

Religion & popular working class politics

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I want to thank Mark for asking me to share with you some of my ideas about religion and working class politics coming out of my work as a historian. My historical work has since turned to issues of housing and sanitation, inspired in many ways by the work of Abahlali baseMjondolo in South Africa. In the course of making connections with some of the Abahlali folks through the tour of the film *Dear Mandela* and a visit Richard Pithouse made to Illinois recently, I was introduced to the work of CLP and very moved by both your work on land and housing and on theology. Since my historical work on housing is just getting going, but I wanted to offer something, I brought along my first book (Oberdeck, 1999), which is centrally about a man, Alexander Irvine, who provided me with an introduction to a perspective on religion in general, and Christianity in particular, that seemed a lot like what the Church Land Programme tries to produce.

Could you tell me a little about how you approach religion and theology?

Let me tell you just a little about what I learned from Alexander Irvine and the religious ideas he developed a hundred years ago as I think it connects to the kind of religion and politics you are practicing here.

When I started working on this book in the 1980s, the history of religion in the United States, and Christian religion in particular did not really speak to how ordinary working people and their political organizations thought about religion. Religious thought was associated with trained clergy and their more well to do followers. According to this history, people who worked as laborers in the developing industries of the late 1800s and early 1900s might be inspired by religious faith and ethics as taught by Christian churches and missions. But according to most historians of religion, and even historians who wrote about the working poor, they but didn't really contribute to religious learning. And the institutions that working people did develop, such as labor unions, workers parties and socialist parties, were seen as non religious and even anti-religious, because they encouraged workers not to focus on the individual redemption taught by churches, but on collective struggles against employers who demanded too much work for low wages in poor working conditions.

Alexander Irvine seemed like a good subject for a book because his life demonstrated that working people's struggles actually inspired their own interpretations of religious faith.

So who was this Alexander Irvine?. He grew up in the 1870s and 1880s in a poor family in a small town in Northern Ireland. This was part of the world with a great deal of religious conflict, as the Protestant British government there looked down on the largely Catholic Irish farmers, agricultural workers and industrial workers. Irvine's parents had married across this divide: his mother was from a Catholic family and his father from a protestant one. This put the family at odds with both kinds of churches. Nevertheless, Irvine's mother retained an everyday faith shaped by her own view of life—that God cared equally for everyone, rich and poor, that extending help and fellowship to local people in need was a deep expression of Christian teaching. Alexander Irvine traced his own faith to these teachings and to an experience of spiritual awakening in a potato field where he witnessed a beautiful sunset while working as a human scare crow when he was a young boy. This experience also inspired him to seek religious education from missionaries directed his ideas away from Christian teaching like his mother's and instead toward teachings that focused on individual salvation. With this in mind he went off to Scotland to work and try to get an education; and then on to a period of military service where he learned to read, but also began to question the Christian ethics of the British imperial ventures he was involved in. He escaped the military by immigrating to the US.

In the 1880s in New York City, Irvine began to work as a missionary to poor homeless men to whom he tried to teach a gospel of individual uplift. Here is where his life began to intersect with a set of religious teachings of the poor that previous histories of religion had ignored. The first example of this occurred in the 1890s when Irvine challenged some of the jobless men by claiming that they were just too lazy and he could show them that they could how get jobs and earn a living. He discovered that it was not so easy to find or keep a job, and began to reflect more and more on the importance of the men's social and economic conditions rather than their individual moral uprightness.

Here is how he put this discovery later:

"Pulpit preaching is the smallest item in the entire programme of a preacher, especially in such a neighbourhood and in such a church. ... When I discovered this, I proceeded to act on my convictions, and I proceeded to work with the people around me instead of for them. There were no lines of demarcation to my activity. I touched the life of the community at every angle...." (Alexander Irvine, *From the Bottom Up: The Life Story of Alexander Irvine*, New York: Doubleday, Page, 1910)

So, this was the beginning of a new vision of ministry that was deepened in other cities as Irvine immersed himself in the ideas and struggles of the communities in which he preached in the 1890s and early 1900s. After New York, it was a squatter community in Omaha Nebraska, where he lived in a shack amongst working people who could not afford other accommodation and worked with the children of the community.

A couple years after this he moved to New Haven, Connecticut as the religious director of the local Young Men's Christian Association and the preacher for a small suburban church. The men who ran the YMCA and the church were well to do people who wanted Irvine to emphasize the themes of individual salvation and moral uplift he had started with in New York. But by this time Irvine was more aware of the importance of local, community connections for his ministry. He developed links with local working people's organizations and labor unions that were at this time growing in strength and numbers in the community. The organizations he joined and supported had their own traditions of interpreting Christian religious ideas and forming communities for prayer and worship.

These trades unions and working men's religious organizations stressed some of the same religious ideas I have seen in the theology of the Church Land Programme—Jesus as a carpenter who surrounded himself with land-pressed peasants, agricultural workers, fishermen and artisans who conceived an alternative society with promises of better material as well as spiritual lives for those who participated. Irvine drew from this theology as he made deeper connections with workers and their struggles for better wages, (and also against US imperial ventures in the Philippines as well as a scheme for supplying water to the city that would not just benefit the wealthy owners of the town's private water company). His sermons began to criticize the ways in which privileged churches ignored prophets like Micah who had struck out "the selfishness of the land grabber, who had squeezed out the peasant and robbed him of his heritage." This tendency had caused such churches to betray the very message of Jesus himself, Irvine insisted.

Again in his words: "This most democratic of all leaders seems now to be the exclusive property of the rich and to be managed by machines with pretensions to divinity. He is fenced in by creeds and clothes and purchased pews—this man whose ancestor was a shepherd and who was himself a carpenter, who selected honest fishermen to found a commonwealth..." (Alexander Irvine, "What is the Matter with the Churches," Sermon, New Haven, c. 1902)

Now, this was not the most successful way to earn a living as a preacher in the early twentieth century. Eventually such sermons and the connections to local movements that had taught Irvine these ideas cost him his jobs with the YMCA

and the church. He started his own “people’s church” among working people, but struggled to keep it going. But when Irvine joined the Socialist Party and began campaigning to transform rather than reform economic relations in the US. Irvine’s activism as a socialist eventually brought him wider popularity with workers across the US, but made it difficult to keep any kind of preaching job in an institutional church.

Irvine probably attracted some of his largest audiences during a year during 1913, when he toured what were known as vaudeville theatres in the US. This was a popular form of theater that offered a series of different kinds of acts—singers, acrobats, comedians, and actors—to fairly diverse audiences—men and women, middle class and workers, adults and children. Irvine presented a small play that dramatized many of the dilemmas he had experienced trying preach a gospel he had learned from workers. The main character, a Dr. Gordon, is a minister of a church in a town where factory workers employed by one of the leaders of Gordon’s church are on strike. The employer complains that Gordon’s sympathy with the strikers is hurting the reputation of the church because, as the employer says “the news has been flashed over every state of the union that the rector of St. Jude’s is in sympathy with the rabble and scum of the city!” Gordon responds that he has a different view of his mission than the employer, as he says “From your point of view, I was hired to be good, to keep quiet, and cover your piracy with the cloak of religion. From my point of view I came to interpret God—to teach virtue, truth and kindness!” He claims this mission leaves him no choice but to side with the employer’s striking workers. The workers’ views are voiced by a character named Taggart, who complains that in association with rich people, “this isn’t a church, it’s a bucket shop where he take chances on religion at so much a share!” The play ends with Gordon’s prophecy that “By the power of a great ideal and a combined working-class vote,” workers can “change the face of civilization!”

This play also contributed to what I learned from Irvine about popular religion and working class culture. As I’ve suggested, the most important lessons came from the ways Irvine drew religious ideas and interpretations from the organizations of working and poor people. This was a feature of religious life in the US in the late nineteenth and early 20th century that had not been widely discussed in histories I had read, which tended to assume that the working poor were at a distance from such disputes and thus from religious thought itself, rather than developing their own alternative interpretations. Irvine’s involvement in popular theater also taught me something. Most historians noted that disapproval that Protestant Christians directed at this kind of popular culture, and assumed that Christianity and popular culture were divided. Irvine provided a window into a wider culture in which everyday popular cultural forms shaped how workers worshiped.

Now you might ask, do I think Irvine offered a blueprint for a people's church or a gospel for working or poor people? No, I don't. I think he just provides a perspective on what some working people did that religious historians had not shown before. He left a lot of open questions and problems associated with his mission, and I want to end by just talking about a couple of these. One involved racial and ethnic distinctions. Irvine preached at a time there was widespread belief among white people in the notion of a civilizing mission to groups defined by racial or ethnic differences who some whites believed were in need of uplift. Irvine did not always completely contradict those ideas, though I think that one interesting affect of his ministry and his cultural politics is that he came to question them and offer an alternative view of human differences. In place of the notion of a civilization that some people of the earth had and others needed to learn, Irvine came to think of human differences in terms of distinctive cultures each with their own virtues to be cherished and respected. This didn't solve the problems that come from divisions between groups, as plenty of violence and discrimination can be made in the name of culture as well as civilization. But in terms of thinking about the local values religion must speak to, it also offers food for thought.

Where Irvine was less successful, I think was in speaking to the concerns of women. Irvine developed his gospel of work from movements of workers that were largely male dominated. He tended to think of the manual industrial labor done by men, and the political and cultural activities they developed out of it as more important to human history than the domestic life of households he associated with women, even though women usually made up at least half of his congregations. This was a blindness that really diminished his mission, I think. There were many women's organizations and communities at this time focusing on the importance of work in homes and questioning ideas about the importance of women's and men's work whether done in the home or outside. How these ideas might have changed Irvine's gospel is a very important question.

Though I now work more on how housing and sanitation is seen from the perspective of poor and working people, Irvine taught me a lot about how those perspectives got formed in relation to the wider ethical ideas that religion represents. I have learned a tremendous amount from Abahlali and what I've read about the Church Land Programme about how your movements are contributing to these issues today. They have made me see the importance of Irvine and his movements in new ways, and I hope that you can help me continue thinking about these questions, and what a theology of the people might look like both in South Africa, the US, and elsewhere in the 21st century.