

# **Christian Responsibility And Industrial Relations: Reconciliation Or Revolution?**

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During the 1979 General Election campaign, industrial relations featured as a prominent issue. Indeed, it might correctly be claimed that the general public in confidently voting in Margaret Thatcher, were voting against the alleged misuse of trade union power. Rising prices, falling standards of living and increasing violence have been popularly attributed to "big unions" striking against each other, against the housewife and against the general public. In a speech<sup>1</sup> only days before the last government fell, Mrs Thatcher outlined the Conservative package to restore stability to Britain's economic and social order: the statutory inhibiting of trade union activity, the enforcement of law and order, the creation of wealth and the reward of individual success. Such opinion was supported in the press and on television by editorial comment, by criticism of union power from the judiciary, and a former chief of police comparing union power with the Nazi control of Germany in the 1930s. The general election result and subsequent cabinet appointments indicate an important change in British politics. The electorate have voted for a radical change and they have voted for the politics and economics of the right. Characteristically, a society in crisis has opted for regression, the reassertion of old hierarchies, values and judgements, with the hope, in particular, of turning back the menace of union power, which, it is claimed, is a threat to the social order. Such perspectives have become the commonplace explanation of the world and of industrial relations in particular, and they have been clothed in the habit of St Francis of Assisi, setting them in the context of the Christian struggle for peace.

Empirical studies<sup>2</sup> of industrial conflict show how seriously inaccurate this dominant perspective and social diagnosis is. Ironically, laying the blame for bad industrial relations at the feet of "big union" power, cannot even be said to be typical of management's view of the problem. In the face of such evidence, this dominant opinion, appears, to say the least, ill informed. Yet Christian comment, especially that of the hierarchy, in recent months has been little more than an extension of this established view. No Christian, of course, will allow his mind to be dominated

by the ruling ideas of the world. He knows that the silent majority and public opinion have stoned prophets and executed messiahs. It is against the background, therefore, of this dominant perspective and empirical evidence that I want to look at British industrial relations from a Christian perspective. In particular, I want to examine one model of industrial relations which might at first sight appeal to Christians and to moderate opinion in general.

### *Reconciliation*

The model of industrial relations I am referring to is the human relations model. The main feature of this model of industrial conflict is that of a marriage dispute. In other words, it is a therapeutic model which seeks to counsel and reconcile an assumed partnership and bond between management and workers. This model has considerable popularity over and above its apparent theological attractiveness. It goes beyond simply isolating the guilty party and is therefore likely to attract thinking, moderate opinion. Its perception of industrial conflict is based on the work of Elton Mayo, Maslow and Herzberg, and the model could include the Tavistock Institute's socio-technical systems concept, the substantial range of behavioural science interest in industry, the work of the government's Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service and Work Research Unit, and the broad area of work study, industrial democracy, participation and modern management science.

Although I admit here to being a little promiscuous with the terms of reference of this model, it is, in fact, very difficult to set precise limits to its influence and popularity. It is not widely known, for example, that the bulk of the work of ACAS is not in the area of individual and collective conciliation, but in the field of prevention, thus taking the conciliation model into less obvious areas of conflict in, say, the measurement of absenteeism and labour turnover, in order to prevent confrontation arising at all. The industrial relations consultant may have private views about the nature of industrial conflict. He may, for example, believe that conflict is transitional and creative, but his brief is to resolve it as soon as possible so that production can be resumed. Moreover, no one likes conflict, perhaps least of all management and workers, and so the idea of "getting it together to work this thing out" is probably more popular than the deliberate use of a working model.

It is also very easy to both under-estimate and over-estimate the value of what are grandly termed by behavioural sciences "diagnostic tools" for industrial conflict, which are very often simple ways of putting conflict into some kind of perspective for both sides. The effectiveness of this (what amounts to) large scale counselling would also depend, as in other areas of counselling, on the values, assumptions and ethical code adopted by the practitioner involved. To be fair, however, most practitioners would

regard the attainment of skill by both sides to the same level of competence as critical.

There are, I believe, important reasons for Christians to be more critical of this reconciliation model of industrial conflict. One major theological defect is its *working* assumption that all conflict is pathological. There is no place for the Cross in industrial relations. There is therefore no place for the Christian doctrine of *redemption* in industry as salvation is uncritically identified with conciliation, or what is worse, with ethics. The only acceptable measure of human relations in industry is the absence of overt conflict and increased productivity. For the Christian these criteria simply will not do as measures of human relationships and endeavour. Wage bargaining according to this model is a "ritual dance", a psychodrama simply to *restore equilibrium*. Each side must retain face whilst essential features of the industrial situation remain unchanged. The manager and the worker may feel better about each other and about themselves, but the manager is still the manager, the worker is still the worker, and, of course, there is no question of a change of ownership of the means of production. One wonders how long such a marriage will last. It is one thing to attend to the games people are playing, but what about the life script in which the games are set?

Any conciliation agent, of course, will not want to collude with either side in a dispute in order to avoid a total breakdown. Although they are not usually involved directly with conciliation, this is the very precarious stance adopted by industrial chaplains in Britain – and the reason why they are sometimes seen by workers as management spies. This non-judgemental, "neutral" position might appear to be attractive to Christians, but it assumes that both sides are equal in the dispute. This is not the case and this fact is also obscured by industrial legislation which has mistakenly led us to believe that "unions" have too much power. Being non-judgemental may be a proper stance in counselling individual couples (although feminists would disagree), but it will not do in larger and more complex situations. Such an approach can never absolve objective guilt which can be shifted about a great deal in organizations as emotions run high and moods change. And there is still the question of *justice*, which may be quite distinct from the question of the two sides living together again in harmony. Behavioural perspectives in industry can reveal the inter-dependence between technology and people, between individual and organizational behaviour, but they cannot deal with questions about the distribution of ownership, power and control in industry, or, indeed, why the particular industry should exist at all.

The reconciliation model of industrial conflict, in the wide

terms in which I have defined it, lends itself too easily to Christian support, but it can only change the “accidents” of industry (sometimes literally), industry’s essential nature remains unaltered. In doing this it legitimizes management control. At best, it is only the management of conflict. The doctrine of man assumed by this model is also lacking in substance. Man is economic man, man is simply an extension of his labour, man is *only* a worker – a mistake which is also made by some of the critics of capitalism themselves. Nor should we be deluded by the fact that conciliation *can* work. It is sad that Elton Mayo never thought more seriously about the implications of his early results at the Western Electrical Company in the USA in the 1920s. They showed that it did not matter very much how work was organized, productivity increased because of the attention being paid to the *workers themselves*. As Marcuse explains in his critique of this therapeutic empiricism,<sup>3</sup> in seeking to expose and correct “abnormal” behaviour in industrial plants, the procedure adopted excludes critical concepts capable of relating such behaviour to society as a whole:

The unification of opposites which characterizes the commercial and political style is one of the many ways in which discourse and communication make themselves immune against the expression of protest and refusal.<sup>4</sup>

My final criticism of the reconciliation model has to do with its strictly technical use and is concerned with empiricism itself. The Mayo studies are celebrated as the entry of behavioural science into industry and the birth of the ideas of job design, enlargement and satisfaction. Marcuse has examined this research in some detail.<sup>5</sup> Those who carried out this early work contended that complaints from the workers lacked “objective reference”. In order, therefore, to make the workers’ statements amenable to empirical methods, their complaints were reformulated. The complaint that “the washrooms are insanitary” became “on such and such an occasion I went into this washroom and the washbowl had some dirt in it”, and the complaint that “pay rates are too low” became “my wife is in hospital and I am worried about the doctor’s bill”. Hence, bad working conditions were attributed to employee negligence and financial difficulties due to low pay were directed to family problems outside of work. As Marcuse observes:

This mode of thought has since not only spread into other branches of social science and into philosophy, but it has also helped to shape the human subjects with whom it is concerned.<sup>6</sup>

It is industry, aided by science, manufacturing its own human robots.

In this way, by virtue of its own methodology, empiricism *normalizes* pathological features of industrial life. It canonizes the

present industrial and social order, the present condition of humanity. Material which should be subject to qualitative analysis is quantified and life and death issues evaporate into statistical abstractions. Empiricism is what Marcuse has called "the defeat of the logic of protest", a "one dimensional philosophy", and the "closing of the universe of discourse". It is also the language of distance and domination. Far from being a morally neutral discourse, it is the absence of empathy, genuineness and love, the "philosophy" of oppression. Above all, empiricism neglects what D. H. Lawrence once called "the forgotten philosophy" that men can know each other not only by distance and abstraction but by *communion*. Modernism is revisionism, is a phrase once coined by a member of the Jubilee Group. To coin another: "empiricism is conservatism". Applied to industrial conflict it is like Lawrence's "counterfeit marriage" which is "only less fatal than the disintegrative effect of masturbation".<sup>7</sup> Empiricism in industry, and in the study of human problems in general, lends considerable support to the popular sub-Christian view, that God helps those who help themselves, but it cannot tell us why he helps some rather than others. There is no room for Job, let alone the blood of the new covenant. In ignoring such questions, its materialism represents not a closing *in on*, but a retreat *from* reality.

#### *Revolution?*

I have tried to show how the reconciliation model of industrial relations avoids central issues and indeed *evades* conflict. This should be enough to indicate caution in its use by Christians. I would like to conclude by suggesting some areas that require more serious study if Christian social responsibility in industrial relations is to mean more than helping to maintain the present (fallen) condition of humanity.

What should Christians make of the appeal for a more *civilized* society in which industrial conflict is managed by government, law and order? In 1930, in his essay *Civilization and its discontents*,<sup>8</sup> Freud pointed out that conflict and its repression was *endemic* to civilization. No one, he claimed, had satisfactorily answered the question of the purpose of human life. Man was simply programmed by the pleasure principle. Even universal love forfeited a part of its value by doing an injustice to its object, and in any case, he claimed, not all men are worthy of love. Discontent, Freud argued, was the psychological origin of religion which he regarded as an illness. In so far as Freud can be said to be scientific, in this essay he is describing in psychoanalytical categories the *present* state of humanity. Remove the reference to Freud and the reference to religion as pathology and we have here the typical Christian's world view. This kind of agreement is inevitable whilst Christians cannot envisage any other civilization except *this* one, if Christians can

find no place in their hearts for *God's Kingdom* of justice, love and peace, if Christians continue to regard salvation as the passage of a soul to heaven whilst *this World* goes on, exactly as it is, and, as they believe, it always has done – a view which is much easier to trace to Greek paganism than the Bible. Freud once argued with Adler over this statement that Adler made in Vienna:

If you ask where repression comes from, you are told, 'From civilization'; and if you ask where civilization comes from, you are told 'From repression'.<sup>9</sup>

There is need for Christians to continue this conversation, to recognize that the social order, civilization itself is a subject for theological study. Industrial peace is not the absence or repression of conflict, but the fruit of social justice which itself is not a static law but a dynamic striving after ever greater justice. An apparent industrial peace is not morally neutral, nor does it indicate the absence of conflict. Silence does not necessarily denote contractual agreement when employees have no real choice.

Perhaps the most difficult question for Christians to take seriously is the possibility that the origins of industrial conflict lie in the violation of a fundamental order in human society – the domination of one man by another, the control of one social group by another. If this is so, then the "ministry of reconciliation" is inappropriate for one cannot reconcile a bond that does not exist. Even in individual terms, if social factors are too important it is well recognised that counselling is inappropriate; yet in industry one can come across the suggestion that existential approaches like that of Gestalt psychotherapy might be applied! There are profound divisions within society and the only satisfactory sociological category for them is *class* – however one might disagree about what constitutes class. Westergaad and Resler<sup>10</sup> in an extensive study of class in Britain have shown how even the conventions of contemporary language emasculate the language of class. The conceptions of *power* and *conflict* are carefully removed from all discourse and conversation. Some two years ago in the *Church Times*<sup>11</sup> the Archbishop of York told Christians that class structures were quaint and not in any way significant for the future of the world. Another article in the same issue argued that "class structures are not only inevitable but acceptable", and that "people should be able to find their own level in society according to what they are and what they do, not according to what their parents are and have been" – something which, in effect, is impossible in a class society! In other words, class is not a serious question. It is a disorder of *thought* and not a disorder within the social order itself. Even the most moderate worker in the field of health or social service would find such a conception extraordinary.

Christian spirituality also can easily accommodate itself to the

management or repression of real conflict. R. C. Zaehner in his last book *Our Savage God*<sup>12</sup> pointed to bride and bridegroom as indeed the ultimate, significant duality in the universe – the duality between God and man, between man and man, who have become supremely compatible in the incarnation. But an authentic spirituality must take the existence of conflict seriously, otherwise spirituality becomes *harmful*, a degenerate spirituality which simply manages conflict, seeking to reconcile opposites, erase real distinctions, so that even good and evil are reconciled. It is the pathetic search for “neutral” ground away from the struggle, but is there really *any* neutral ground anywhere in the universe for Christians?

Richard Hyman<sup>13</sup> has appealed for a dialectical sociology, a sociology which takes into account the real feelings, views and experiences of the social actors themselves. Let us also have a dialectical theology which can transcend Marcuse’s “continuum of repression”<sup>14</sup> and enter an authentic struggle for freedom and liberation. Society is only too able to label who is guilty, who is greedy. It may throw light on the real extent of union power if we remember that it is the *weak* and not the strong in society who end up carrying such labels and burdens. The Christian knows that he himself is capable of all the wickedness he reads about in the newspapers, and yet his estimate of human nature is determined by the divine qualities he perceives within himself and other people. He knows that the enemy of the poor are the rich, but that the final obstacle, the last enemy of man is not *other men* but death. There is therefore a need for renewal in the Christian understanding of sin and its remedy. There is, for example, a great deal of biblical evidence and discussion to indicate that law is not a remedy for human failing. Frequently, also, the only alternative which Christians and others can conceive of the present distribution of wealth and control is its opposite: a crude equalizing. This amounts to the assertion that the remedy for envy is its repression, and we are back again to the problem of conflict. Erich Fromm in his recent book on contemporary society<sup>15</sup> suggests that this is a false asceticism – a crude communism which was disowned by Marx as early as 1844; (Sadly, Marx’s most popular and vociferous critics have never read the old man himself). Surely, what matters is not that material resources should be *equalized*, but that they should not be so differentiated that different groups have different experiences of life. It is here that we can locate the *spiritual* problem which Christians have somewhat vaguely been claiming is at the root of society’s ills. Yet even this is an over simplification, Goldthorpe and others,<sup>16</sup> in their study of three Luton firms, have concluded that a worker can double his income and own his own house without ever experiencing middle class life.

Finally, and most tragically of all, Christians are oblivious to the existence of industrial conflict within the Church itself. On both sides of industry there are Christians. They celebrate the Eucharist together, and on Monday they return to industry where conflict is part of the essential fabric of the building. In Latin America, the presence of this conflict is so intense that it has been remarked that the Eucharist for many Christians has become an exercise in make-belief.<sup>17</sup> In the similar absence in Britain of an authentic community many Christians' experience of the Eucharist may belong to an immature, magical phase of their spiritual development. Like class, the Eucharist can become for Christians *epiphenomenal* – not at all significant for the future of the world. The cynical Christian will say that no matter how wealth is distributed, people, *other* people, of course, will always want more. St John Chrysostom, in the days before industrial chaplaincy, who defended vineyard workers in their request for a share of the produce, put it more simply and more profoundly: “when riches disappear, so will wickedness”. The proper question is not what is Christian responsibility in industrial conflict, but what can Christians learn from it, and, indeed, what can Christians contribute to the conflict itself?

- 1 Solihul, Saturday 24 March 1979. Conservative Central Office 408/79.
- 2 Richard Hyman *Strikes* Fontana 2nd ed 1978.
- 3 *One Dimensional Man* Abacus 1972 p. 139.
- 4 Marcuse op. cit. p. 82.
- 5 Marcuse op. cit. ch 4.
- 6 Marcuse op. cit. p. 95.
- 7 A propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover in *Phoenix* Vol 2 Heinemann 1968 p. 508.
- 8 Standard Edition London 1961 xxi pp. 64-145.
- 9 On the history of the psychoanalytic movement (1914) in *Collected Papers* Vol 1 International Psychoanalytical Library 1924 p. 346.
- 10 *Class in a capitalist society* Penguin 1976.
- 11 31 December 1976.
- 12 Collins 1974.
- 13 Hyman op. cit. p. 72.
- 14 *Essay on Liberation* Penguin 1969 p. 11.
- 15 *To have or to be?* Jonathan Cape 1978 pp. 84-5.
- 16 Goldthorpe et. al. *The Affluent Worker* CUP 1968 Vol 3 pp. 162-3.
- 17 Gustavo Gutiérrez *Theology of Liberation* SCM p. 8.