transformation, informed not only by traditional forms of Christian social service but also by social sciences that would reach beyond "superficial" goodwill, applying remedies to existing social ailments. It was a fascinating moment in interwar radical Christianity, because this Reverend Warner was the same clergyman who before the war had argued strenuously, in *The Church and Modern Socialism*, that the Golden Rule and the "socialist catechism" were largely one and the same.<sup>79</sup> He was one of many figures of the "classic" period of the social gospel whose words seemingly retained great currency in the 1930s – an epoch in which the current's power is often thought to have waned.

Thus a prominent theme in the religious writing in the mainstream Canadian labour press was that a better world could be made if labour unions and churches combined to transform the social order. This position was not tantamount to shelving critiques of the church, which continued strong through the period. In the *TLC Journal*, J.J. Holmes underlined the extent to which the historic church had undercut the workers:

It will be found that labor still believes that the churches are on the side of the master class and helping them to further exploitation. Some ministers ... are frank enough to admit that the church has not done all that it should. Jesus said "without Me, ye can do nothing." I believe it and I have hope really down in my heart that the church and its leaders will ... do their best to bring about a more humane treatment of men who are unduly exploited.<sup>80</sup>

One might call this the "on the one hand, on the other hand" approach – one that praised the potential social activism of the church while noting its often disappointing history. Bernard Rose in *LW/MO* exemplified this strategy by first praising the Christianity beloved by the workers, and then condemning

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Church in Canada, 1945).

78. Rose, "Bishop Farthing Speaks Out," 3.

79. Reverend D.V. Warner, "The Views of a Prominent Local Clergyman as to the Future of 1933," *Labour World/Monde Ouvrier*, 11 February 1933; Reverend D.V. Warner, *The Church and Modern Socialism: An Essay* (Truro: News Publishing Co., 1909), 10–11.

80. J.J. Holmes Jr., "Christianity and Industry," *The Trades and Labor Congress Journal*, July 1930, 37–38.





Cartoon from *The Canadian Unionist*, December 1927. Drawn by F. Leslie.

the brick-and-mortar churches that failed to inspire the hearts of men. He concluded with a call to rise above “Creed, Dogma, and theological quibbles” as they sought to comprehend and pattern their lives upon the teachings of the “Noble Exemplar.”<sup>81</sup> The *Unionist’s* version of this theme was particularly pointed. It noted that notwithstanding its loyalty to the Prince of Peace, the church had forsaken the will of Christ in its acceptance of war. The carriers of the Christian standard were the ones most guilty of tarnishing it.<sup>82</sup>

81. Rose, “What would the Master Say if Where Here Today?” 3.

82. Ernest G. Jones, “Enemies of Peace,” *The Canadian Unionist*, October 1927, 159. A vital aspect of progressive Christianity relates to the peace movement. Though present in the mainstream labour press, it was not as central as were discussions of social reform. See Thomas Paul Socknat, *Witness Against War: Pacifism in Canada, 1900–1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); Stephen Lyon Endicott, *James G. Endicott: Rebel Out of China* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

Specifically, labour writers took issue with what they perceived to be the mainstream Christian approach to poverty: charity. *The Unionist* printed a blistering cartoon in 1927 titled “The Problem – and Society’s Solution.” It portrayed a storm labelled “unemployment” bearing down upon a bedraggled working-class family. In the foreground was a clergyman with a bowl of soup and a tag on his arm titled “charity.” Speaking to his capitalistic master off-scene, he says “yes sir – soup will keep them alive ‘till next spring.” The message: charity was meant to maintain subsistence levels so as to underwrite the harvesting of surplus labour.<sup>83</sup>

Three years later, the same newspaper gave coverage to Toronto labour activist Elizabeth Morton, when she proclaimed that charity was a tool to shame workers into accepting “thankfully the crumbs that fall from the rich man’s table.” Charity was thus simultaneously an insult and a capitalistic ruse: “How long will the workers continue to be blinded by these spasmodic displays of largesse, which are only intended to keep them docile until the time comes to exploit their ability to work once more? Wake up, workers! Charity *always has been* and *always will be* the cloak used to cover the multitude of sins of the upholders of an iniquitous and oppressive system” [emphasis added].<sup>84</sup>

One also finds in most of the papers, including the *TLC Journal*, articles sharply critiquing the church as an elite institution that blesses capitalist exploitation.

In strikes, either the Church remains silent, or else uses its efforts to defeat the ends for which the strikes were called. The rights and wrongs of the case appeal to it not at all. We hear Christian ministers and priests admonish the wrongdoer from the pulpit. Did anyone ever hear a sermon in condemnation of child labor, of the long hours of labor that are the rule? Certainly not; and no one really expects such things from the modern Christian Church. Instead we are comforted with the assurance that all these things will be eliminated in the world to come.<sup>85</sup>

And we find a very similar line the *LW/MO*. Churches, the Montréal paper proclaimed, must do more to bring their message to a society plagued by starvation wages and disparity:

Brotherhood must be more than a poetic dream within the walls of the churches. When the minister says: “Oh Lord, we thank you for the food and clothing, and education...” We must all admit that God gave it in abundance ... but immediately outside the doors of the church are to be found children short of food, clothes, wholesome conditions, and education. The work of the church is to preach the safe delivery of God’s gifts in mankind, to agitate for it, to accomplish it, to run the risk of death in its advocacy as Jesus did.<sup>86</sup>

83. F. Leslie, “The Problem – and Society’s Solution,” *The Canadian Unionist*, December 1927, 98.

84. Elizabeth Morton, “Charity,” *The Canadian Unionist*, January 1931, 203.

85. H.A Spence, “The Labor Unions and Christianity,” *The Trades and Labor Congress Journal*, June 1926, 40.

86. “The Challenge to the Church,” *Labor World/Monde Ouvrier*, 9 April 1927, 3.

Was such a “on the one hand this, on the other hand that” approach merely an easy way for contributors to pose as discerning critics of society, without actually having to commit to very much in the way of concrete political actions? It is striking how often the papers attacked “the church” – a conveniently passive and nebulous target, not one likely to call them to account for their often hostile characterizations. At the same time, it is noteworthy that the mainstream labour press in English Canada apparently respected a fine line, one that balanced the cultural and spiritual integrity of “the church” with its often disappointing socioeconomic practice. It is entirely plausible editors and contributors were aware that if they strayed too far from that line, they risked losing the support of their readers – many of whom wanted to hear something about religion, but who did not wish to have their faith communities traduced in public print.



RUNNING THROUGH MUCH of the mainstream labour press were bold claims that Christ Himself was a labour militant. Readers of these newspapers often encountered Jesus or Christ as the Redeemer, Great Commoner, and Reformer. It was a fairly old discursive move that, employing apparent loyalty to a traditional Christian message subtly subverted it, challenging the claim of any religious institution to be an authoritative repository of the Christian message. The mass popularity of imagining this Christ-like labour movement could be traced back at least to the 1890s, when *What Would Jesus Do?* became a runaway bestseller.<sup>87</sup> Reverend Warner held that Christ became man incarnate not as a prince, but as a workingman. And as such, He accomplished great works in humility. This was for Warner a purposeful choice for God the Son, who came and “blessed the poor, condemned the thoughtless and idle rich, denounced the proud teachers and leaders of the national religion, and ... after this revolutionary activity, He was executed by the law of the land. Though detested by the religious authorities of the day, it was said of Him, significantly enough, that the ‘common people heard Him gladly.’”<sup>88</sup> This rhetorical trend has roots in the earlier period of the social gospel. Colin McKay dubbed Christ the “first world-conscious workingman,”<sup>89</sup> and Charles Stelzle, the Presbyterian minister and former union machinist whose writings employed this theme in the first decade of the 1900s, was still being featured as a respected voice in *LW/MO* in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>90</sup> One of his most applicable pieces asks if a returned

87. For discussion, see chapter 4 of McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise*.

88. Warner, *The Church and Modern Socialism*, 17–18.

89. McKay, *Working-Class Culture*, 102.

90. On Stelzle, see Richard P. Peothig, “Charles Stelzle and the Roots of the Presbyterian Industrial Mission,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 77 (Spring 1999): 29–43; George Nash III, “Charles Stelzle: Apostle to Labor,” *Labor History* 11 (Spring 1970): 151–174. For a 1908 piece

Christ would sign up to be a union carpenter, and answers, unsurprisingly, in the affirmative: "It also quite likely that were He to come again as a carpenter, with all that implies – a workingman's trials as well as a workingman's sympathies – He would identify Himself with an organization which is doing much to better the conditions of all workingmen as is Organized Labor."<sup>91</sup>

In the *Canadian Unionist* in 1935, A.C. Campbell argued that although humanity's application of Christ's teachings had been flawed in the past, there was now evidence that the Depression's economic and social crises were instructing men and women on the "simple teachings of the Carpenter of Nazareth."<sup>92</sup> The *TLC Journal's* 1930 Christmas message proclaimed that a vital step in eliminating suffering was for workers to steel their faith and "strive for a more consistent and practical adaptation of the teachings of that lowly Carpenter of Nazareth."<sup>93</sup> For its part, the *LW/MO* declared that "Christ the Carpenter Loved Mankind," and suggested that a Christian life was one which stood for the oppressed, eschewed luxury, and embraced an unabashed working-class identity: "Christ the Carpenter was a good workman. He may rightly be called the first and world's greatest labor leader. His message was to those who toiled. He exhorted all those who labor to come unto Him and He would give them rest."<sup>94</sup>

In the *TLC Journal* we find further evidence of the emphasis on Christ as labour man. The 1928 issue published a poem by British Church of England clergyman G. Studdert Kennedy, titled "It's Hard to be a Carpenter." It spoke of how Jesus practised His trade, and implied that His infinite mercy and love allowed many to take advantage of His generosity. Then, in a deft illustration of the "mixed message" so typical of the labour press' treatment of the church, it also explores how Christ's working-class realities had been omitted by the Gospels:

I wonder what he charged for  
chairs at Nazareth.  
And did men try to beat him  
down  
And boast about it in the town –  
"I bought it cheap for half a

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that proclaims the need to respect socialist Christians, see Charles Stelzle, "The Spirit of Social Unrest," in *The Social Application of Religion* (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1908), 11–38. See also Stelzle's autobiography, *A Son of the Bowery: The Life Story of an East American* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1926).

91. Charles Stelzle, "Jesus – 'Union Carpenter?'" *Labour World/Monde Ouvrier*, 8 October 1938, 5.

92. McKay, *Working-Class Culture*, 100–102, 196; A.C. Campbell, "The New Year and Plenty," *The Canadian Unionist*, December 1935, 199–200.

93. The Executive Council, "The Season's Message," *The Trades and Labor Congress Journal*, December 1930, 11.

94. Bernard Rose, "Christmas 1929," *Labour World/Monde Ouvrier*, December 21, 1929, 4.

crown  
 From that mad carpenter?"  
 And did they promise and not  
 pay,  
 Put it off to another day;  
 Oh, did they break his heart that way  
 My Lord, the Carpenter?  
 I wonder did he have bad debts,  
 And did he know my fears and  
 frets?  
 The gospel writer here forgets  
 To tell about the Carpenter  
 But that's just what I want to  
 know  
 Ah, Christian glory, here below  
 Men cheat and lie to one another  
 so;  
 It's hard to be a carpenter.<sup>95</sup>

There was here a quiet critique here of institutional religion, one not just focused (as had become conventional) on the church as an institution, but of the structure of Christianity as a tradition of faith, where the identity of Christ had become obscured by the Gospels themselves. Kennedy suggested in his poems how completely one clergyman might see in the labour movement the highest calling of the faithful, who were imagined to be preparing for the second coming.

THEN WILL HE COME

WHEN through the whirl of wheels and engines humming,  
     Patient in power for the sons of men,  
 Peals like a trumpet promise of His coming,  
     Who in the clouds is pledged to come again.

When through the night the furnace fires flaring,  
     Loud with their tongues of flame like spurting blood,  
 Speak to the heart of love alive and daring,  
     Sing of the boundless energy of God.

When in the depths the patient miner striving,  
     Feels in his arms the vigour of the Lord,  
 Strikes for a kingdom and his king's arriving,  
     Holding his pick more splendid than the sword.

95. G.A. Studdert Kennedy, "It's Hard to be a Carpenter," *The Trades and Labor Congress Journal*, December 1928, 45. Kennedy was involved in the Industrial Christian Fellowship, a British organization defending labour rights but overtly denouncing Marxism that sought to imbue industrial relations with cooperation and a Christian ethic. See G. Studdert Kennedy, *Dog-Collar Democracy: The Industrial Christian Fellowship, 1919–1929* (London: Macmillan Press, 1982). For a brief biographical sketch, which mentions his criticism of both capitalism and Marxist socialism, see Geoffrey Rowell, "Kennedy, Geoffrey Anketell Studdert (1883–1929)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2004, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.queensu.ca/view/article/38028>.

When on the sweat of labour and its sorrow,  
 Toiling in twilight, flickering and dim,  
 Flames out the sunshine of the great to-morrow,  
 When all the world looks up – because of Him.

Then will He come – with meekness for His glory,  
 God in a workman's jacket as before,  
 Living again the Eternal Gospel Story,  
 Sweeping the shavings from His workshop floor.<sup>96</sup>

There were interesting energies in such poems, combining almost Soviet-style reverence for the Promethean workingman with the image of a gentle yet revolutionary Christ, whose generosity seemed boundless, but who would also return to cleanse the world, using the metaphorical image of a meek workingman sweeping up a workshop. One may also see here a transformation in the mythic representation of Christ the Workingman – in that, contrasting dramatically with earlier poems and paintings, the energy and activism He exemplified is portrayed as coming from the workers themselves. It was the labour movement that was the Collective Christ, wherein a suffering humanity manifested a power greater than the sum of its parts. As Bernard Rose explained, “the workers owe it to the memory and sacrifice of the Great Jewish carpenter to not only organize along craft and industrial lines, but co-operate in every way, and thus help to bring about that heaven on earth of which Christ dreamed.... No movement so impressively typifies all that is essentially Christian and tolerant as that which seeks to promote the welfare of man ... as the one which has secured for the workers a better life.”<sup>97</sup>

Were Christ to return to the modern world, he would become a union carpenter, gravitate to the meek and downtrodden, and faithfully pay his union dues. He would also furiously chastise the wealthy and become the scourge of many a comfortable clergyman. In their representations of Christ the Workingman, the labour newspapers continued to maintain their careful balance of critique and affirmation, challenging those elements of institutional Christianity linked with the capitalist class, while calling for a closer alliance between churches and their own organizations to push for a more egalitarian society.



BUT WHAT TO MAKE OF ALL THIS religious writing in some of the most powerful and widely read labour newspapers in English Canada? A nuanced,

96. G.A. Studdert Kennedy, *The Unutterable Beauty: The Collected Poetry of G.A. Studdert Kennedy* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1927).

97. Bernard Rose, “The Greatest Reformer in all Recorded History,” *Labour World/Monde Ouvrier*, 9 October 1937, 7.



sympathetic, and cautious appraisal is clearly in order. As many scholars have noted, the principal origin of working-class opposition to capitalism was located not in religion but in the contradictions of material life.<sup>98</sup> Yet it is important to recall that such economic contradictions do not provoke immediate and direct ideological responses. They must be taken up and interpreted within frameworks of analysis and complexes of myths and symbols where they “make sense” to many people. In interwar Canada, Christianity provided a still-hegemonic framework most Canadians used to form their sense of right and wrong, the direction of history, and the possibilities of dramatic social change. Communists and atheists were certainly contesting its hold, and the science of evolution and the drive to read the scriptures themselves as documents of history were, at the least, complicating Christian perspectives – but, both for English Canada and Québec, evidence for a general collapse of Christianity is scanty. Those who wanted to shift public opinion in a pro-labour and pro-socialist direction rarely mounted frontal attacks on the religion of the majority. What they did do, consistently and powerfully, was use the radical resources of Christianity to point out the hypocrisies and contradictions of the ruling order.

Mainstream trade unionists were responding to many cultural influences in the interwar period. The rise of communism, which had special resonance when the Workers' Unity League exploded onto the scene in 1931, meant they were increasingly under pressure from a radical left that had demonstrated its capacity to organize the unorganized and rattle the government.<sup>99</sup> The economic crisis placed enormous pressure on their ranks and employers, as old beliefs and allegiances began to crumble and rupture. Thus, the labourism that had once seemed a suitable expression of their politics had receded, with nothing very substantial, at least until the consolidation of the CCF in the late 1930s, to take its place. Clergymen were themselves responding to similar forces, combined with those more specific to their situation – such as the rise of modernism and fundamentalism in theology, and the vast debates that continued to circle around the theory of evolution, fuelled particularly by the recent Scopes Trial.<sup>100</sup> They also saw the rise of a secular left and working-class

98. For a particularly suggestive account, see Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 150–153. For an analysis by Marks of earlier labour Christianity, see Lynne Marks, “The Knights of Labor and the Salvation Army: Religion and Working-Class Culture in Ontario, 1882–1890,” *Labour/Le Travail* 28 (Fall 1991): 89–127.

99. See Stephen Endicott, *Raising the Workers' Flag: The Workers' Unity League of Canada, 1930–1936* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012). See also John Manley, “Communism and the Canadian Working Class during the Great Depression: The Workers' Unity League, 1930–1936,” PhD thesis, Dalhousie University, 1984; Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Victoria, BC: Trafford, 2004).

100. Known in popular parlance as the Scopes “Monkey” Trial, the 1925 event was a defining moment in 20th-century Christianity. The trial concerned the legality of teaching evolutionary

movement, and understood the need to address their concerns whilst still within a Christian matrix so as to not lose their flock. While not discounting the sincerity of their words, they were at least in part encouraged to critique capitalism because influential workers' movements were doing just the same.

On either side, then, there was a search for allies and stability in a time of convulsion. Yet not defensiveness, but a kind of beleaguered hope, can be discerned in their mutual relationship. While much of the historiography asserts the end, or at the very least, a steep decline of Christian expression or church alliances in the labour movement by this point, I have demonstrated that the labour press continued to tie Christian symbols and rhetoric to a working-class identity. For many workers, the church and Christian teachings still had an abiding cultural authority in the interwar period, and labour papers took religion and the church seriously indeed. In their "on the one hand, on the other hand" representations of Christianity, they struck a balance between their crisis-plagued and often strike-bound members, experiencing firsthand the pain of a capitalist system spinning out of control and angry with a church that seemed indifferent to their suffering, and their conviction that the values historically embodied by Christianity were ones they needed to affirm all the more strongly precisely in such a crisis.

Here Richard Allen's ground-breaking interpretation of radical Christianity remains vital for understanding the vibrant working-class Christianity we find expressed in these labour papers. In a sense, what we find in much of the religious writing in the mainstream labour press is a translation into a humbler and more accessible language of the FCSO's iconoclastic theology and socialism. Yet it still sounded a tocsin of transformation, goading the comfortable and inspiring the downtrodden. Perhaps most important was how many labour intellectuals went beyond liberal and conservative strains of Christianity to emphasize critiques of capitalism and inequality. The synthesizing of religious and economic criticism signified a genuine effort to locate the roots of sin in capitalism. These labour intellectuals were not atheistic socialists, liberal progressives, or conservative evangelists. They were, for the most part, developing forms of Christianity that combined socialist social insights with a religious appreciation of sin and suffering.

Sometimes, the language in the labour press belied the actions of the organizations they represented. In many cases, the radicalism and fraternity showcased through Christian appeals contradicted policies that emphasized

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science in Tennessee classrooms, and would pose larger questions around fundamentalist and metaphorical interpretations of biblical text. See Paul Conkin, *When All the Gods Trembled: Darwinism, Scopes, and American Intellectuals* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998); Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: the Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1997). For an analysis of Canadian coverage, see Edward Betts, "The Argument of the Century: The Ontario Press Coverage of the Scopes Trial and the Death of William Jennings Brian," MA thesis, Queen's University, Ontario, 1992.

inequalities among members due to gender, race, or religion. The venerable concept of the Brotherhood of Man was as gender-specific as it sounded when it came to women, and solidarity with immigrants and first-generation Canadians was as often limited.<sup>101</sup> Christian rhetoric was only on occasion translated into political action.<sup>102</sup> Yet this does not mean the radical Christian framework expressed in the mainstream labour press had no substance. The labour press was something more than the mere mouthpiece of the institutions that sustained it. Labour intellectuals consistently went beyond their particular socioeconomic interests to articulate a more general outlook on the world. The labour press was a place where workers, often excluded from traditional media, could have their views heard and discussed in a public sphere attentive to their interests and ideals. For others, it was deemed an integral part in the development of class consciousness and articulation of the ideals that would build a better world. Many historians have correctly interpreted labour newspapers to be harbingers of new ideas and articulations.<sup>103</sup> For all

101. For examples in which both ACCL and TLC-affiliated bodies failed to fully stand up for the ideals of Christian solidarity and compassion, see Ruth Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto 1900–1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); David Goutor, *Guarding the Gates: The Canadian Labour Movement and Immigration, 1872–1934* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007); Ralph R. Ireland, “Some Effects of Oriental Immigration on Canadian Trade Union Ideology,” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 19 (January 1960): 217–221; “North of the Colour Line: Sleeping Car Porters and the Battle Against Jim Crow on Canadian Rails, 1880–1920,” *Labour/Le Travail* 47 (Spring 2001): 9–41; Craig Heron, *Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada, 1883–1935* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), 84–86; Ruth Frager, “No Proper Deal: Women Workers and the Canadian Labour Movement, 1870–1940,” in Linda Briskin and Lynda Yanz, eds., *Union Sisters: Women in the Labour Movement* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press and Women’s Press, 1990), 44–66; Gillian Creese, “Exclusion or Solidarity? Vancouver Workers Confront the ‘Oriental Problem,’” *BC Studies* 80 (Winter 1988–89): 24–51.

102. Jerry Lembcke, “Class Capacities and Labor Internationalism: The Case of the CIO–CCL Unions,” *Critical Sociology* 15 (October 1988): 71–93; John Manley, “Does the International Labour Movement Need Salvaging? Communism Labourism, and the Canadian Trade Unions, 1921–1928,” *Labour/Le Travail* 41 (Spring 1998): 147–180; Irving Abella, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour: The CIO, The Communist Party, and the Canadian Congress of Labour, 1935–1956* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973); John Manley, “Moscow Rules? ‘Red’ Unionism and ‘Class against Class’ in Britain, Canada, and the United States, 1928–1935,” *Labour/Le Travail* 56 (Fall 2005): 9–49; John Manley, “Communism and Canadian Working Class during the Great Depression: The Workers’ Unity League, 1930–1936,” PhD thesis, Dalhousie University, 1984; Ian McKay, *The Craft Transformed: An Essay on The Carpenters of Halifax, 1885–1985* (Halifax, NS: Holdfast Press, 1985), 89–91.

103. There has been a good deal written on the importance of the labour and left press historically, but the following are some specific examples outlining their roles as intellectual stimulators and centres for education and consciousness-raising. See Phillip S. Foner, *American Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), xiv; Jon Bekken, “No Weapon so Powerful: Working-Class Newspapers in the United States,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 12 (July 1998): 115; Ron Verzuh, *Radical Rag: The Pioneer Labour Press In Canada* (Ottawa, ON: Steel Rail Publishing, 1988), xiii; Paul Rutherford, “The People’s Press: The Emergence of the New Journalism in Canada, 1869–1899,” *Canadian Historical Review*

their links with established trade unions, these newspapers often suggested a politics of social and political transformation far removed from conservatism.



ANTONIO GRAMSCI, ENCLOSED for much of this period in his prison cell, would study the mainstream religion of his own country with a fascination that has mystified many of his later followers. He discounted as anti-progressive the old habits of orthodox leftists – their tendency to ridicule the clergy and engage in what he termed “vulgar-Masonic” diatribes against the complex traditions of historic Christianity. While most Marxian socialists were not themselves religious, he argued, neither should they be anti-religious: “All workers – over and above any belief or faith – can and must be united in the struggle against the bourgeoisie.”<sup>104</sup> Gramsci believed that “impossibilist” approaches to religion, of the sort associated with the often aggressively atheistic *One Big Union Bulletin*, would simply divide leftists from workers and leave religious structures more or less intact. The revolutionary’s task was not to promulgate a metaphysical rationalism, nor to indulge in clergy baiting, but to gradually win space within religion and in civil society as a whole for the development and dissemination of radical democracy.

In short, conducting a hegemonic struggle effectively – in ways that actually moved people into new ways of thinking and acting – meant not dismissing religion but understanding and responding to it, both as a cultural legacy and a powerful set of institutions. The writers I discussed in this article likely knew little of Gramsci, yet I think we see in them a similar insight into how to juxtapose an appreciation of religion’s deep appeal with a critique of its system-maintaining influence. Over and over, labour intellectuals sought to challenge the hegemonic control conservative forces had over Christianity by critiquing and recasting the Christian message in profoundly different, and at times revolutionary terms. They may not have been wholly successful, but they did demonstrate the ways in which labour intellectuals have attempted to reclaim and recast hegemonic languages, myths and symbols, so as to find their own distinctive idioms of struggle.

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56 (June 1975): 169–191; McKay, *For a Working-Class Culture in Canada*; Kealey and Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be*.

104. For an illuminating discussion, Derek Boothman, “Introduction” to Antonio Gramsci, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Derek Boothman trans. and ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xxi.