

## Political religion and British communism

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The claim that British communism was in fact a religion, as made most recently and in a renewed form by Thomas Linehan in his *Communism in Britain 1920-39: From the Cradle to the Grave* (2007), provokes conflicting thoughts. On the one hand it appears to state an obvious truth, capturing the communist 'certainty in place of doubt', devotion to the holy books of Marx, a belief in the Promised Land of the Soviet Union and the promise of 'a final, liberating eschatological moment'.<sup>1</sup> On the other it seems a preposterous falsehood; after all, not only was this the party of the League of Militant Atheists but it is also uncontroversial that not all members of the Church of England are wild-eyed fanatics living in eager anticipation of the second coming of Christ. Given that the claim that communism is a political religion dates back to shortly after the revolution, it is worthwhile revisiting the history and development of such claims, especially as they specifically relate to British communism. By placing recent debates in the context of the contemporary revival in the concept of political religion makes it possible to re-examine the question of how far its recent advocates have been able to move beyond the rather unsatisfactory generalisations of the *God That Failed* literature.

The list of advocates of the view that communism is a political religion is not just long but is also extremely distinguished, beginning with the philosopher Bertrand Russell. 'Bolshevism is not just a political doctrine it is also a political religion with elaborate doctrines and inspired scriptures', wrote the atheist on his return from a visit to the Soviet Union in 1920. 'The hopes which inspire communism are, in the main, as admirable as those instilled by the Sermon on the

Mount'. However, just as later Christians had 'learned to use the Inquisition and the stake, to subject the human intellect to the yoke of an intolerant and ignorant priesthood, to degrade art and to extinguish science for a thousand years', so too the powerful 'desire for a new religion' which led to bolshevism's promises to end injustice, economic slavery and war were likely to do 'just as much harm' as Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

This comparison between religion and communism thrust itself upon the popular imagination, in part stimulated by the writings of ex-communists and, indeed, for a period during the early Cold War it became a dominant way of thinking in anti-communist circles. It first became commonplace in observations of the Soviet Union; Freda Utey, a former British communist for example, wrote on the 'religious side of communism', identifying her own move away from it with her distrust of the 'idolatry and superstition' which made it impossible for her to 'accept Stalin as a God'.<sup>3</sup> In a more extended use of this language, Charlotte Haldane described herself as a 'religious convert' to communism and developed the analogy between the 'Communist church' and the Christian one using a holy book with old and new testaments (Marx/Engels and Lenin/Stalin), Stalin as Pope with communist leaders elsewhere as cardinals, with elements of the inquisition and the central role of heresy-hunters. She also wrote about the psychological processes, based in a sense of frustration leading to the desire for violent change coming from a lack of emotional comfort or as a protest against 'over-fond and over-anxious parents', which drew middle-class intellectuals into the communist movement.<sup>4</sup> These ideas were most dramatically popularised in the collection of ex-communist memoirs, *The God That Failed*, published in 1950. This work presented the stories of six 'men of letters' who had been drawn to communism as a religion. The point was not that they were typical.

On the contrary, as Richard Crossman noted in his introduction, it was precisely their exceptional nature that revealed the truth because being literary they had a 'heightened perception of the spirit of the age, and felt more acutely than most both its frustrations and hopes'. Their conversions were therefore more 'acute' and sometimes

‘in a hysterical form’, but for this reason more clearly expressed feelings that ‘were dimly shared by the inarticulate millions who felt Russia was “On the side of the workers”’.<sup>5</sup> The broad thrust of these accounts was that adherence to communism was based on misguided faith in a dogmatic ideology. They regarded susceptibility to communist ideas as being understood in large part due to a form of neurotic attraction. The point, as Arthur Koestler wrote, is that ‘from the psychologists point of view there is little difference between a revolutionary and a traditionalist faith’, ‘[a]ll true faith is uncompromising, radical, purist’. Certainly he accepted that the ‘revolting injustice’ of society contributed to explaining the acceptance of the communist faith. However, the communist craving for utopia, just like the religious, had also to be seen as a sign of ‘neurotic maladjustment’.<sup>6</sup>

This way of thinking about communism was applied about not just to the Soviet Union, but also to non-ruling parties, not excluding relatively small parties such as that in Britain. *The God That Failed* included a chapter by Stephen Spender. However, even on his own account, Spender was member of the communist party for just a few weeks and his only contribution, a condition of his joining, was to publish in the *Daily Worker* an article critical of the communist attitude towards the Moscow Trials. His claims about communism as a religion are of course congruent with the overall argument of the book, but in contrast to its stated aim come not from autobiography but almost entirely from observing others.<sup>7</sup> The rather problematic nature of this piece in the more general arguments about communism as a political religion was noted by Crossman, who speculates from Spender’s single case that the lack of orthodoxy of his views and his flimsy attachment to the cause was part of a more general pattern of communism doing better in Catholic countries than Protestant ones because the ‘Protestant is, at least in origin, a conscientious objector’.<sup>8</sup>

Given that Utley and Haldane, like Russell, had been primarily motivated in their descriptions by first-hand observation of the Soviet Union and Spender was at best a problematic example, the idea of specifically British communism as a political religion was most clearly expressed by Douglas Hyde. His autobiography, *I Believed*, appeared in the months after the publication of *The God That Failed*, advertised as

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selling at its peak as many as 3,000 copies a day and described by Spender himself as 'the best account yet of how the Communist Party in Britain works'.<sup>9</sup> Hyde spent twenty years in the British communist party, which had seen him rise to a senior editorial position on the *Daily Worker*. His accounts of the party from joining, through activism to his subsequent conversion to Catholicism, were framed explicitly as part-continuation part-repost to *The God That Failed*. Whilst for him the six writers had 'lost a faith, even though it was a bad one, and in most cases, found only a vacuum', Hyde had filled his religious longing by finding in Catholicism a 'God that did not fail'. Played out in his personal story he describes a Methodist childhood, a move to agnosticism as a teenager and then back towards religion receiving the 'call to preach' with a 'very real personal religious experience' shortly after his brother's early death. This did not satisfy either his social conscience or his spiritual needs and whilst remaining a Methodist lay preacher he set off on a quest of religious searching which took him through everything from the Plymouth Brethren to the Quakers and eventually Hinduism. From there he joined the Commonwealth of India League and the communist-dominated International Class War Prisoners' Aid (ICWPA). Conversion to the communist party came through his re-examination of 'poverty at home and exploitation abroad' in 'the light of the Sermon on the Mount'.

Communism came to dominate his life, canalising the 'emotion, thought and activity' that had previously been dedicated to religion. The only aspect which he lost was his belief in God; with his earlier religious vision explained away as a sublimation of the sex instinct, he embraced militant atheism and communism as a faith without God. Hyde's account of his communist religion does not suggest that it was devoid of an inner life. In particular his enduring dedication to William Morris made his quest 'spiritual' as well 'purely intellectual'. Indeed, Morris' Medievalism was linked to Hyde's continuing fascination with *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer which proved so important in his later journey to Catholicism. However, he stressed the spiritual and moral damage of communism in his repeated discussions about sexual immorality in the party and the communist focus on the ends making any means justified, with repeated examples of a lack of

concern shown for people in themselves, including numbers of dedicated party members who were abandoned by the party. All of this he associated with a complete disinterest in 'the Truth'. Thus, Hyde's account of communism as a political religion, which like Crossman's is not afraid of generalising from one particular story, describes the bankrupt attempts of communism to provide a spiritual and moral life and argues that communism takes 'what is essentially a religious instinct and uses it for evil ends' with the rise of communism having its roots in the decline of religion and the consequent 'spiritual vacuum which exists all over what once was Christendom'.<sup>10</sup>

The huge circulations of *The God That Failed* and *I Believed* reinforced the popular view that communism could best be understood as a political religion. This form of discourse about communism as a political religion was intimately connected to other ways of thinking and writing in this period. In particular the suggestion that communism, like traditional religions, contained doctrinal advice designed to regulate the conduct of an individual's private life down to their innermost thoughts could be seen as part of broader totalitarian approaches to communism, which stressed the importance of ideological regulation of all layers of society. The intimate connection between communism and fascism which underpinned much of the literature on totalitarianism was also present, with parallel attempts to understand fascism as a religious form.<sup>11</sup> The emphasis on a neurotic explanation was also congruent with the Freudian explanations of the attractions of religion itself extended by others to extremist politics, initially to fascists in Adorno et al's *Authoritarian Personality* and subsequently extended to refer to the far left as well.<sup>12</sup>

Whilst ideas of communism as religion retained a popular resonance they were not in later years much used by academics in the study of British communism, even by those strongly critical of the party. In part this is explained by the decline in associated concepts. Totalitarianism, as an essentialist framework, had flourished when evidence about Soviet communism was extremely limited, particularly because of closure of the system to Anglo-American observers. With the increasing availability of empirical evidence and the associated growth of a new social history of the Soviet Union, and with

increasing western experience of civil society in communist states, totalitarian accounts fell out of favour.<sup>13</sup> The decline of interest in Freudian explanations of political engagement was even more dramatic, with a general attack on the scientific status of his work and the initial studies into the psychological basis of political activity roundly dismissed 'as the most deeply flawed work of prominence in political psychology'.<sup>14</sup> In addition to these general points there was a specific critique of the concept of political religion. Opponents suggested that ideas of political religion were confused generalisations without substance. Essentially the charge was that the framework took neither religion nor communism seriously. The concept moved from the mainstream to a position where its main role was to become a regular feature in substandard undergraduate essays in both communist and religious studies.<sup>15</sup>

The disappearance was partial, and it is interesting to see how subsequent authors dealt with the obvious problems identified. Perhaps most notably with regard to British communism, the idea was revived by Raphael Samuel in his work on 'The Lost World of British Communism', originally published as a series of essays in *New Left Review* in the mid-1980s and republished as a book in 2006, ten years after his death. As in other versions of political religion arguments, communism is presented as a totalising vision: 'Communism was the way, the truth and the life. Like earlier belief systems, it put forward a complete scheme of social salvation'.<sup>16</sup> Thus, he argues that 'what we called Marxism ... dealt in absolutes and totalities ... it claimed jurisdiction over every dimension of experience'. The metaphysical aspects of communism, particularly 'The Struggle', could bathe even the 'banal aspects of organisational details' in a 'transcendent light'.<sup>17</sup> However, Samuel's use of ideas of political religion was both more nuanced and more informative than those found in earlier writing. In the first place Samuel's invocation of religion to help understand the collective mentality of British communism was explicitly metaphorical rather than literal. The likeness between communism and religion was used as a device to help comprehend specific aspects of the former, to be discarded at the point where the likeness breaks down. However, there is more than this. Samuel is as much arguing for the

continuities between communism and the broader political culture as he is stressing its separateness. His point is to use communist mentality to explore the 'zenith of mass society', Britain in the 1940s, where the 'principle of collectivity was dominant ... in every department of national life'.<sup>18</sup> It is 'politics' which he begins by noting is often seen as 'a weak form of religion'. The discussion of communism as political religion then simply says it is one form of politics. Implicitly the same religious framework could be applied to any British political party of the period.

Given this starting point, what is specifically distinctive about communism is not its resemblance to religion but the specific forms of religion to which it is likened – 'a crusading order, a union of novices and initiates', 'a gathered church: a people apart, in the world but not of it', 'a church militant rather than retreatist sect' – and to the specific aspects of theology which it called upon, most obviously the correspondence 'to the eschatological terminals of the Christian cycle, and indeed, in the confident hypothesis of everlasting peace, to Christian prophecies of the afterlife'.<sup>19</sup>

Samuel's work clearly forms one of the starting points for Thomas Linehan's recent revival of the concept of political religion as the key to understanding British communism. Indeed, the book is dedicated to Samuel and it begins by setting out an ambition to understand communist life and the experience of membership which sits securely within a tradition inspired by him. However, Linehan's central contentions are not simply a restatement of Samuel's conclusions about post-1945 communism for the interwar period. Rather his work develops as much, if not more, out of a recent revival in the concept of political religion in fascist studies, with the book following on as it does from a commissioned article he wrote for the journal *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* on the British Union of Fascists (BUF) looking at the BUF in the light of the writings of Emilio Gentile and Michael Burleigh.<sup>20</sup>

In adapting these ideas to British communism he argues that 'interwar British communism functioned as a type of "political religion" or "political sacralisation"'. He draws attention to the fact that 'many who entered the congregation of the devoted followers of

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the Party' found that 'the communist way of life contained moral, evangelical, sacrificial and penitential ingredients of a kind that characterised conventional movements of religious belief'. In part because of this religious aspect to communist life, and in line with earlier accounts of the relationship between totalitarianism and political religion, Linehan suggests that communism could offer 'a complete identity' which reached 'into virtually all aspects of life and personal development' also potentially imparting 'a sense of being a part of a wider historical pattern'. This is related to a second distinctive feature of Linehan's work, an attempt to address 'the experience of Party life and membership as the principal phases of the life cycle'.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, it is this life-cycle framework which Linehan uses to structure his account, splitting the book into four sections, which trace the communist from birth to death. The first looks at communist child-rearing and the children's and youth movements. The second examines adulthood, examining communist couples and families and the activist life. The third considers communist culture and lifestyle, and the final section examines the communist way of death and memorialising life. This life-cycle structure meshes closely with the general argument about political religion. The approach draws attention to aspects of communism, generally neglected elsewhere, particularly relating to birth and death, which are central in religious practice. So too the presentation of the party 'from the cradle to the grave' fits well with the totalising narrative of communism stressing a life lived in a separate communist sphere, from the experience of communist summer camps as a child to a 'red funeral' at death. Linehan does note the importance of variety in the understanding of communist lives and no doubt would also stress that it obviously matters to the overall picture whether it is one individual who stays with the party throughout their life, or whether there is a constant turnover of membership. Whatever the intention, in *Communism in Britain* ruptures – most obviously the decision to leave the party – are rarely personalised and understood from the inside.<sup>22</sup> Hence, the way in which Linehan traces the narrative through different stages of communist life certainly tends to emphasise the continuities, and hence the overall picture of a 'total' political religion.

The account provides many fascinating insights into the dynamics of interwar communist political culture, including otherwise neglected aspects of life such as the rational, soviet-inspired, approach to mothercraft within the party. Its promise is suggestive of the need to engage in a rather more careful consideration of the current state of the debate about British communism and political religion, which places Linehan's book in the context of the more general reawakening of interest in the concept of political religion which has seen the launch of new journals, books and book series.

This new literature on political religion is certainly sensitive to some of the problems in earlier uses of the concept. In the first place a much clearer attempt is made to clarify the relationship between this concept and others such as totalitarianism and neurotic susceptibility. Thus, for Gentile, as in the earlier forms of the debate, the relationship between political religion and totalitarianism is reaffirmed.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, Gentile stresses that religious themes are found in all modern political systems. In his view 'civic religion' is a democratic analogue of the totalitarian 'political religion'. Thus, whilst the relationship between political religion and the explicit use of the category totalitarianism is reaffirmed, the sacred elements of non-totalitarian political formations are acknowledged. In contrast to the early Cold War position, the category of 'political religion' is defined in a way which does not assume the religious uniqueness of communism.

As importantly, considerable attention is given to religion itself. Earlier writing on political religion worked with a very basic model of religion, leading to simplistic narratives which paid little or no attention to the diversity or different forms of religious activity which it has been the mainstay of historians of religion to document. Gentile attempts to treat religion more seriously both by engaging with the sociology of religion and also by giving an important place to church institutions. With respect to the former Gentile argues that politics can appropriately be seen as religion because much work, perhaps most notably in the tradition of Emile Durkheim, does not conceive of religion in terms of supernatural beliefs. Instead Durkheim argued that the category of the 'sacred' could only be defined in terms of its absolute opposition to the 'profane', by which he meant the mundane

or everyday associated with private life. Religion could then be defined as 'a unified set of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say things set apart or forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them'.<sup>24</sup> Second, the general theoretical position advanced by Gentile is that the 'sacralisation of politics', the rise to prominence of the mythic functioning of politics, is caused by processes of secularisation with the declining political power of the church and the associated removal of religious legitimation of politics.<sup>25</sup>

In addressing questions about the possibility of communism as a religion, the evidence outlined above is pertinent. In the Durkheimian view, for communism to be seen as a religion it must not only have sacred elements but they must function to unite its adherents into a single moral community. Here, there was clearly something which remained unquestionable, set aside from mundane enquiry which did unite a significant number of communists. The collective myths, the sacred texts, the shared rituals, may not have been universally acknowledged, but were nevertheless important to the unity of a communist moral community which tied together a significant number of communists. These conclusions about communism as a moral community might not have been finally established but certainly a substantial and highly suggestive body of evidence has been collected.

On the question of whether the communist religion set it apart from other sections of the British political system, Samuel and Linehan take opposite positions. Samuel places communist mentality alongside the general collective mentalities of British society in the 1940s. Linehan does note the continuities with earlier organisations on the political left, naming Chartist births and the early Independent Labour Party (ILP) with its complex mix of socials, alcohol, moral restraint and temperance, but argues that these are less significant than the discontinuities. Not only does he point out that these were different times but the 'Party endeavoured to go about its business here in a manner that was comprehensive and systematic, as well as authoritarian, in a manner that was quite unlike anything that had gone before it in regard to the earlier organisations of the Left'.<sup>26</sup>

However, Linehan's points about Chartism and the early ILP represent only a very small subset of relevant evidence. The sacred nature of political beliefs can, and indeed have, been made about all other British political parties, for example in the Labour Party from the 'religion of socialism' and the 'Christ that is to be' through the myths constructed around Clause IV to Tony Blair's visions of faith and globalisation.<sup>27</sup> According to Gentile's conception, Linehan's argument conflates the issue of whether communism should be considered as a religion with whether it was totalitarian. If communism is seen as totalitarian it is the 'political' part of 'political religion' which is established, in contrast to the presumably 'civic' religion of the non-totalitarian Labour Party. Those sceptical of totalitarian ways of thinking will on this basis be sceptical of the distinction between political and civic religions. However, regardless of this, the question of the sacred or religious dimension of politics, including communist politics, remains.

Establishing the possibility of talking of communism as a religion, and the potential independence of such questions from a discourse of totalitarianism, is a necessary but far from sufficient condition for establishing the rather more controversial proposition that it is helpful to do so. Indeed, there can be no single answer to such a question because any answer necessarily depends on the further question 'helpful for what'. Gentile, following a broadly Durkheimian approach, argues that seeing communism as political religion is helpful because it draws attention to the functional importance of secular religions for the stability of modern political regimes. His central questions concern political legitimacy and consider how modern political movements usurp both the political and religious functions of the church. It is precisely the conceptual separation of religion and the sacred from the institutions of the church which enables examination of the theoretical contention that religious functions move from the church to politics. It is this in turn which suggests an empirical study focused on the relationship between political and church institutions and which includes the question of whether shifts happen through alliance, conflict or elision.

Attempting to fit British communism into this framework is chal-

lenging. The continued existence of the established church makes Britain an awkward case in general for Gentile's version of secularisation, whilst the co-existence of the supposedly 'political religion' of communism alongside more dominant non-totalitarian forms makes for a potentially interesting tension in his arguments. At the same time, as recent commentators on political religion have noted, the concept itself has a tendency to truncate further enquiry. Precisely because the language of political religion 'seems credible' it can too quickly be accepted. The ability to translate the most salient aspects of communism into familiar religious terms then prevents us from probing the differences between religion and communism. In the same manner the emphasis on the historical specifics are lost in the general religious picture.<sup>28</sup>

In such a situation, Linehan's approach raises the possibility of resolving a very significant set of issues from the framework. By building up from the micro-level of individual biography through his reading of nearly one hundred biographies and autobiographies it becomes possible to subject the general framework of political religion to more rigorous scrutiny by identifying the relative importance of the ways in which communists did and did not experience their politics as religion. However, this potential for exploring the relative significance of the sacred and mundane, and assessing their relative significance, is never realised in Linehan's book. Whilst he identifies a significant number of ways in which communism was experienced as a religion, the question of what, even conceptually, would count as evidence against communism being a religion is not addressed.

A potential resolution of this can be found in Durkheim, where his conception of the sacred is contrasted to the mundane and everyday, particularly those aspects of life concerned with economic production. Thus, whilst aspects of communism were concerned with the sacred, much of it may also have been mundane and indeed the self-presentation of the party was rooted in a vision of very practical work in the sphere of economic production. Possibly the lack of concern with testing the limits of the political religion thesis explains some of the more striking omissions from Linehan's book, most particularly the workplace, which appears as an extremely brief component

in a discussion of communist lifestyle, and the even more obvious limited discussion of the unions.<sup>29</sup> To take just one example, even Arthur Horner, otherwise best known in this period as author of Britain's most important deviation from Comintern policy which brought him as the party's most influential trade union leader to the brink of expulsion, appears in Linehan's text only because he married a communist, called his daughter Rosa, and with a Chapel background was very puritanical on family matters.<sup>30</sup>

Rectifying these general omissions raises the potential for establishing rather than assuming the helpfulness of a political religion framework by considering the relative importance of the sacred and mundane in explaining the various aspects of communist life. One motivation of the major project on British communists led by Kevin Morgan, and on which I worked, was precisely the identification of such tensions and their clarification through engagement with a collection of several thousand biographies. In *Communists and British Society*, the major output from that project, communism as religion was a minor theme. We suggested that it was appropriate to view British communism as a 'community of the faithful'. However, in Britain communists were small in number and in many cases communist loyalties were only one amongst many in an individual's life. Although obviously much larger, many of the same points can be made about the declining influence of the church. Thus *Communists in British Society* suggests the analogy apt because whilst 'first of all it conveys the importance of ritual, belief and belonging in the identity of British communism, it also hints at empty pews or Sabbatarian pieties not always reconcilable with daily routines'.<sup>31</sup> The book did not aim at, and certainly did not achieve, the goal of settling the question of whether communism should be seen as a religion. Rather the point of the discussion was to take the empirical manifestations of both communism and religion more seriously alongside the suggestion to render the discussion useful precisely by identifying not just where talk about communism as a religion is helpful but – as importantly – specifying the limits of its utility.

Such limits can potentially be illustrated even in the stories of attraction to British communism found in the Cold War anti-

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communist autobiographies of the early post-war years. Bob Darke presented his *The Communist Technique in Britain* as a working-class complement to Hyde, Haldane and Utley, while Fred Copeman's *Reason in Revolt* was published in 1948. What is striking about both of these accounts is the story given of attraction to the party. In contrast to the vision of fulfilled religious longing given by Hyde we have accounts which stress a relationship with the practical activities of everyday life. In Darke's case movement into the communist party came through his own unemployment and working in the National Unemployed Workers Movement, along with the direct and sometimes violent struggle against fascism in the east end of London.<sup>32</sup> In Copeman's case, after a childhood in workhouse and orphanage, he joined the Navy and, whilst 'totally ignorant' of the communists became a leader of the Invergordon Mutiny. His movement into the communist party came from his excitement in the mutiny and a desire for ongoing struggle alongside his activities in the unions and in the NUWM (National Unemployed Workers' Movement).

Sacred themes are certainly present in both Copeman and Darke's accounts. Indeed, Copeman, who like Hyde moved to Catholicism and also became a supporter of Moral Rearmament, explicitly considers the possibility that 'through Lenin's preserved corpse, and their eulogy and reverence for Stalin' the Soviet Party was 'attempting to build up a form of Communist religion'.<sup>33</sup> In Darke there is an occasional use of religious language, for example when talking about the party 'gospel', its 'scriptures' and its 'worship of god-heads'. The point is not that their accounts of joining the party show that views of political religion are wrong. Rather, if the sacred dimensions of communism are important in explaining Hyde's decision to join, but the mundane are to the fore in Copeman and Darke's recruitment, then their relative significance becomes a matter amenable to historical investigation. It is precisely the comparison of the sacred with the mundane that enables the investigation of the diversity, or potential lack of diversity, of experience across different persons, places and times.

If the statement that British communism was a religion initially provokes contradictory thoughts, it is reasonable to ask whether the voluminous writing on the subject has taken us any closer to resolu-

tion. Clearly much of the initial writing in the *God That Failed* era was based on the obvious truth of the idea and the fact that the analogy was undoubtedly powerful. Just 'seeming right' left it apparently without need of further justification or explanation, especially when it linked so well into the popular ideas of totalitarianism and neurotic susceptibility. This made it briefly dominant, but as the surrounding edifice of Freudian psychology and totalitarian analysis collapsed it left the idea of political religion susceptible to challenge. This pointed to the equally obvious ways in which 'political religion' was a preposterous falsehood, oversimplifying both communist and religious experience and failing to note the substantial difference between communism and religion. More recent works on communism as political religion have attempted to address these problems. The frameworks offered by Gentile and others do suggest ways in which both religion and the sacred may be taken more seriously. The development of a vision of communism from the bottom up, pioneered by Samuel, combined with an approach such as that used by Linehan that builds on the multiplicity of communist experience in combination with the concept of political religion, provides a method for investigating such a framework. In these ways writing on communism as political religion in Britain has moved beyond the position of the 1950s. Nevertheless, the literature raises as many questions as it answers. Despite the evident awareness of the respective authors the recent discussions on communism as religion in Britain have made no explicit reference either to the theoretical debates or to the earlier writings in the same tradition. This makes drawing out the connections, conclusions and developments an inevitably rather tentative business. Perhaps more importantly, whilst the potential of political religion frameworks to inform debate can be seen, the utility has yet to be demonstrated. The potential for addressing these problems through concrete historical analysis depends on establishing the importance of the sacred relative to its opposite. However, in both the theoretical work of Gentile and the more focused historical analysis of Linehan there is a distinct lack of concern with the mundane. The potential validity of a study of British communism as political religion has been outlined, but work to date, in assuming rather than establishing the analytical importance of

the sacred dimension of communism, points towards work yet to be undertaken. It is appropriate, but not necessary, to see British communism as a religion.

### Notes

1. Thomas Linehan, *Communism in Britain 1920-39: From the Cradle to the Grave*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p102.
2. Bertrand Russell, *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1920, pp8-10.
3. Freda Utey, *The Dream We Lost: Soviet Russia Then and Now*, New York: John Day, 1940, p5.
4. Charlotte Haldane, *The Truth Will Out*, London: Weidenfield & Nicholson, 1949, pp297-313.
5. Richard Crossman, 'Introduction', in Crossman (ed.) *The God That Failed: Six Studies in Communism*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1950, p8.
6. Arthur Koestler, in Crossman (ed.), *God That Failed*, p25.
7. Stephen Spender, in Crossman (ed.) *God That Failed*, pp231-72.
8. Crossman, 'Introduction', p12.
9. *The Times*, 25 January 1951, p8.
10. Douglas Hyde *I Believed*, London: Heinemann, 1951, p273.
11. Emilio Gentile, 'Fascism as Political Religion', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 25, 2/3, 1990, pp229-51.
12. Theodore Adorno *et al*, *The Authoritarian Personality*, New York: Harper & Row, 1950. For a similar application to communism see, most famously, Gabriel Almond, *The Appeals of Communism* (Princeton: University Press, 1954). For a comparison on these lines between communists and fascists, see H. J. Eysenck and T. T. Coulter, 'The Personality and Attitudes of Working Class British Communists and Fascists', *Journal of Social Psychology*, 87, 1972, pp59-73.
13. Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
14. John Levi Martin, 'The Authoritarian Personality 50 Years Later: What lessons are there for political psychology?', *Political Psychology*, 22, 2001, pp1-26.

15. For an example of this attitude from a scholar of religion, see N. J. Demarsh, 'Varieties of Sacred Experience: Finding the Sacred in a Secular Grove', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 39, 2000, p6.
16. Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism*, London: Verso, 2006, p45.
17. Samuel, *Lost World*, p52.
18. Ibid, p9.
19. Ibid, p51.
20. Roger Griffin, 'God's Counterfeiters? Investigating the Triad of Fascism, Totalitarianism and (Political) Religion', in Griffin (ed.), *Fascism, Totalitarianism and Political Religion*, London: Routledge, 2005, p3; Thomas Linehan, 'The British Union of Fascists as Totalitarian Movement and Political Religion', in Griffin (ed.), *Fascism, Totalitarianism and Political Religion*, pp103-24.
21. Linehan, *Communism*, pp1-2.
22. For example, although we hear of disastrous membership losses, and despite the claim of the book to see communist life from the inside, we do not meet any of those who leave. Linehan, *Communism*, p95.
23. For an overview of differences in the recent literature on political religion and Gentile's place within it, see Richard Shorten, 'The Status of Ideology in the Return of Political Religion Theory', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 12, 2, 2007, pp163-87.
24. Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, London: Free Press, 1965, p47.
25. Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, Princeton: University Press, 2006, pp1-15.
26. Linehan, *Communism*, pp4-5.
27. See, for example, Stephen Yeo, 'A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-96', *History Workshop Journal*, 4, 1977, pp5-55; Philip Snowden, *The Christ That is to Be*, London, 1903; Tudor Jones, *Remaking the Labour Party: From Gaitskell to Blair*, London: Routledge, 1996, pp1-24.
28. David Roberts, "'Political Religion" and the Totalitarian Departures of Inter-war Europe: On the Uses and Disadvantages of an Analytical Category', *Contemporary European History*, 18, 4, 2009, pp397-8.

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29. For example Linehan, *Communism*, pp98-9.
30. Linehan, *Communism*, pp69, 76, 131.
31. Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn, *Communists in British Society, 1920-91*, London: Rivers Oram, 2007, pp56-9.
32. Bob Darke, *The Communist Technique in Britain*, London: Penguin, 1953, pp15, 23, 34-5.
33. Fred Copeman, *Reason in Revolt*, London: Blandford Press, 1948, p175.

Introduction: Britain and Italy, Religion and Politics. Chapter. Jan 2014. Danilo Raponi. It puts religion at the centre of a complex political and cultural war that was fought on many different levels and had important implications for global, international, and domestic dimensions: global because of the termination of the Pope's temporal power; international because of the birth of the Kingdom of Italy, which redesigned the political map of Europe; and domestic (for the United Kingdom). The history of slavery in Britain and the British empire has placed the legislative milestones of anti-slavery - the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the abolition of slavery in 1833 - at the centre of historical inquiry. For we communists had Marxism to guide us in our world view. Marxism was scientific - its laws of history were as incontestable as the laws of physics. Marxism was, quite simply, true. Everything else was mere ideology or, in the case of religion, superstition. The question at the heart of Aaronovitch's book, just as it must be at the heart of any study of British communism, is a much wider one, wider even than politics. With some notable exceptions, many of the communists I knew seemed to be essentially decent and intelligent people. But how was it that decent people like Sam and Lavender Aaronovitch or my parents could stick with the Party when they all knew, at some level, about the inhumanities for which the communist movement was responsible? Religion and politics are concepts that designate two different and interdependent subsystems of society. Although the concepts are READ MORE. The relationship between religion and politics experienced a systematic restructuring in the context of the early modern secularization processes, which led to the emergence of the modern secular state. While the past century has seen a myriad of often contradictory usages of the concept of secularization, most social scientists today agree, at a minimum, on the historical-descriptive conception of secularization as denominating the process of differentiation of the secular spheres (e.g., state, law, economy, science, administration) from religious institutions and norms (e.g., the transfer of We merely assert that British parties and British politics derive much of their style from the character of party activists. This being the case, we feel that the relative lack of information about the socialization of activists represents a considerable gap. Type. 6 Almond, G., *The Appeals of Communism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p.ix. Google Scholar. 7. 7 Newton, K., *The Sociology of British Communism* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1969), P.3. Google Scholar. 38. 38 Study of Political Life in Dundee, Department of Political Science, University of Dundee. Religion in the United Kingdom, and in the countries that preceded it, has been dominated for over 1,000 years by various forms of Christianity. Religious affiliations of United Kingdom citizens are recorded by regular surveys, the four major ones being the national decennial census, the Labour Force Survey, the British Social Attitudes survey and the European Social Survey.