

## READERS' COMMENTS

### *The Labour Church Movement*

I welcomed Dr. K. S. Inglis's re-assessment of the Labour Church Movement in the last issue of this journal. It is very valuable to have an interpretation by one who has been making a special study of nineteenth-century religious attitudes in Britain, and I certainly did not suppose that I had said the last word on this topic in my *Origins of the Labour Party*.

At the same time I am not sure that I can accept very much of Dr. Inglis's criticism. The I.L.P., although it had a few middle-class leaders, was a distinctively working-class organisation; and I do not think that the Labour Church movement has been proved to be other than a protest against Nonconformity by the citation of five prominent members who were former Anglicans. (Dr. Inglis in fact cites six, but one of them turns out to have been a Unitarian).

Dr. Inglis argues that the movement began to decline in 1896, because few churches were founded after this date. But it was only to be expected that there would be very little expansion in the period 1896-1902, when the political side of the movement was also in the doldrums. The Labour Churches were too closely tied to the I.L.P. not to suffer when it suffered; and the problem is rather one of explaining why they failed to revive as the I.L.P. revived from 1902 onwards. Here, the growth of the Clarion Fellowship must be taken into account; and in this longer period of consideration the gradual process of awakening to the social problem on the part of the denominational ministers may reasonably be supposed to have played a part. I do not think that Dr. Inglis has suggested any satisfactory alternative explanation. There is however one further reason that occurs to me: the South African War and events following it occasioned a rapprochement of Liberal and Labour leaders which must have blunted the antagonisms on which the Labour Churches had been built.

Dr. Inglis seems to me to rely rather too much on the minutes of the Birmingham Labour Church, because, through no fault of his own, it was the only Church whose unpublished records he was able to peruse. But the Birmingham Church was not typical of the movement, most of which as he says was concentrated in Lancashire and Yorkshire. Conditions in Birmingham were unique, both in Chartist days, as Mr. Tholfsen points out, and in the early twentieth century. I wonder what evidence, other than Birmingham, Dr. Inglis has for his remark that after 1900 Labour Churches only survived where "local conditions made them convenient mediators between other bodies"? Was this true of Leek, for instance, or of Norwich?

HENRY PELLING

*Reply to Mr. Pelling*

On the first point, my argument was that "the Labour Churches were not a revolt against Nonconformity *alone*." I cited some leaders "who had come from the Church of England." The one who "turns out to have been a Unitarian" is presumably R. A. Beckett, of whom I wrote that he "had once been a Unitarian lay preacher; but he was the son of an Anglican clergymen, and he had been set on the path to socialism by reading F. D. Maurice." If Mr. Pelling thinks he should not count as an ex-Anglican, let us substitute James Stott, secretary of the Labour Church at Bradford. But there is other evidence than the histories of individual leaders. I suggested that when Labour Church speakers attacked the social attitudes of Christians, they did not protest against Nonconformists only or even mainly. A number of Anglican clergymen saw the Labour Churches as a rebuke to their own efforts, not just to the Nonconformists'. And when Beckett was editing the Labour Prophet he wrote: "People of all shades of religious opinion – Episcopal, Congregational, Baptist, Quaker, Unitarian – appreciate our literature and take a more or less active part..."

Mr. Pelling now seems to accept the view that the movement was flagging before 1900. But it is too mild to say that it enjoyed "very little expansion in the period 1896-1902." It was in this period that the Labour Prophet collapsed (1898) and its more modest successor the Labour Church Record disappeared (1902). It was in 1899 that the founder, Trevor, said: "We have a new religious message for the world, but we have practically no messengers to deliver it..."; and in 1901 he himself gave up. No doubt it is relevant to observe that the I.L.P. was also "in the doldrums"; but the Labour Churches appear to have declined more seriously. A number of them in the West

Riding of Yorkshire were struggling; yet in the West Riding, Mr. Pelling has written, the I.L.P. in these years "on the whole held together well."

Mr. Pelling argues that changing social attitudes on the part of Christian ministers help to explain why a movement founded in 1893 did not revive after 1902. I cannot agree that denominational opinion on social problems changed so noticeably. There were many socially radical Christians in the England of 1890. None of them, to my knowledge, believed that they had gone far towards converting their conservative brothers by 1910.

In saying that Labour Churches survived after 1900 only as "mediators" between other bodies, I may have chosen too narrow a word. This passage from the Reformers' Year Book in 1909 illustrates, I think, how in the movement's last stage its religious content had evaporated, leaving it a broad-front political body: "For some years past it has stood as an avowedly Socialist organization – not political in the sense that the I.L.P. and S.D.P. are political, but rather in the sense of wakening a passion for reform to give strength to political movements. Labour Churches... have largely helped to increase and extend the influence of political Socialist organizations."

I wish Mr. Pelling had indicated *in what ways* he thinks I was misled by relying on printed sources for every Church except the one at Birmingham. But I agree that it would be useful to see the minutes of others – especially for the years after 1902, when there was no journal to record Labour Church activities.

K. S. INGLIS