

Keir Hardie and Christianity

'The workingmen of to-day, who are labouring six days in the week for their oppressors, refuse to be cribbed, cabined and confined by the dogmas, creeds and theologies of the orthodox churches, and to enter and find their oppressors sitting in the front pews.'

Keir Hardie's parents were not Christians; they were supporters of Charles Bradlaugh MP and the National Secular Society. Hardie came to Christianity through the temperance movement, dominated by evangelical Christians. There he met Christians who became friends and lent him books. In his diary, he wrote, *'Brought up an atheist - converted to Christianity in 1878.'* He later developed a close association with a nonconformist movement called 'the New Theology'. This wasn't a church; it was an approach that gave attention to social and spiritual issues. It published its journal, *'The Christian Commonwealth'*, edited by the Reverend R.J. Campbell, which contested the hold many wealthy industrialists had on nonconformist churches.

Christian support was also important in his electoral base. The Christian argument for social change still had broad resonance among radicals, socialists, trade unionists and the working class generally. Ministers in Wales supported him in the Merthyr constituency, even when he failed to strongly oppose the Education Act (1902), which gave financial backing only to Church of England schools. Probably because he was less than keen on religious education in schools. Hardie had helped found the Children's Crusader Movement in Glasgow and later supported Socialist Sunday Schools. He thought it was important for children to be aware of a socialist view of life. In the 1910 election, John James, the vice-president of the evangelical Christian Endeavor in Wales, pleaded, *"Let us vote for Mr J. Keir Hardie and practical Christianity.'* Dr Fairbairn, late of Mansfield College, Oxford, addressing a minister's gathering, said, *'I know him intimately ... seldom in my life have I met a more deeply religious man.'*

Hardie did not often speak at religious events and explained why, *'Those of us who for many years past have practically deserted the religious platform, have not done so because our faith in religion has grown less, but because the Church thought fit to specialise in what it most unfairly calls the spiritual side of Christianity.'* His key message was, *'Christianity on its social side can never be realised, if it is to be interpreted in the light of Christ's teachings, until there is full free communism..... The rich and comfortable classes have annexed Jesus and perverted His Gospel. And yet He belongs to us.... Make no mistake about this. The only way we can serve God is by serving mankind. There is no other way.'*

There have been many efforts to place Hardie as either a Christian or a Marxist. Caroline Benn, in her biography, argues that his greatest asset was that he saw no necessity to choose. He translated religious images into labour and socialist politics, *'Jesus belonged to the working class; he was a leader who fought for his class'*. Even in industrial disputes, he used religious imagery, *'Do not you think that God... intended you to be free? And here you are in bondage!'* Benn also refers to his interest in different religions as he travelled the world. He met socialists of many other faiths and was attracted to the B'hai philosophy, which encompassed all religions.

In his writings, he also addressed this issue. Chapter IV of *'From Serfdom to Socialism'* covers socialism and Christianity. He wrote, *'It would be an easy task to show that Communism, the final*

goal of Socialism, is a form of social economy very closely akin to the principles set forth in the Sermon on the Mount.' He then highlights many of Christ's other teachings that reflect that view, pointing out that it wasn't until the thirteenth century that the Church came out into the open as a defender of property. He argued that it showed how little modern churchgoers know of the history of their religion when they charge socialism with being anti-Christian. His purpose in writing the chapter was to show that socialism was in the true line with Jesus's teachings and Christianity for the first 700 years of the faith.

Hardie also wrote (around 1905) a pamphlet, *'Can a man be a Christian on a Pound a Week?'* In it, he challenges the criticisms he received from the established church to his position that *'modern Churchianity was not only un-Christian, but anti-Christian.'* He certainly attracted several clerical critics with the claim that the modern self-satisfied parson *'is the exact prototype of the ancient Pharisee.'* He accepted that this was strong language but argued, *'these are not times when men can afford to muffle the truth by wrapping it up in soft words or fine phrases.'* In the pamphlet, he carefully rebuts the four main criticisms of his argument. His concluding paragraph suggests that the prayer *'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'* should be taken literally. By which he argues that his opponents are suggesting that there will be two classes in heaven, one is revelling in riches and the other in factories working for starvation wages. If not, he argues, *'how can they consistently support the system which inevitably produces that state of things upon earth?'*

In his epilogue, Hardie's biographer, Bob Holman, himself a passionate Christian socialist, argued that the attitude of churches toward money and wealth are not consistent with the life and teachings of Jesus, *'I know no Christian leaders who name and shame greedy Christians in the way Hardie did.'*

A religious conviction can offer comfort and shelter from the world. For some others, it justifies greed, bigotry and even violence. And for Christian socialists like Keir Hardie, it is the route to social action, challenging injustice, and exploitation.

In summary, Keir Hardie was a Christian and a socialist, a man of firm religious conviction, but not a supporter of the orthodox churches, which in his view had strayed from Christian teaching. As Hardie himself said, *'Believe, says the preacher. Believe and Act, says the socialist.'*

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February 2022

Keir Hardie Society

The Keir Hardie Society was formed in 2010 and aims to keep alive the ideas and promote the life and work of Keir Hardie. For more information on the Society and how to join, please visit our website:

www.keirhardiesociety.org