Socialism and Religion

Roads to Common Wealth

Vincent Geoghegan

Routledge Studies in Social and Political Thought

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There is much talk of the ‘return of religion’ these days. This is frequently conceptualised in terms of ‘post-secularism’, a perceived move away from what Richard Rorty has described as (and as a resolute secularist defended) ‘the compromise that the Enlightenment reached with the religious’, namely that religion be confined to the private sphere and that public discourse be grounded on the basis of a common rationality shorn of the metaphysical and ethical particularities of religious doctrine.

Thinkers as varied as Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor have argued that a necessary defence of the achievements of secular modernity needs to be combined with a recognition of the fundamental value of religious traditions, and of their legitimate place in public life. The global resurgence of a new religious politics – graphically symbolised by 9/11 – has added a new urgency to this project; how is religion to be integrated, and if necessary contested, in such a time? As this study shows, the desire to integrate religion into a ‘progressive’ politics, or even to make it the very basis of such a politics, is not new; Geoghegan argues that ideas and practices generated in these earlier moments have an inherent interest, and even a degree of relevancy to contemporary concerns about the nature and scope of religion.

Providing a comprehensive analysis of the Common Wealth movement, this work seeks to bring together for the first time the religious and political commitments of four of the leading thinkers in the movement, bringing to light the significance of the relationships between them.

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For David Gregory Burgess

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Introduction

Common Wealth was a left-wing political movement which emerged in Britain in the Second World War, and became for a period a real presence on the political landscape. This book is not an institutional study of this movement. It is only in the final chapter that there is an extensive discussion of Common Wealth, and this is done with a very specific focus on the religious controversies that animated the leadership of the movement. This is not an arbitrary or tendentious point of concentration for the debate about the fundamental values of Common Wealth was central to its political project of transforming Britain. The earlier chapters are concerned with the emerging ideas of four individuals: the philosopher Professor John Macmurray (1891–1976), the novelist and writer Kenneth Ingram (1882–1965), the science fiction writer and philosopher Olaf Stapledon (1886–1950) and the Liberal MP and baronet Sir Richard Acland (1906–90). Again, the focus is on the religious thinking of these individuals, for the religious was, or was to become, central to their modes of thought. The link between the political movement and these four men is that all were to become prominent members of Common Wealth, with Richard Acland as the effective founder of the movement. The final chapter therefore traces the complex interactions between the four men in Common Wealth as they took up varying positions in the battles over religion. The aim is both to show the intrinsic theoretical interest of many of the ideas discussed and to illuminate a fascinating period in the intellectual and political history of Britain.

Let us begin by saying a few initial words about Common Wealth, for the name probably suggests relatively little to present-day readers. Formed in 1942 out of two earlier movements, Forward March and The 1941 Committee, it had at its peak somewhere between ten thousand and fifteen thousand members, and over three hundred branches around the country. While its policy was broadly socialist, it attracted support from a wide spectrum of political opinion, and from people who had previously little or no interest in political matters. To further its political cause and to ensure that the coalition government had to face the tribunal of a public vote it broke the wartime electoral truce and either fought by-elections in conservative seats with its own candidates or, where this was not possible, supported acceptable anti-conservative

candidates. In the process it chalked up some considerable achievements, regularly achieving significant swings in its favour, despite the fact that two potentially significant sources of support were, until 1945, disenfranchised (21- to 25-year-olds, since the 1939 Electoral Register was still in place, and the armed forces). There were also three outright victories by its own candidates, principally Chelmsford in April 1945 which converted the 1935 Conservative majority of 16,624 into one of 6,431 for Common Wealth, a swing of over 28 per cent. Apart from this, Common Wealth also published and distributed large quantities of propaganda, organised talks and lectures the length and breadth of Britain, and sought to use its small parliamentary group to get an alternative voice heard in the Commons. One little illustration of its visibility is that when troops held a mock election in Cairo towards the end of the war Common Wealth came second, securing 55 votes to Labour's 119, with the Liberals third (38 votes) and the Tories taking the wooden spoon with a mere 17 votes;[1] it is also an indication of its energy in that Common Wealth had been actively responding to, and further building up, support in the services. The political programme of Common Wealth was centred on two themes – Common Ownership and Vital Democracy – which boiled down to social ownership of all the main sectors of the economy, fundamental constitutional reform, and the extension of democratic participation to both the economic and the social level. In the process it provided a focus and a space for the aspirations of a range of different constituencies who saw the movement as a vehicle for moving beyond the barren politics, social inadequacies and international madness of the 1930s towards something better. Largely the creation of the maverick Liberal MP Sir Richard Acland, Common Wealth held a particular attraction for those like Acland himself who wanted to restore a moral basis to politics. Often, again as in Acland's own case, this was linked to a belief that the religious needed to be at the centre of such an enterprise. This concern with religion was also to be a source of considerable strife in the organisation, not simply between differing conceptions of the religious, but also between the latter and those, such as Marxists, who were not happy with what they considered religiosity and moralism.

In what follows there will be an examination of three individuals that eventually joined Acland's movement – Macmurray, Ingram and Stapledon – and a study of Acland's own development. Concentrating on central themes in their work which help illuminate their conceptions of the religious, the goal is both to get a sense of what sort of *mentalité* each brought to Common Wealth, and how these fed into the subsequent battles over religion in the movement, but also to show that each has striking things to say about the relationship between the religious and the social and political. There is much talk of the 'religious turn (or return)' these days. This is frequently conceptualised in terms of 'post-secularism', a perceived move away from what Richard Rorty has described as (and as a resolute secularist defended) 'the compromise that the Enlightenment reached with the religious',[2] namely that religion be confined to the private sphere and that public discourse be grounded on the basis of a

common rationality shorn of the metaphysical and ethical particularities of religious doctrine. Thinkers as varied as Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor have argued that a necessary defence of the achievements of secular modernity needs to be combined with a recognition of the fundamental value of religious traditions, and of their legitimate place in public life.[3] The global resurgence of a new religious politics – graphically symbolised by 9/11 – has added a new urgency to this project; how is religion to be integrated, and if necessary contested, in such a time? As this study should hopefully show, the desire to integrate religion into a 'progressive' politics, or even to make it the very basis of such a politics, is not new. In this respect it is a piece of historical reconstruction. But – a claim the reader will have to test – there is also a supposition in the book that the ideas and practices generated by these individuals have an inherent interest, and even a degree of relevancy to contemporary concerns about the nature and scope of religion.

There were linkages between the four men before they all became members of Common Wealth. Macmurray and Stapledon knew of, and referred to, each other's work in the 1930s, Ingram became importantly influenced by Macmurray and joined forces with him in the Christian Left, while Acland was a student of Macmurray, a friend and political ally of Ingram, and got to know Stapledon in the very early days of Forward March. Although all were concerned with the validation of the religious, their religious trajectories were distinct. As a youth Macmurray fervently embraced the Scottish evangelical Presbyterianism of his family, while Ingram was an active and vocal Anglo-Catholic – both were later to adhere to a form of immanentist materialist Christianity. Acland abandoned his boyhood Christian beliefs as a teenager, and it was only many years later, in 1940, that he became a passionate Anglican. Stapledon fairly early on decided that he was no longer a Christian, and maintained this stance until his death; instead, he espoused what he sometimes referred to as a 'pious agnosticism' centred on a philosophically unknowable 'spirit'. These very different religious understandings and beliefs were to determine the patterns of conflict between them over religion, most notably in the skirmishes and battles in Common Wealth concerning religion; they also drew fire from yet other positions in the organisation, as from the Marxists and theologically conservative Christians.

The first three chapters are primarily concerned with the theoretical contributions of, respectively, Macmurray, Ingram and Stapledon. Acland's interest is somewhat different. He had a very sharp political brain, a radical intuition and the capacity to articulate, and dramatise, powerful ideas; to a number of his critical colleagues in Common Wealth, however, he thought and wrote quickly, too quickly – as Tom Wintringham (of whom much more later) put it in a letter to Ingram, Acland 'can write a book in the time I need for an article'[4] – and he undoubtedly was not theoretically dextrous, knew it, and it pained him; from his perspective there was the pique of a practical politician at what could seem the self-indulgent theoretical fastidiousness of intellectuals when by-elections had to be won, and effective propaganda produced. His

skilful establishment of Common Wealth is dealt with in Chapter 5, and the other three are reintroduced into the picture as they become associated with his project, and as they participate in the struggles over the foundational values of the movement. The big geopolitical events of the time variously recur in, and to an extent frame, the separate chapters: Fascism's rise, the Spanish Civil War, Soviet Communism, the drift to war, war itself, its immediate aftermath and the emergence of the Cold War. By the late 1940s one has reached the end of what one might term the 'long inter-war years' and the terminal boundary of the study is reached. Olaf Stapledon's death from a heart attack in 1950 is the boundary stone.

The first chapter's subject, John Macmurray, was an academic philosopher who, after a couple of early appointments, was based in turn at Balliol College, Oxford, University College, London, and the University of Edinburgh. He could also be called a public intellectual, particularly in the 1930s and the subsequent war years, notably through the broadcasts he gave on the BBC and the publications that flowed from them. Thus when a book came out in 1944 entitled *Ten Modern Prophets* Macmurray was deemed to be one of them (as was Olaf Stapledon).[5] Also included was someone who had died over sixty years earlier – and therefore hardly modern – namely Karl Marx, included, as the introduction put it, 'because of his great influence on our times'.[6] And it is Macmurray's engagement with this figure which is the focus of the first chapter. He was initially drawn to Marx's work in the early 1930s as he attempted to get to grips with the nature of Soviet Communism. But what he found in Marx, particularly in the early works, a number which had just been published for the first time, was a powerful theoretical resource for progressing his own project, the development of a refurbished Christianity, shorn of idealism and politically relevant. This involved a radical re-reading of the figure of Jesus, stressing his rootedness in the integrated culture of the Jews and his role in the universalising of the living elements of this culture in the form of Christianity. This intermingling of Jesus and Marx animates his most important work of the 1930s, *The Clue To History* (1938), with a dazzling, if at times perverse, account of the process of European development. Central to this is an understanding of the religious dimension in phenomena often deemed non- or anti-religious, as in, for example, science and socialism, and of the integral role these dimensions must play if an adequate religion is to emerge. Religion is here understood not as one separate mode of human activity among many – for this indicates a still fragmented society and culture – but as the informing essence of an eventual Kingdom of Heaven on earth, for 'if a society … has a religion it is not religious. If it is religious it cannot have a religion.'[7]

Macmurray was to become a major influence on the subject of the second chapter, Kenneth Ingram, novelist and writer, a man we know relatively little about, despite his having written over seventy books and being an active member of numerous political organisations. The chapter traces the development of his ideas through a focus on one particular aspect of his work, his

reflections on sexuality, not his work on sexuality in general but on his analysis of 'deviant' sexuality – what he referred to as 'abnormal' but not 'unnatural' sexuality – homosexuality, bisexuality and, way out of most people's comfort zone, pederasty or boy love. This focus is justified partly on biographical grounds: Ingram was a homosexual, in days of illegality and moral censure, and one senses the burning centrality of the issue to him in his writings. As one reviewer noted: 'it is on the subject of homosexuality that the author becomes most expansive.'[8] For a variety of reasons he does at various stages critique the name, the concept and the practice of homosexuality but, as he sees it, in the service of a more adequate conception of that which is of value in the homosexual, and against the inadequate, as for example in an overly sexualised notion. His sexual orientation would also appear to be pederastic, evidenced by both the distinctly homoerotic portrayal of young males in his fictional works and his willingness to validate this orientation in his theoretical work. Pederasty was to him a spiritual phenomenon, and not a sexual activity, which he rejected as immorality and vice. This was to cause him theoretical and moral headaches when in his later work he came to the conclusion that sexual activity outside of marriage could be justifiable. Finally, bisexuality featured in his work as an ideal or aspiration that he believed was *the* appropriate mode of human sexuality. The other reason for the focus on these forms of sexuality is that, as both Macmurray and Ingram recognised, sexuality was an issue that went right to the heart of how Christianity saw itself, and that its sexual exclusions spoke of deficiencies in its conception, and evaluation, of the personal and the interpersonal. That today the issue of homosexuality is threatening to tear Ingram's Anglican Church apart is perhaps some evidence of how deep the issue of sexual behaviour goes in the issue of what constitutes an authentic Christianity. Ingram's pursuit of these issues was to result in a call to him to withdraw his final comprehensive statement on sexuality, *Sex Morality Tomorrow* (1940), from William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury, an attempt by the Bishop of London to have the book repressed, and an approach to the police by some members of the Church of England to have him prosecuted. In terms of Ingram's political and ideological development the chapter shows how he moved from an early neo-Medievalist feudal socialism with a very ugly and explicit anti-Semitic dimension, to a socialism that bears, under the influence of Macmurray, a marked Marxist inflection.

With Olaf Stapledon, in the third chapter, we ascend to the cosmic. He came to public attention in the 1930s with a series of science fiction novels, notably *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker*, the latter having as their subject matter conjectural histories of the universe in which beings and planets and galaxies flourish and die and where the ultimate terminus is utter extinction, the death of the universe itself, and with it all memory of the billions of years of sentient life and the teeming expanses of space. At first sight this doesn't seem promising territory for a positive conception of religion, but Stapledon was adamant that an authentic religion was both possible and very necessary.

This was not to be Christianity. Although sympathetic to some elements of Christianity he viewed it as hopelessly enmeshed in doctrines that he believed could not be validated philosophically because they asserted things far beyond the capacity of the human mind to know. This was the rigorous philosophical dimension in Stapledon's work, honed in his PhD in philosophy, and in his extra-mural classes in the subject in his days as an adult education lecturer, and that made his imaginative works very much ideas-based. His religion had two principal components. One was the normative principle of 'personality in community' which was the focus of his political and social radicalism, itself self-consciously socialist with a critical sympathy for Marxism. In this respect he shared with Macmurray and Ingram the notion that the seemingly irreligious could be profoundly religious. This is designated as the 'utopian' pole of his thinking, not in the pejorative sense of the impossible, but in the sense of an informing vision of a better society. His second religious conviction was a deeply personal sense of an awesome spirit in reality, one unconcerned with humanity and its purposes, and one that humanity could and should embrace, even though it was the effective author of the destruction of their highest hopes and ideals. Unknowable, it was the object of an 'agnostic piety' which Stapledon denoted as 'worship'. His problem, as he acknowledged throughout his life, was that there was a considerable tension between these two religious convictions, for how was one to worship something that was constantly undermining the search for personality in community, and would ultimately visit an obliterating nothingness on aeons of striving? We can see the tension in his notes for a lecture in 1934: 'Conflict between Love and Worship/love demands fruition for the beloved/worship qualifies this demand/and accepts tragedy gladly/ … Admit a logical conflict/between striving and worship/ between "Love thy neighbour" and "Thy will be done".'[9] And it was a tension still unresolved at the time of his death.

Chapter 4 seeks to chronicle the political and religious development of Richard Acland, a man who, though sadly lacking a biography, left no fewer than three drafts of autobiography in his papers.[10] The product of generations of Liberal politicians, Acland was elected Liberal member for North Devon at the 1935 General Election, aged 25. His views became increasingly socialist over the next five years. In the Commons and in his first publications he attacked the social conservatism and the foreign policy of appeasement of the National Government, and aligned himself with those seeking to create a Popular Front of those opposed to that administration. Still an atheist, he began to stress the moral dimensions of his politics, and religious language began to enter his vocabulary. It was only in 1940 after reading John Hadham's *Good God*, and an ensuing mystical experience, that he regained a Christian faith, initially attracted to, though significantly misinterpreting, Kenneth Ingram's views. Quite quickly, though, he developed a belief in a personal God, and this was to be the basis of his religious stance in Common Wealth. The publication of *Unser Kampf* (Our Struggle) in early 1940 was a huge popular success (rapidly selling over 150,000 copies) which triggered the

beginnings of the popular movement that was to lead via Forward March to the establishment of Common Wealth.

This sets the scene for the final chapter, which charts the development of Common Wealth, and shows the roles Macmurray, Ingram and Stapledon played in the new organisation; Macmurray entering via the 1941 Committee, J.B. Priestley's group of notables, and Ingram and Stapledon via Forward March. Their roles were significantly different. Macmurray, according to Angus Calder, whose unpublished 1968 PhD thesis on Common Wealth is still far and away the most detailed and thorough account of the organisation,[11] acted as an *éminence grise*, his views consulted on foundational matters such as the movement's constitution and, as we shall see, on its philosophical basis; he sat on an Appeals Committee but was not an active day-to-day member of Common Wealth. Ingram, however, was very much a hands-on member. For the effective life of the movement he was a very senior member, sitting on the ruling Executive Committee, and was spokesman on foreign affairs. He was also a member of Acland's 'ideational team' (as was Macmurray) which was meant to formulate policy. Stapledon was primarily a regional member of Common Wealth based in the North West of England. Although involved in the talks in London that brought about the merger between Forward March and the 1941 Committee, his main political activity was on the Wirral and Merseyside where he was an active branch member and officer. From here he wrote his contributions to Common Wealth publications and canvassed in elections, and this was where he travelled round contributing talks and lectures on policy matters at public and branch meetings. Finally, the role of all four men in the multi-faceted religious controversies in Common Wealth is charted, bringing in important new characters who played key roles in the debates, especially, from the Marxist wing, Tom Wintringham (veteran of the Spanish Civil War, former member of the Communist Party and leading figure in the establishment of the Home Guard) and his wife Kitty (née Bowler), a formidable figure in her own right, and two figures relatively close to Acland on religious matters, the Rev. John Parkes (who under the *nom de plume* John Hadham was the actual author of *Good God*) and Tom Sargant. Acland came under attack from theologically conservative clergy for his early associations with Ingram and Macmurray, and from Olaf Stapledon for what he took to be Acland's hegemonic claims for Christianity. Above all, coming to a head in November 1943 was a clash for the soul of the organisation that pitted the Wintringhams and their Marxist distaste for Christianity and the vocabulary of the moral against what they saw as the conservative troika of Acland, Parkes and Sargant. Both sides sought to win over Macmurray and Ingram, for to Acland they were fellow Christians, and to the Marxists they were sympathetic to the claims of historical materialism. Macmurray decisively sided with the Wintringhams; Ingram, whose whole attempt to theorise homosexuality had centred on its *moral* status, though supportive of a number of the Wintringhams' ideas, assisted Acland in his attempt to validate the moral appeal of Common Wealth. No one was able to engineer an outright victory,

and time was anyway running out for Common Wealth. The decision of the Labour Party to pull out of the government coalition and field candidates in the post-war General Election sounded the death knell of Acland's movement; slaughter at the polls followed.

In the conclusion, after briefly sketching the lives of Macmurray, Ingram, Stapledon and Acland after 1945, an attempt is made – again briefly – to relate our subjects and their movement to some contemporary thinking on the emergence, and significance, of modern secularism. The ideas of the four men discussed in the previous chapters represent an historically earlier round of thinking about what is distinctive about secularism, and what stresses and strains have been generated in its emergence. In this sense Macmurray's *The Clue to History* is not doing dissimilar work to Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. Furthermore, like the contemporary theorists referred to in the conclusion, these earlier writers were not simply commentators but partisan writers who wished to defend the precious gains of modernity, correct perceived weaknesses, and rejuvenate, particularly through a reworking of religious resources. The recent theorising also allows us to get a fuller picture of why Macmurray and the other three felt that a reconsideration of the relationship between the religious and the secular was so necessary. Thus, although historical figures, they have a very modern resonance.

The particular conjuncture in which Macmurray, Ingram, Stapledon and Acland operated was framed by the two world wars. Macmurray, Ingram and Stapledon were all at the heart of the fighting in France during the First World War, the former two as combatants in the infantry, Stapledon as a member of the Friends' Ambulance Service. The horrors they experienced, and their growing perception of the whole disastrous context and direction of the war in varying degrees, distanced them from previously held assumptions and beliefs, and forced them to ponder alternative conceptions. There was a stark contrast between the relative realism and camaraderie of the front line (with a degree of respect for even 'enemy' troops) and the illusions and animosities of the civilian world left behind. In Macmurray's case his experience of the jingoism of institutional Christianity during the war precipitated his redefinition of himself as a Christian outside the Churches;[12] Ingram was to talk of his experience of 'war hysteria', and 'the welter of hates and enthusiasms' that poisoned public opinion and led to a vindictive and self-defeating foreign policy towards Germany;[13] Stapledon, appalled by the bellicosity of relatives on one of his spells of leave, wrote that it was up to those who had experienced the reality of the war to counterbalance the fantasies of those who had not: 'The only hope is that the people who have been *in* the furnace may not be so mad and venomous and blind as the people who sit around the furnace and talk politics.'[14] Acland was only a schoolboy when the war started,[15] but the war was to cast a long, long shadow on his politics, particularly in the 1930s when a re-run looked increasingly a possibility. The current generation, he argued, had a duty to those who had perished in the war to prevent a further war setting their ultimate sacrifice at nought. He was very conscious

of being a part of that young generation who had found themselves heirs to the insecure peace of the interwar years.

They all arrive at various points and in various ways at some form of socialism, but, as we shall see, each one's ideological development is markedly different, as are their understandings of the nature of socialism. What distinguishes them from most of the socialists of the period – again noting variations between them – is the desire to subsume socialism into a broader foundational concept of the religious – socialism as an integral part of an essentially religious project. We see them engaging with, and contesting, a range of leftist currents, all the time looking for some form of vehicle that could make a practical political difference, a need that Common Wealth at the time met. Although attracted to socialism as a very young man it was really in the 1930s that Macmurray, greatly influenced by his encounter with the work of the early Marx, became a serious exponent of socialist theory and practice.[16] Convinced as he was of the underlying Christian impulse behind the Bolshevik Revolution, he found the Communist repudiation of religion erroneous and pernicious and viewed the Communist Party of Great Britain as a snare for the unwary. From 1935 to 1941 he sought to build up the 'Christian Left', a small offshoot of an offshoot of the Student Christian Movement, to offer true political leadership in Britain[17] (and Kenneth Ingram was to become actively involved). Ingram in the 1920s developed an Anglo-Catholic feudal socialism which he was eventually to abandon and, under the significant influence of Macmurray, move much closer to a Marxist conception of history. He was not, however, a mere populariser of Macmurray's work. His life-long reflections on the *moral* status of homosexuality made him more sympathetic to the use of moral argumentation than was Macmurray, who was not at ease with talk of 'oughts'. Politically he was prepared to work with the Communists, but found their minds to be closed and their attitudes intolerant, confessing in 1941 that 'I have secretly prayed that I should never again be associated with a campaign which enlisted communist support.'[18] He himself was a member of the Labour Party in the 1920s and 30s, though we also know that like a number of leftists (such as C.E.M. Joad and John Strachey) he was attracted by Oswald Mosley's 'New Party' before it became Fascist – though whether like them he was an actual party member is unknown.[19] Stapledon on the other hand throughout the 1920s and 30s remained outside of all the political parties, describing himself in 1939 as 'one who has never been able to identify himself with any party'.[20] He had been a socialist since at least the age of 24, recognising himself in H.G. Wells's *New Worlds for Old*,[21] and he told a 1930s audience in a talk entitled 'Why I am a Socialist' that although the term 'socialist' could be misleading he was happy to adopt the title for it seemed to him to be a shibboleth for progressive views; it was 'the great *touchstone* today … if you accept essential Socialism … you are politically useful … if not, not'.[22] But the way he chose to engage in political activity was through a host of campaigning organisations agitating primarily on the causes of international peace and co-operation; these included the 'No More War' movement, the

'League of Nations Union', the 'International Peace Campaign' and the 'Federal Union';[23] he tirelessly spoke at their meetings or on their behalf to whatever groups would listen to him. Acland's reading of Keynes in 1936 started his road to socialism, though his liberal roots were still apparent, and it took him some time before he was comfortable with describing himself as a socialist. He was also anomalously the Liberal MP for North Devon (elected in 1935), and did not formally leave the Liberal Party until a couple of months after the foundation of Common Wealth in September 1942; 'London Liberal headquarters,' he was later to write, with some understatement, 'was naturally concerned at having one of the few Liberal seats represented by a Socialist.'[24] Although stimulated by a book his socialism, unlike the other three, owed relatively little to the literature of socialist theory; he recalled that he was totally ignorant of this literature before reading Keynes,[25] and even afterwards seems to have done little to familiarise himself; it was only under the pressure from his Marxist colleagues in Common Wealth in 1943 that he made some effort to read Marx (and Macmurray). He saw himself as a practical man who thought issues through as they emerged in everyday experience. Thus his admiration for John Macmurray as a thinker was not untinged with an element of scorn for the philosopher's perceived unworldliness.

The central religious concern linking all four men could be called a recognition that religion is too important to be left to the religious. One aspect of this was a shared conviction that contemporary organised religion had lost touch with what should have been its animating spirit. All, in differing ways, found current Christianity deficient in this respect. In Stapledon's case this was a belief that the religious core of Christianity, which it shared with other faiths, had been smothered by empty speculative doctrine; for Macmurray and Ingram the Christian materialism of Jesus had been turned by institutional Christianity into a conservative transcendentalism; even for Acland, who was burning with enthusiasm for his rediscovered faith, and relished his new communion within the Anglican Church, the contemporary Church had failed in the social duties entailed in faith by declining to bring its morality to bear on the disabling inequalities of a capitalist society. In these responses Stapledon saw himself as a person outside the current patterns of faith, while Macmurray deemed himself to be a Christian outside the Churches; Ingram and Acland, committed to their shared Church, sought to generate internal renewal, as in their participation at the 1941 Malvern Conference called by Archbishop Temple to equip the Church for the coming post-war world. All four believed that 'religions' contained resources for the renewal of the religious. Thus even Stapledon acknowledges that the ancient spiritual vocabulary of Christianity has both a poetic potency and referential precision lacking in the concepts and vocabulary of secular rationalism, and he embraces words such as 'worship' and 'spirit'; he sees no reason, furthermore, why existing faith communities should have a monopoly of, let alone a veto on, the religious heritage of all. Macmurray and Ingram attempt a form of critical hermeneutic on biblical texts seeking to uncover intentions marginalised or suppressed by subsequent

hegemonic readings which can then both enrich and correct the very necessary and historically progressive methods and categories of modern thought. Finally, Acland wants the Bible to be read not just as a repository of timeless spiritual truth but as an authoritative source of a morality that is mocked in merely private projects of individual salvation.

Underpinning these responses, though again in varying degrees, is an expanded conception of the religious. It is most marked in the cases of Stapledon, Macmurray and Ingram, but, partly in response to criticisms of his 'orthodoxy' within Common Wealth religious debates, it can also be seen in Acland. Stapledon is keen to detach the religious from 'faiths', which to him undermine their religious dimensions with specious metaphysical invention. As he put in some lecture notes:

> religion is one and perennial/religions are many, fleeting, and all false … 'The religions' (Christian, Buddhist etc) are in part local and temporary expressions of true religion/ (and in part sheer opium of the people, dope)/ every religion contains a pinch of true religion/sometimes a lot of it/but always with adulteration.[26]

Religion is about openness to the universe and all its possibilities and limitations not sets of prescribed ontological 'beliefs' – it is therefore concerned with 'a feeling that something is sacred/not a God, but a way of life/a feeling that we are instruments/on which divine music must be played'.[27] He also uses the term 'religious' to characterise a political openness and energy in the service of genuine community. Macmurray and Ingram, although they privilege Christianity, have a very capacious conception of the meaning of authentic Christianity. Macmurray's historical narrative is full of the Christian manifesting itself in forms that appeared to the institutionalised Christianity of the time as deeply unchristian or even anti-Christian, as in the religious roots of the Enlightenment, and the Enlightenment roots of the contemporary religious. For Ingram a particular concern was to bring affections and practices historically condemned by Churches – notably homosexuality – within the moral parameters of Christianity by excavating from the depths of biblical Christianity morality's foundation stone of love. In the case of Acland creedal adherence and theological rectitude is no guarantee that one is doing God's will, nor atheism and hostility to religion a sign that one is necessarily not; of Tom Wintringham, his relentless opponent in the religious debates but a man whose idealism and hard work he greatly admired, he was to write: 'although we differed about morality he really does qualify for "They who do the work of God shall be called the children of God".'[28]

The tumultuous international context of the 1930s gave edge and immediacy to these concerns. Soviet Communism and German Fascism seemed in a variety of ways to put the deficiencies of the Western democracies into high relief. In the case of Fascism both Stapledon and Ingram drew attention to the way that this ideological movement was able to draw upon and channel the energy

and enthusiasm of their populations. Although deeply hostile, as they all were, to the expansion of German National Socialism, and conscious of the role of manipulation and terror, Stapledon was convinced that it was not simply a matter of lies and brute force, and that Fascism in a perverted manner offered a vehicle for aspirations that the existing social structure failed to nurture. These yearnings were for Stapledon at root religious, for

> the peoples of Italy and Germany, in their despair and bewilderment, obscurely but rightly felt a need for some kind of real values, something more compelling than the goal of economic prosperity … The Fascist and the Nazi faiths offered him in a crude and barbarous form the very thing that he craved.[29]

In contrast the forces of socialism were simply not open to these dimensions and were politically surpassed. Ingram, also, points to the capacity of Fascism to mobilise a religious desire without a home – Fascism is triumphant 'not because the masses are cowed or apathetic' but rather because they 'are filled with religious fervour', 'there is new hope, a new purpose in their lives'.[30] In this respect, therefore, Fascism both exposed a fatal blindness to the potency of religion in hyper-rationalist leftism and pointed to the dangers within capitalist economies of reducing everything to the private and the utilitarian. There are similarities here with the type of analysis the utopian Marxist Ernst Bloch was developing at this time in his attempt to understand events in Germany; the Nazis had moved into the territory abandoned by the Left; 'vulgar Marxism had forgotten the inheritance of the German Peasant Wars' and 'the Nazis streamed into the vacated, originally Münzerian regions';[31] in Acland's words, 'Nazism exploited the opportunities which Socialism neglected.'[32]

But Fascism was clearly an international threat and nowhere was this more dramatically instantiated than in the great passion play of the 1930s left – the Spanish Civil War. From the opposition benches in the Commons Acland harried the government over what he considered its mendacious, naïve and self-interested policy on Spain. Between November 1936 and July 1938 he spoke in the chamber on Spain on twenty-nine separate occasions, all premised on the belief that Britain and France were cowering behind the doctrine of non-intervention while Italy and Germany actively assisted General Franco's rebellion against the elected Republican government; he also tried to perform a difficult political balancing act as regards Soviet policy on Spain, stressing both the commitment of the USSR to the Republican government *and*, compared with Fascist intervention, its relatively limited actual intervention. In April 1937 Macmurray and Ingram were part of a group of Christians invited by the Spanish government to Spain to investigate claims by the Francoists that the Republicans were systematically trying to eradicate religion. The emotional heart of the joint report subsequently published is the delegation's experience of the Basque country. While there they witnessed at first hand the second aerial bombing of the little town of Durango by Franco and his allies

(hundreds had perished in the first attack, among them 'twelve nuns and two priests, one of whom had been killed while saying Mass'[33]), a prelude to the bombing by the German Condor Legion of Guernica shortly afterwards. Members of the group were able to broadcast a refutation of the nationalist claim that 'the Reds had blown up churches in Durango and killed the nuns'.[34] The nationalists are portrayed as the enemies of real religion, the republican closure of churches and attacks on clergy are construed as a response to the reactionary *political* stance of the religious and not an attack on religion as such; indeed, the Basques are portrayed as embodying all the virtues of a truly religious society: 'All of us who were in this part of Spain agreed that we had never been in a country anywhere in Europe in which religion was more real and more alive as a social force.'[35] The political mood is upbeat, Franco has missed his opportunity and is facing defeat despite his Fascist backers; likewise in the Commons at more or less the same time Acland saw the resistance of the Spanish as the first serious check the Fascists had experienced in the 1930s, no thanks to the craven behaviour of the British and French:

> Until recently the Fascist powers went calmly on their way, and they succeeded unless we, the non-Fascist powers … were prepared to do something which might, in certain circumstances precipitate a conflict; and as we always failed to do anything of that kind, the Fascists up to quite recently, seemed to be having it all their own way. Now they have met the Spanish People's Army, and the position to-day is much more serious.[36]

Up in Merseyside Stapledon threw himself into supporting the republican government, lending his pen and his voice to the cause, and, along with his wife, Agnes, helping to arrange the evacuation of Basque children following the German bombing raids.[37] The fading of optimism and the acceleration towards global war is tracked through Acland's eyes in Chapter 4. In the narrowing and darkening space that remained, Acland's desperate search for some process or vehicle that could provide political hope was to culminate in the emergence of Common Wealth.

In the case of Soviet Communism the response could broadly be characterised as critical support. This was partly a willingness, often deeply credulous, to see the new socialist experiment in the USSR in the best possible light, and also a belief that in the absence of any moral backbone in the leading Western democracies the Soviet Union alone seemed willing to stand up to Fascism – most notably in the Spanish Civil War. There was also a perception that anti-Sovietism was an important weapon in the ideological armoury of anti-socialist forces in Britain. Internal repression was noted and deplored but was softened by notions of Russia's historical 'backwardness' and international hostility. These considerations were of sufficient strength to survive the Nazi–Soviet pact and the USSR's invasion of Poland, when a whole host of mitigating circumstances were identified (though Acland did, with some equivocation, condemn the invasion of Finland).[38] Expanded notions of the religious provided a

theoretical space for this stance. Writing in the Second World War when, following the Nazi invasion of the USSR, philo-Sovietism was at its height, Macmurray opined that since 'the leadership of progress is in Russian hands … the religious issue in Russia is the decisive question, not only for the Christian Church, but for world-civilization'.[39] He viewed the militant atheism of the USSR as, in effect, Communism's belief, though not expressed in these terms, 'that Christianity is the enemy of every effort to establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth'.[40] But this assumption, true as regards institutional Christianity, is itself the expression of an authentic Christian impulse towards both science, itself so necessary to overcome the underdeveloped conditions of Russia, and community. Macmurray's assertion of this point clearly impressed Stapledon, though he replaced 'Christian' with 'religious': 'the Russian revolution … though consciously anti-religious … was unconsciously a religious movement, as has been pointed out by John Macmurray'.[41] Macmurray himself argued that progressive Christianity had the task of making the Soviets conscious of the deep Christian roots of their great experiment; the corollary of uncovering the dark atheism lurking in the Christianity of the West.

Common Wealth thus provided a space that proved hugely attractive to a host of different voices, an organisation that actively encouraged an aspirational politics, and was sufficiently capacious and open to allow a huge diversity of opinion; Irene Wagner, who was to become librarian of the Labour Party, expressed the exciting sense of possibilities that Common Wealth offered: ' So like many other socialists we were attracted to the Commonwealth [sic] Party … here we could hear and say, and do, what the Labour Party was officially not allowed to be concerned with.'[42] The titles of Acland's books in this period convey something of the sense of anticipation, hope and a forward-looking optimism that could be found at all levels of the movement – *Unser Kampf* (Our Struggle), *The Forward March*, *What It Will Be Like* and *How It Can be Done*. His own moral and ultimately religious grounding of politics made the space of Common Wealth alluring to the religious/political projects of Macmurray, Ingram and Stapledon, yet its modern, socialistic outlook could make it an acceptable home for refugees from the Communist Party such as Tom Wintringham. Common Wealth brought together people with some pretty big dreams. The contrast is clearly great between these personal, sexual, global, even cosmic, aspirations, and the relatively modest reality and achievements of a small political organisation. And yet it is a tribute to Acland's creation that there was no sense of incongruity, or of bathos. Common Wealth took ideas very seriously, for it had itself grown out of analysis and debate, vision and values. In its short life, in a time of mortal peril, it did what it could to effect political and social change while never losing a desire for the sublime.

1 John Macmurray
Christ and Marx

In 1994 Tony Blair, the newly elected leader of the Labour Party, publicly identified himself with the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray: 'if you really want to understand what I'm all about,' he had said, 'you have to take a look at a guy called John Macmurray. It's all there.'[1] Since then much ingenuity has been deployed trying to identify the nature of this 'it',[2] for Blair has never been particularly precise on the matter.[3] His highly visible endorsement has been distinctly double-edged – on the one hand he significantly helped to rescue Macmurray's name from the obscurity that had descended upon him even before his death in 1976, but on the other hand the philosopher was to an extent wrenched out of context, his name linked to an issue of which he knew nothing, New Labour. The impression created was that Macmurray was some kind of pious social democrat, when the reality was so different. Since Blair's intervention there has been a growing literature seeking to redress this imbalance, attempting to place Macmurray's work in the turbulent intellectual and political conditions of his time. This chapter endeavours to do this through a consideration of his interwar exploration of the relationship between Christianity and the work of Karl Marx, where, a lifetime away from Blair, in a world context of Soviet Communism and international Fascism, Macmurray attempted his ambitious synthesis of radical socialism and highly heterodox religion.

'Here I Stand'

Some time around 1934 John Macmurray (born 16 February 1891),[4] Grote Professor of the Philosophy of Mind and Logic at London University, decided to commit to paper his deepest convictions.[5] It is a token of the seriousness of the resulting document – especially from one raised in a staunchly protestant household in Scotland – that it begins with the words of defiance traditionally attributed to Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms: 'Here I Stand'. The typescript, which Macmurray never published, can be found in the Macmurray Papers at the University of Edinburgh, where he was to become Professor of Moral Philosophy in 1944. It is a little spiritual autobiography dealing with

the erosion of the faith of his childhood and youth, and its replacement by a new Christian certainty:

> I STAND as a Christian, outside every Church. I stand outside the Churches because I am a Christian. If I am to explain the position I take up as an individual, or as a citizen, in philosophy, or politics, in any department of human life, theoretical or practical, it is this I have to explain. Everything else follows from it. It is, to me, the fixed centre of an experience in flux. Of this I am certain. I am sure of other things, only to the point where I can see their necessary relation to this.[6]

He looks back to his days as an undergraduate at Glasgow University (1909–13) and to the evangelical Protestantism he then vigorously espoused:

> That faith today is in rags and tatters. I should rather go naked than be seen in it. Even though I find a good deal of its language still useful, the meaning behind the words has been transubstantiated. In its traditional meaning, it has become frankly incredible.[7]

This is attributed not to a gradual and largely unconscious process of loss but to 'a conscious and continuous re-examination of its substance, in the light of history and science and philosophy, as well as of concrete personal experience'.[8] He indicates the current direction of his thinking in enigmatic, even paradoxical, language: 'The experience that has led me to this declaration, that I am a Christian, is the same kind of experience that has led a considerable number of my own generation to declare themselves atheists.'[9]

That this intense credo was written at this time is indicative of Macmurray's sense that his thought was going through a significant shift, and is a testimony to the impact that a couple of years' intensive study of the young Marx had had on his ideas. As he suggests in 'Here I Stand', his thinking had been evolving since his undergraduate days, in his time studying philosophy at Balliol College, Oxford, and as a university teacher at Manchester and Witwatersrand, before his return to a fellowship at Balliol (1923–8). Significant among his 'concrete personal experience' had been his active service in the First World War where he was wounded (indeed permanently scarred), and his company wiped out, at the battle of Arras (he was subsequently awarded the Military Cross for his actions in the battle). There was also his painful experience of the hostile reception he received when, on sick-leave after the battle of the Somme, he preached a sermon on international reconciliation in a London church, an event which determined him to renounce membership of any institutional Church.[10] Thus, as we shall see in more detail later, a good deal of his thought in the 1930s had roots that predated his encounter with Marx, but his deep engagement with that thinker's work was an undoubted watershed. Reminiscing in the 1960s Macmurray pinpointed his decision to begin an in-depth reading of Marx's early work to a conference held in