

Neil Johnson, *The Labour Church: The Movement and Its Message*

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Neil Johnson, *The Labour Church: The Movement and Its Message* (London: Routledge 2018)

NEIL JOHNSON'S STUDY of the socialist Labour Church is at once a reinterpretation of the church itself and a broader attempt to rewrite labour history as religious history. Johnson, a Methodist minister who holds a doctorate from the University of Birmingham, brings the sensibility of a churchman and the expertise of a historian to his in-depth study of an institution that developed a distinctive theology and a new approach to labour activism in late nineteenth and early twentieth century England and Canada.

A utopian visionary named John Trevor founded the Labour Church in Manchester, England, in 1891. After a childhood marked by poverty, loss, and strict Calvinism, Trevor pursued careers as an architect and a Unitarian minister. He also traveled widely and was influenced by movements ranging from Transcendentalism to the Oneida Community, the Salvation Army and Free Religion (a doctrine that rejected the distinction between sacred and secular and embraced progressive reform), as well as by the poetry of Walt Whitman. Trevor subsequently left the ministry – declaring organized religion inadequate to the needs of workers – and became convinced that God had moved from mainstream churches to the labour movement.

Differentiating his study from other accounts, Johnson argues the Labour Church Trevor founded was based on a new doctrine called Theological Socialism, “the belief that God was working through the Labour movement.” (13) By the late nineteenth century, Johnson suggests, ideas about socialism and Christianity had become intertwined. “While Christian Socialists saw the socialist agenda to be the means of applying

Christian principles to society, Socialist Christians found in socialism values lost to the Church which brought a relevance to the teaching of Jesus Christ.” (27) Trevor, by contrast, embraced a post-Christian theology not centered on Jesus; he believed God had shifted focus from Christianity to the labour movement, making the latter his new “vehicle of grace.” (29) Adapting millennial rhetoric to his radical politics, he prophesied that “a socialist utopia was imminent” in which the working classes would be emancipated. (14) Trevor insisted that “the Labour Movement is a Religious Movement” and called for a cross-class coalition in pursuit of its goals. (59) The Labour Church, he wrote, “is an organized attempt to develop the religious life inherent in the Labour Movement, and to give to that Movement a higher Inspiration and sturdier Independence.” (65)

Conditions were ripe for the Labour Church. Workers were increasingly literate and enfranchised but living with economic uncertainty, and throughout Britain the labour question was being debated and socialism was on the rise. At the same time, many British evangelicals were experiencing a crisis of faith that caused them to look outside established churches for spiritual guidance. The Labour Church, Johnson writes, was a broad and inclusive institution that offered a chance to engage with socialist and labour politics, within the familiar structure of a church. It reached out to educated working- and lower middle-class spiritual seekers through its newspaper, by forming alliances with socialist journalists, and by providing recreation and charity through its partnership with the socialist Clarion movement and Cinderella Clubs. The Labour Church spread rapidly throughout the United Kingdom and across the Atlantic to Canada and to a lesser extent

the United States (leaving a footprint in New England); Trevor briefly became a recognized leader in the British labour movement; and the church played an important role in the formation of Britain's Independent Labour Party (ILP).

Over time the Labour Church encountered various challenges, among them internal tensions about how to interpret Theological Socialism (most members interpreting it more loosely than their founder did) and how deeply to engage in electoral politics once the church joined the ILP. The church's decentralized structure and broad vision were advantages in recruiting a diverse membership; but those features also created problems as members disagreed over theological principles and political priorities. Another challenge was Trevor's personal problems and restless temperament, which led him in and out of the movement and caused him to leave it permanently after ten years.

The book does a fine job of explaining the theology behind the Labour Church but is most compelling when discussing what the institution actually did. The church and its members come to life when the author furnishes details about chapter activities, such as the church partnering with the Clarion movement to sponsor cycling clubs, lectures, and charitable projects, or offering its own correspondence class that appealed to literate working people. Johnson quotes one member who described a service as a satisfying middle ground between "the purely religious service and the stark materialism of the socialist propaganda meeting." (108) Two appendices provide an intriguing window into this comment by reconstructing Labour Church services. In the final chapter, the author disputes the theory that the church died out after the First World War (as well as the British-centric focus of previous studies) by presenting case studies of its postwar

revival in Birmingham, England, and across Canada. Johnson's finely grained study of the church in Birmingham is particularly well done and allows the reader a sense of how it worked on the ground. More details of this nature would have done even more to bring the church to life and provide a sense of what it accomplished.

Johnson makes broad claims for the Labour Church. According to the author, "The simple but far-reaching idea that God was in the Labour movement became the cornerstone of a religious organisation which by its existence would challenge theological assumptions within and about British Labour politics." (43) Was the Labour Church large and impactful enough to challenge those assumptions? To back up such claims, it would have been useful to provide numbers (a couple of statistics are buried in the last chapter) and a better sense of the scope and nature of the church's political activities. The author also asserts that "Theological Socialism redefines our understanding and refines our approach to Labour history as religious history." (14) In recent decades scholars have started to move past the tired assumption that religion discouraged workers from engaging in labour activism and explore the complex relationships between faith and working-class activism. Although this reviewer is not convinced that theological socialism redefines that relationship, it certainly presents an intriguing and distinctive approach to the question. Graduate students and specialists in the field will find this well-researched book an important contribution.

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