

**Labour's hidden soul: religion at the intersection of labour and the environment**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the intersection of individual life-histories, organisational histories and societal histories and reveals how religion, in several different expressions, serves to provide a connection between justice for workers and justice for the environment in the work of trade unionists. The trade union movement is generally seen as secular, and thus in our life history interviews religion as a backdrop to labour activists' formation was unexpected. Religion becomes manifest in various ways, partly through experiences in the present or at formative periods in unionists' lives, but also through its cultural embeddedness in language and collective memory. In this way it serves to provide subtle influences on beliefs, concepts of social justice and daily action.

### **Keywords**

Environmental labour studies; religion; trade unions; environmental justice; climate change

### **Introduction**

The debate over the influence of religion has been a contentious one since the publication of Lynn White's seminal paper (1967) which made the case that the basic tenets of Judeo-Christian beliefs have been essentially destructive for the environment as they advocate human dominance and control over the earth. Although there has been much empirical research on the influence of religious beliefs on environmental values and practices (Kanagy and Nelsen 1995; Boyd 1999; Sherkat and Ellison

2007), the findings have been less than conclusive. Taking a more philosophical line, Rolston (2006) has argued that religion and ethics have the capacity to teach people to care for our world justly and charitably in a way that neither science nor economics is able. Moreover, he argues that those of religious faith, in concert with other interest groups, can do more than individuals alone (which is the emphasis of many governments' policies). Smith, in the same volume of *Environmental Values* (2016) proposes that a more fine-grained approach to understand people's justification for an environmental ethic is needed, such as that provided by Dunlap (2016). Dunlap argues that spiritual arguments provided the foundation for many of the early environmentalists (e.g., Thoreau, Muir) and one might see 'some aspects of environmentalism as a religious movement' (2006, 322). However, Dunlap suggests that subsequent environmentalists and those with whom they have formed alliances have failed to recognize the spiritual and religious roots of the movement.

It is within this context of the influence of religion on environmentalism that this paper seeks to explore in what way religion may have influenced the inclusion of environmental concerns on trade unions' agendas and trade unions' response to climate change.

### **Labour, Religion and the Environment**

Arguably, trade unions have long been concerned with environmental issues but typically, although not exclusively, in relation to health and safety issues. Only recently have they been discussed as an issue of social and environmental justice or in the context of climate change. Trade unions are having proactively to respond to a changing and warming world (Lipsig-Mummé and McBride 2015; Räthzel and Uzzell

2013). Workers have a ‘double-interest’ in addressing climate change. First, they will be affected directly as citizens in their communities and in the workplace in terms of living and working conditions. Second, the industries and organisations in which they work will be subject to regulations and controls, which will have a direct or indirect effect on jobs. It makes sense for trade unions to play an active role in formulating constructive worker-protective policies and practices that include environmental protection. Particularly since 2006, trade unions have been contributing to international climate change debates and to the formulation of agreements at the Conference of the Parties (COP) demanding the inclusion of a just transition for workers (United Nations Environment Programme 2007; International Trade Union Confederation 2009).

In 2007, the UK Environment Agency asked leading scientists and environmentalists what are the most important actions that can be taken to address climate change (Stoneham 2012). Their first priority was energy efficiency and reductions in fossil fuel use. Their second priority was action, support and advocacy from religious organisations. As Christie (2011) argues, there is a growing recognition that ‘sustainable development movements can’t afford to ignore or reject opportunities for collaboration and communication associated with faith.’ Trade unions too have recognised that environmental actions can be made more effective by working with others, not only environmental NGOs but also faith groups. Unlike in the UK, in some European countries there are explicitly Christian professing trade unions e.g., Belgium - Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond/ Confédération des syndicats chrétiens (ACV/CSC); Germany - Christlicher Gewerkschaftsbund Deutschlands (CGB). In the ACV/CSC mission statement they claim to be a trade union of values (e.g., fair

distribution, public care, participation, tolerance, equality, international solidarity), which in turn are central to one of their principal policy interests, climate change: ‘A green economy in a low-carbon society only offers an opportunity if it is also socially just’ (Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond 2018). But perhaps what is noteworthy is that there is no explicit reference to their particular Christian foundation as a driver for the advocacy and support of this policy. The same is true of the CGB in Germany, which does not even mention the environment in their main goals.

Notwithstanding the fact that theologians such as Walter Rauchenbusch and Washington Gladden in the US and John Trevor and the nonconformists in Britain made a critical contribution to the labour movement in the late 19th century by preaching a ‘social gospel’, the trade union movement is generally seen as secular based on a Marxist or Social Democratic. We were surprised to find that quite a number of unionists mentioned religion in their life-history account although we had not asked about it. Indeed, a number of trade unionists argued that it was important to involve civil society organisations such as church groups and gave examples such as securing support from the Quakers for a climate change caravan that toured the North-West England. Another unionist referred to working with a Pakistan Community Centre which represented six mosques.

Thus, we decided to investigate the salience of religion in the formation of our union interviewees, and its possible relationship to their environmental engagement. We were interested to explore what role religion has played in the way they conceptualise environmental concerns as a trade union issue. If a linkage can be identified, has this provided inspiration and tools for unionists to become engaged with environmental and labour futures?

We want to state at the outset that we do not consider this work to sit comfortably within a sociology of religion, nor within the theoretical frameworks that inform most of that work (Beckford and Demerath 2007). We are aware that there is a body of research on religion, protests movements, and collective action (Nepstad and Williams 2007), but our emphasis is different. We present some of the ways in which unionists relate the role of religion in their lives and for their engagement in workers' interests and environmental justice. We ask whether and why religion might play a role in connecting these two areas of engagement. We do not argue that these results can be generalised across the trade union movement; the nature of our sampling did not have this objective. Quite the opposite – we selected leaders within the different unions because we were interested in people who have been influential in shaping union agendas on the environment. What we will argue is that connecting social and environmental justice through a religious framework indicates that broader worldviews than those currently available in the labour movement are possible in order to address the environmental issue from a workers' perspective (Gibson 2004; Smith and Smythe 2017). There is a body of work such as that by Witt (2016) who documents how three theological approaches have served to provide the justificatory argumentation to oppose coal extraction through the destruction of mountain top removal: the notion of 'Creation Care', dark green spirituality' and the Christian gospel emphasis on social justice.

### **Religion's growing influence on global politics and social movements**

In what is often presented as a technological, rational and secular world, it might be thought that an affirmative response to the question posed on the now-famous 1965

cover of TIME, 'Is God Dead?' would be inevitable. But as Christie (2011) points out, this is a European perspective. In a study based on the analyses of 2500 censuses, surveys and population registers worldwide, it has been calculated that eight in ten people identify with a religious group (Hackett and Grim 2012). While there may be evidence of declining congregations, we should not confuse falling church attendance with a decline in religiosity. The version of 'Believing without belonging' (Davie 1994; Voas and Crockett 2005) hypothesises that although church attendance may have waned, and the church increasingly is taken for granted except in times of 'need' (e.g., baptisms, marriages, funerals and at moments of 'national crisis'), many Britons are nevertheless 'Christian though unchurched' (Voas and Crockett 2005). Importantly, believing without practice does not prevent the persistence of Christianised beliefs within national culture(s).

Philpott (2009) takes a slightly different position, arguing that religion's influence on global politics across the world and its place in public life has become more prominent and controversial over the last decade. It is just that its place and importance for political (and other social) sciences has not been fully acknowledged, although there are signs that this is changing. Philpott throws down a number of challenges: first, there is need for a better understanding of religion's relationship to modernization if, as Shah and Toft (2006) and Hanson (2006) argue, economic and technological development, and democratization actually strengthen religion. Second, the relationships between religion and the state need to be explored and explained more adequately. It is not simply a question of inserting religion into the mix, but rather recognizing that religion may become a salient component of the identity of politically influential social movements (Thomas 2005). Third, religion has had

significant influence on ‘large-scale shifts and innovations in the international system’ (Philpott 2009). It is difficult to think of an international system more significant than the global climate system that will require large-scale social and economic shifts and innovations. Recent evidence of the ‘Francis Effect’ suggests that this may already be happening (Maibach 2015; Pope Francis 2015).

Glock (1962) argues that regardless of differences between traditions and faiths, religiosity can be understood to comprise five dimensions: the experiential (i.e., subjective experience including affect, expectations and awareness of immanence), the ideological (i.e., expectations concerning shared beliefs), the ritualistic (i.e., outward manifestations of religious practices, e.g., prayer, fasting etc.), the intellectual (i.e., knowledge of the tenets of faith), and the consequential (i.e., the secular effects of religious belief, practice, experience, and knowledge on the actions of the individual). Our analysis focuses on the intellectual and how this becomes a driver for the consequential dimension. In other words, the ways in which the normative tenets of the faith (e.g., the Ten Commandments) specify how people should and should not live out their faith in their daily (working) lives, even if they do not consider themselves to be religious anymore, and how this may become manifest through their union work.

### **Past Meets Present**

The growth of Protestant nonconformism in the industrial centres of 19th century Britain and its role in the advancement of trade unionism and socialism was formative (Thompson 1963; Reid 2004) and is still present in the collective memory of the labour movement (Glasman 2011). If we are to understand the influences of the past

on the actions of UK unionists, and simultaneously appreciate the influence of religion on the labour movement and its development, we have to go beyond the role of institutional collective memories and draw on formations over the lifecourse.

In his genealogical account of 'Labour as a radical tradition', Glasman (2011) argues that the relationship between the English church and Labour has been neglected. Although this is not entirely accurate, as Thompson (1963) and Hobsbawm (1957) discuss the development of working class radicalism and its relationship to the church, Glasman is correct in suggesting that the conjoining of the Church and workers' movements does seem like a paradox as this represents a coming together of the previously opposed and antagonistic into new forms of common life. But it was not the 'Established' Anglican Church, which Keir Hardie described as a 'reflex of modern business' (Pierson 1960), but rather the non-Established churches (i.e., Roman Catholic and the non-conformist Protestant churches such as the Methodists) which had been subject to persecution over the centuries (Bevir 1999) and were marginal to the establishment, who became what Glasman (2011) calls 'the grandparents of the Labour Movement'.

The Labour Church (Bevir 1999; Inglis 1893; Katterhorn 2011; Pierson 1960; Trevor 1897), for instance, was seen by its adherents as a driving force for obtaining 'the Kingdom of God on earth'. This was the most outwardly manifest expression of the link between religious beliefs and social justice: 'Although British socialism owes debts to Marxism and Fabianism, many of its leading characteristics derive from a tradition of ethical socialism ... and did much to inspire the formation of the ILP [Independent Labour Party] and thus the Labour Party' (Bevir 1999 218). At the

Bradford conference in which the Independent Labour Party was formed, John Trevor, the founder of the Labour Church in 1891, organised a church service to accompany the event. He saw as the purpose of the church to ‘develop the religion of the Labour Movement into clearer self-consciousness’. For Turner, the Labour Church was ‘Labour’s lost soul’ and ‘... has a place in history synonymous with the foundation and development of the political working-class movement’ (Turner 2009). There is a correspondence between the tenets of liberation theology (Löwy 2000) which gives primacy to a reading of the scriptures through the eyes of the poor, to bring about social and economic change, and the principles of the Labour Church (Trevor 1897), with its identification of capitalism as a type of structural sin, and the individual as an agent of their own emancipation from social, economic and moral bondage.

### **Methodology**

The study reported here was part of an international project with the overarching theme of understanding the role that individuals play in transforming organisations (Räthzel et al. 2015) by investigating how individual life-histories, organisational histories and societal histories intersect to create change. As the organisation to be investigated we chose trade unions since their engagement in environmental issues requires them to transform not only their policies but their self-perception as well. Life history interviews with individuals engaging in such transformations are our main sources of information together with union documents. The 22 unionists we interviewed in the UK came from a range of manual, professional, managerial, or administrative-focused unions in the resource extraction, manufacturing and service sectors. Unionists interviewed were those whose portfolio was the environment. As

the number of unionists involved at a policy and implementation level in environmental affairs is still quite small, we can say that we interviewed a majority of the most influential unionists.

Life history interviews are insightful for our understanding of change and the subtleties of social, economic and historical influences on social practices over the lifespan. Interviewees were asked to relate their life story beginning from the date of their birth and including the familial, spatial and societal contexts in which they grew up. However, they knew we were interested in union strategies regarding climate change and in individual trajectories into union work and environmental issues. While we occasionally sought clarifications and elaborations we never asked questions relating to religion. Where interviewees brought up the theme it was because they regarded it as salient for them. Interviews lasted between 1½ - 2½ hours; some were longer. They were recorded with the interviewees' agreement and transcribed.

While coding the transcripts according to our research questions, our close reading was done on the basis that we were open to issues that we had not anticipated. The twelve interviewees (out of 22) in the UK whose life-stories included the mentioning of religion, either as religious beliefs, organisations, or upbringing were an unexpected result, which we wanted to investigate more closely because we are interested in the motivations and world-views which guide the positions of unionists and their environmental practices. Interviews are a co-construction between the interviewer and the interviewee (Holstein and Gubrium 2003). This does not mean that life-stories are inventions but rather, different aspects of a respondent's life will be told differently in different contexts and at different times. Life-histories provide

the opportunity to learn something about the ways in which people experience themselves as actors and act upon what they see as limitations, success or failure. The challenge for the researcher is to walk the thin line between taking stories at face value and giving them a meaning that corresponds more with the position of the researcher than with the experience of the respondents. One strategy to avoid this is to send our text to the interviewees. So far, we have never had to amend our analyses, even where respondents were surprised by the ways in which we made sense of their stories.

A case study is not a basis for statistical generalisations but may provide the possibility to learn something about people's potential to act, since it is closer to a 'multidimensional and unpredictable reality' (Flyvbjerg, 2006). We hope to provide insights into the possibilities of connecting traditional union concerns of social justice with environmental concerns and religious beliefs or with world-views derived from religious influences. We do not aim to prove that religion plays an important role in unions in the UK (and neither do we argue the opposite). What interests us is how religion is articulated in the life-histories of those who mention it, and whether and how it plays a role in their environmental concerns and policies. We are interested in the function of religion for our interviewees' practices, or as Glock (1962) expressed it, the consequential dimension of religion.

Conditions of anonymity and confidentiality were followed throughout, in accordance with the ethical opinion given by the Ethics Committee of the University of Surrey and the Swedish Etikprövningsnämnde. Therefore, we cannot describe the place and position of our interviewees in detail and names are pseudonyms. Interviewees have

had the possibility to check the quotes we used prior to publication. We have followed Yardley's (2000) four principles for conducting and analysing qualitative research: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance.

### **Religion in the Formation of Trade Unionists: Belief, Social Justice and Action**

Religion provides a moral justification for acting upon the world, taking up the cause of social justice, protecting the vulnerable. It means being driven by beliefs that are implicitly or explicitly derived from a religious faith. Our interviewees rarely if at all attributed their actions causally to their past or present faith, but they did acknowledge that religion (had) informed their view of the world to the extent that sometimes it pushed them in specific directions.

#### *Jack Cromore, an Irish Catholic*

For Jack Cromore who was raised in Ulster, a country with 300 years of sectarian discrimination, oppression and violence that cut across all aspects of political, social and economic life (Cairns and Darby 1998), the Roman Catholic Church represented resistance, because it was a culture under attack. Thus, Ulster Catholics had a 'siege mentality' as Cromore calls it. He was brought up by relatives in a rural part of County Down because his parents had died when he was young. He did not belong to any youth organisation because 'the Boy Scouts were seen as a kind of British establishment thing, so we didn't do that.' Moreover, the Boy Scouts were seen to have ties to the established Anglican Church. Many groups are associated with their local church and participate in quasi-military parades on Remembrance Sunday (the annual day of commemoration of the war dead in November). As a Catholic non-

membership affirmed resistance. Jack played Gaelic football, the principal sport of the Irish Republic, not rugby or soccer that epitomised colonial (i.e., British) culture. While Jack had a devout and strict upbringing, attended Mass daily and knelt down every night and said the rosary, as a teenager he eventually rebelled. This was because, ‘people wouldn’t answer your questions properly ... say about the Pope’s infallibility. ... it was just waffle, to be honest. ‘Cos they weren’t that well educated, and they were going to say, you know, “We’ll take you to the priest,”’ Jack, a committed environmentalist both in terms of his advocacy within the union and in his personal and domestic life was not sure about religion ‘how it shaped my environmental thing’ except that his questioning shaped his views about ‘...Fairness, equality, stuff like that.’ His recalcitrant attitude was seen not just as disrespectful but challenging the authority of the Church which would bring disgrace, “No, you’re not bringing shame on this family!” From an early age, he was seen as confrontational: ‘Well, he’s going to be an argumentative little sod.’ He contrasted his experience with relatives over the border in Donegal (Republic of Ireland) where the attitude to religion was more flexible. In Ulster, however, threatening religion threatens identity and one’s right to belong, or even exist; a Catholic identity was a statement not only of faith but also of politics.

Although religion ceased to be part of Jack’s daily life, interpretations of its values and precepts became engrained into his thinking, and continue to inform and guide his actions: ‘I try to judge them fairly, no matter what their creed, their colour, their sexuality, whatever else it may be... I think that Catholicism did shape my – I suppose my conscience, for want of a better term. It didn’t dominate from a Christian ethos; it was more to do with a humanistic thing’. These sentences show two

contradictory aspects of Jack's self-representation: while he recognises the 'Christian ethos' as decisive, he also seeks to translate it into a different ethos, a humanist one, which he does not see as necessarily Christian.

*Richard Newcastle, an Anglican*

Richard Newcastle said that his commitment to union work was: '.... a moral thing... It's more about the contribution you can make in the time that you have ... [making] a mark in some way'. He contrasted his position with a relative who is a financier who, when he dies, 'no one would ever know that he'd made an impact on the world – he just has a lot of money'. Richard begins almost apologetically and embarrassed to admit he is a Christian, but his language is suffused with idioms that come from the Bible:

'I'm not particularly religious. I am a Christian, and in fact I was only baptised a couple of years ago! But I wouldn't say I'm particularly overly religious. But I think it has always been a presiding factor that I do, you know, treat other people as they would treat you, and look after people, make sure they're looked after. You know, I think that's just the common strand through the work that we do. And I think you couldn't be an active trade union official without having some kind of element of that deep down'.

Although a concern for others is something he had always felt, even prior to formally becoming a member of the church, this signifies that religion has played a decisive role in his life, otherwise he would not have decided to be baptised as an adult. But he imputes the same values that drive him, to other union officials; it is regarded as a requirement of the job – a 'common strand'. He does not ascribe religious beliefs to

this, although he sees his beliefs informing his actions: ‘I tend to much more look to work in partnership with employers ... [whereas] ... some will very deliberately as a strategy take quite an aggressive hard line. I don’t tend to do that.’ Richard is looking to apply his Christian beliefs to his daily, perhaps conflictual, encounters; partnership for him means working with employers even though their interests may be different, and if necessary ‘turning the cheek’ if it will serve his members’. One should be cautious in attributing causality to the relationships between beliefs, actions, and identity, i.e. did Christian beliefs precede (because they are deeply embedded in culture as we argue later) or post-date what he calls his guiding principles? What is clear is that:

‘What can we do so at the end of the day (...) people are better off than they were at the beginning of the day? I think that (...) certainly drives me, and probably drives, you know, pretty much everybody that works here.’

This is seen as a personal and a shared value, thereby providing the conditions in which action becomes possible. However, Richard does not make a connection between his beliefs and bringing environmental issues on the union agenda. Religion is a guide for human interaction, and for caring for people.

*Julie Kingston, a Quaker*

Beliefs, injustice, and the environment come together powerfully for Julie Kingston, a senior unionist who was brought up in a Quaker and political household, ‘a really formative experience’ in a city dominated by the chemical and mining industries. Her mother, an environmental activist, led the community’s campaign against the development of a toxic waste incinerator, eventually taking her case to the European

Commission. Asked about the influence that being a Quaker has on her work in the union she makes reference to taking the chair in Quaker meetings:

‘... part of the responsibility of the chair is that you sense what the consensus is in the room... So you have to have quite an astute feeling of people’s body language, but also that you’re really listening to what people say. Because sometimes people say, ‘Yeah, yeah, fully agree!’ – but you know that really there’s a big problem which, if you’re not careful, it’ll come back to you afterwards. And that’s a skill that I’ve had since a kid and it’s a trained skill [through being a Quaker]. ... as young Quakers from the age of eleven we were clerking little groups of eleven-year-olds or twelve-year-olds. So it’s something which I wouldn’t know where it started or where it came from, or whether it’s natural or – you know, nature/nurture. I’ve no idea, ‘cos it’s my life.’

Julie studied history, politics, sociology and philosophy, and on graduation was employed in a European Quaker organisation and was responsible for the work on Human Rights and Social Justice questions. Undertaking a Master’s degree in social welfare, but pursuing her interests in collective bargaining, this led her to realize where this road was leading:

‘... probably a little bit like Paul on the road to Damascus’ ... ‘Oh my God, that’s the best way to organise society!’ ... ‘I’d always grown up in and around the trade union movement. I mean, my mum and dad aren’t massive shop stewards or union activists, but there’d always been a union kind of feeling around people: parents, friends were.’

From early childhood, political, environmental, union and religious commitments were connected in Julie's life. In this sense, her life-history stands out in relation to other unionists we interviewed, where different sources of world-views only came together at different points in their life.

*Colin Bedford, Catholic*

Colin Bedford was brought up in a household where his mother was a liberal Catholic while his father was a member of the Communist Party who 'never lost a belief that the Soviet Union was worth defending, despite it being a caricature of socialism.' Colin was educated in a Catholic grammar school run by Christian Brothers, which was 'not the most enlightened educational environment!'; one particular Brother would launch into a tirade at any reference to the Soviet Union and thought Mussolini's achievements were underestimated. Colin joined the Labour Party Young Socialists to 'escape the repressive regime that was the Christian Brothers'. Colin's socialist ideas were informed,

'by a sort of ecological perspective. Although you'd have to say that neither the Left in the Labour Party nor Militant or many of the Left groups, or even Left Unity, have ever really (...) given the issue a priority. But it's something that .... has (...) grown and become (...) more an important element of my conception of socialism: ... the question of climate is not some secondary question; it's absolutely intrinsic to the whole question of how we raise socialist ideas and challenge capitalism, all its consequences.'

Catholicism, one of Colin's formative experiences, also taught him to reject religion. His decision to join the young socialists, to leave school at an early age and to study

politics and sociology were escape attempts from his conservative catholic upbringing.

*Robert Petworth, 'lapsed Anglican'*

Robert Petworth is a unionist with a national responsibility for environmental issues. He talked of being a churchgoer when he was a young boy. While questioning and being uncomfortable with many of the formalities of the Church of England, he acknowledged the continuing importance and legacy of the Christian values that influenced his boyhood. His parents (who were not regular churchgoers) encouraged him to join the Cubs and later the Boy Scouts, based in his local church. By his early teens he had become sceptical of activities such as a monthly 'Church Parade'. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that it had an influence on his later work experiences:

'... whether as a community worker in an inner-city area or working for the T&G as a union official in low paid industries in London, and the exposure to people's hardships .... I'm sure that my choices of this kind of commitment were influenced by those early-acquired, if you like, Christian values. I mean, I'm not a churchgoer now, but when I was young, attendance whether with the Cubs or Scouts was expected, it went with all the other activities I really enjoyed, especially camping and hiking – the activities you shared with friends and in so doing learned about mutual support. (...) So, what does that do to your understanding of society? You learn about these Christian values from a very early age, whatever that means, and about working with others .... These values are often summed up in simple phrases or mottoes, like, 'Don't walk by on the other side. Do unto people as you would be done by' – all that does influence you quite profoundly, and the choices you make, I believe'

While Robert's experiences of Christian values emerged from a relationship with the church that 'was expected', they are still the first values that come to mind when asked about the sources guiding his actions today. As with Richard Newcastle above, not only does Robert draw on Christian values, but he has no difficulty in remembering the exact expressions from the Bible. He uses the archaic 'unto', and expresses the phrase using the quid pro quo style of treating people that Jesus used. We can see how this legacy has an influence both as a guide for practices and as a way of seeing the world. In addition to the conjunction of outdoor activities and the church mentioned above, his interest in the environment emerged

'... in a kind of very profound way influenced by living near the sea, and often on the beach in the summer with my mother, and on the edge of what's called the South Downs, which is the countryside on the edge of Brighton, where we would often play when we were kids, in woods and – so that you would have a lot of contact I suppose, with just the natural environment without really kind of appreciating just how much you enjoyed it.'

This is a vision of the environment not as a battleground between competing forces of capitalism, but a bucolic setting for restoration from everyday troubles.

### **Cultural Embeddedness and Historical Memory**

There are less obvious but no less important ways in which religion insinuates itself into the everyday, even for those who do not see themselves as following a faith.

First, through language and the discourses people use to organise their thoughts and

give meaning to their world. Second, through the collective and historic memory of actions in the past which become talismanic and a source of identity for the present.

### *Language and Culture*

Even if the unionists quoted here were not practicing their faith in the traditional way, their speech was peppered with Biblical phrases which often reflected Christian values, e.g., ‘do unto others as they would do unto you’ which might be a popular way of expressing justice and equality. Sometimes, such expressions emerge even when the speakers do not mention religion or the church as part in their upbringing. One unionist, John Beaulieu, who has spent thirty years as part of a ‘democratic centralist Trotskyist organisation’, was not only keen to involve religious (and non-religious) groups in the ‘Campaign Against Climate Change’ but twice used the expression ‘being part of a broad church’ to refer to the inclusion of other groups, a phrase frequently employed by the Labour Party to describe its inclusive reach (Fletcher-Hackwood 2011).

Religion provides a discourse with which to describe the relationships between beliefs and action. A number of interviewees used the term ‘tools’ as instruments for change, perhaps not unsurprising given their industrial background. As Matt Cambridge said, ‘... toolmakers have always been radical – they used to refer to them as the ‘labour aristocracy’ ... Heidegger who, of course, was a hideous person politically ... pointed out that one should distinguish between a tool and a machine. A tool is amenable to the human spirit, whereas a machine appropriates your knowledge.’ And tool, of course, reminds us of the prayer attributed to St Francis, ‘*Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace*’.

For others, the discourse of religion stands in contrast to action as it lays bare conflicts. Jack Cromore cited the hypocrisy of some churchgoers and priests, who would demonstrate their faith inside the church, but ‘... outside people were badmouthing each other! As a kid you think, ‘Well, that’s not what the priest was saying ten minutes ago!’ ... So that maybe formed the genesis of my questioning why, you know, faith, religion, Christianity, whatever, you know.’ He saw the contradiction in that people in church were exhorted to be just and non-discriminatory, but the life lived outside encouraged people to be discriminatory. Arguably his criticism of Christianity is based not on the values that this religion is defending, but that they are not realised in the practices of those who allegedly follow them: ‘... I didn’t abandon what you might call the principles of it in terms of treating people fairly. And an extension of that is to treat animals fairly and treat the environment fairly.’ This ‘extension’ is interesting because many religions, not only Christianity, create a connection between humans, human nature and non-human nature (Simpson 2011).

### *Collective Memory and Culture*

Language, is so much part of other influences it is difficult to discriminate ‘figure and ground’. It lies within the collective memories of those organisations to which individuals belong. Assmann (2011) maintains that while memories are held by individuals they are also shared with others, inter-generationally communicated in narratives. They interact with the material world which in turn becomes a carrier of memories through events of commemoration, sites and monuments, and the institutions of education and the media. The past and its traditions become socially

constructed, assimilated and accommodated within existing cognitive structures, memorialised in language, images, artefacts, structures and events to provide discursive resources upon which the present draws (Potter and Wetherell 1995). The union banners paraded in marches which celebrate values such as solidarity, shared struggles, loyalty and strength, provide an obvious example. When marching behind such a banner you are no longer marching only with those around you, but with all those who fought the struggles of the past.

What bearing does this history have on the formation of UK unionists in the early 21st century, especially for those who do not purport to be ‘religious’? It is easy to become convinced that our societies and especially the labour movement are secular or even anti-religious, and thereby overlook the impact that religion has had on our everyday lives. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, argued that although Britain is a more secular country than it was even fifty years ago, it still retains the vestiges of a Christian culture: ‘... the cultural memory .... and in some ways, the cultural presence is still quite strongly Christian. But it is post-Christian in the sense that habitual practice for most of the population is not taken for granted... A Christian country as a nation of believers? No. A Christian country in the sense of still being very much saturated by this vision of the world and shaped by it? Yes.’

(Moreton 2014). This is a reflection of the ‘Christianised beliefs’ (Voas and Crockett 2005) referred to earlier by several unionists who used words and language from religious engagement in their youth, long since detached from their original context. When relating their life-stories, however, these engagements were resuscitated. Religious practices and world-views are embedded in the weft and weave of society’s

fabric and provide significance for many people especially at transition points in their lives (e.g., baptisms, marriages and funerals).

Whether the unionists we interviewed are practicing or lapsed Christians, the language and values of the Bible run deep: ‘the ‘purer tenets’ of Christianity, I suppose get embedded in you in the sense that ‘treat people fairly, you know, no discrimination’ (Jack Cromore). The dominant worldviews and the practices of a society are reflected in its language and thus language provides an inescapable framework for our assumptive world (Parkes 1971).

While the relationship between religion and union activity was expressed and consciously lived for some, for others it was more immanent, a taken for granted part of everyday culture, embedded in discourse and collective memory. This culture feeds the genealogical roots of socialism in the UK, as Glasman (2011) argues. For example, Miliband was lampooned in the national media for appearing to see himself as Moses during the 2015 national election campaign when he wrote Labour’s commitments on a tablet of stone. While it may be speculation that he chose to present his commitments this way as it spoke to Labour’s heritage, it is clear that this is how it was interpreted (McTague and Chorley 2015). Jack Cromore demonstrates the historical perspective: ‘...because all unions don’t see the cross-over between the environment and the industrial. ... we get knocked back on lots of things, (...) but you can’t just say, “Oh, we’re giving up.” Because otherwise we wouldn’t have got this far! I mean, we were founded 120 years ago’.

One must be cautious in directly connecting historical collective influences and individual action, implying that the interaction between religion and the labour movement 150 years ago is instrumental in the formation of individuals as agents of change today. But one way in which those influences exist is through everyday language and through values that appear at first sight secular but are seen by some of our respondents in retrospect as part of their religious upbringing.

### **Conclusion**

Perhaps we should not have been surprised that religion and the church were mentioned as formative by some unionists. After all, the church is one of society's significant institutions and directly or subtly, plays a key role in the development of individual and collective identities, integrates personal lives with the State, inculcates cultural norms and practices and is a critical source of hegemonic discourses. Early experiences leave a lasting legacy on values and actions. A number of the unionists we spoke to took on leadership and organizing roles in such organizations in their youth, which then provided the competences, sense of self-efficacy, self-esteem and experience they drew on in later life. Our societies are steeped in religious practices and discourses, even when they are not necessarily experienced as religious, but just as everyday culture.

Religious precepts were a salient part of our respondents' biographies and formation, in which involvement in the church at a young age has left a legacy of values centring on social justice and a concern for others. Such values are not exclusively Christian but in the Western world historically have been formulated to a large degree by Christianity.

The influence of religion that led our unionists into an involvement with environmental issues varied. For some, denominational faith had been passed across generations; some had come to a faith later in their lives. Those respondents who had experienced conservative and orthodox positions were critical and prepared to ask ‘awkward’ questions on the grounds that the values which were preached were not lived. Yet others simply rejected any kind of religion. Some were surrounded by a hostile world in preaching on love and forgiveness stood alongside ever-present injustice and pain such as the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland. For others, coming from progressive religious backgrounds, even a ‘lapsed’ religion provides a moral compass and a normative framework of values with respect to mutual support and a willingness to listen to others. And for a few, a link was forged with the environment as a vehicle for connecting justice for workers with justice for animals and nature. It is this link that we found especially interesting since it begs questions about the way in which the relation between nature and labour is conceptualised in the labour movement.

We made reference to the fact that this research was part of an international study in which we interviewed trade unionists in, amongst other countries, Brazil, where a majority of our interviewees mentioned religion as their motivation for connecting workers’ rights and environmental concerns. For example, as one unionist from the Brazilian Trade Union of Metal Workers said: ‘The study of ecology led me to think that there was something supreme, subtle, that couldn’t simply be physical reactions, biological. (...) the Bible says (...) all creation has to be redeemed with the presence of God on Earth. In other words, it’s all a relationship between humans and nature.’

His inspiration was the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff (1996) who defined the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of workers as the two ‘plagues that bleed’, an indictment that has been most recently voiced by Pope Francis (2015). This link is both theoretical (Gutiérrez 1973) and based on everyday experiences: the impact the destruction of nature has on communities.

In the UK, even those who represented their beliefs as an important motivation for their work, described its presence more as a conviction guiding their social actions, without presenting a comprehensive religious world-view that connected humans and nature as God’s creation. What if any, importance does it then have that leading unionists connect their engagement with Christian values? The accounts of our interviewees bring the significance of religious thinking and feeling for some unionists to life and alerts us to the historical connection between churches and workers’ movements, not only in the UK, but also in other European countries (Belgium, The Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden) and in some countries of the global south. Taking this into consideration opens up a space for possible alliances between workers’ movements and religious movements and organisations, which link care for workers’ rights with care for nature. There is, for instance, an eco-justice tradition with religious roots, which is older than the Environmental Justice movement that began in the US in the 1980s (Gibson 2004). But practical alliances are not the only perspective we can derive from our findings, but there are theoretical perspectives as well, namely the need for a comprehensive world-view that allows workers and their representatives to make the connection between labour and nature.

*Nature and Labour*

Despite the fact that unions internationally (Rosemberg 2013; Burrow 2014; ITUC 2015) and nationally (TUC 2008; Hampton 2015) have included environmental issues into their agenda and fought to incorporate a ‘just transition’ for workers into the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, we did not find a worldview which accounts for the inseparable relationship between nature and labour (Räthzel, Cock, and Uzzell 2018). Both are seen as separate entities, where one (production) has an effect on the other. The trade union movement could learn from the writings in Liberation theology (Boff 1996; Gutiérrez, 1973) and from other interpretations of Christianity where a worldview is espoused in which humans and nature are seen as allies rather than adversaries. Several unionists, including Jack Cromore, grasped this idea and saw a relationship between justice for people and justice for nature. One could well imagine a connection between these Christian worldviews and Marx’ dictum that society’s wealth is not produced by workers alone but by workers and the earth (Marx 1998), an insight that has been forgotten by trade union movements across the globe. Both forms of linking humans and nature could be connected with the everyday experiences of workers and thereby provide a theoretical framework for practical alliances between workers’ and religious movements for environmental justice.

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