

Workers' Conceptions of Religion (1890)

Abstract

In the last third of the nineteenth century, issues of popular piety and church attendance attracted the attention of politicians, social reformers, and statisticians, all of whom were sensitive to differences in the behavior of Protestant and Catholic workers. To experience working-class life first-hand, Paul Göhre (1864–1928), a Protestant pastor and social reformer, spent three months undercover as a factory worker in Chemnitz, a large industrial city in the Kingdom of Saxony. He published his observations in the book *Three Months in a Workshop* [*Dreieinhalb Monate Fabrikarbeiter und Handwerksbursche*]. In the following excerpt, Göhre describes workers' views on religion. According to Göhre, they saw the church—in Saxony, the Protestant Church in particular—as siding with the interests of the state, with capitalism, and with the enemies of the Jews. For workers, the church was an obstacle to social reform. Many of them referred to it as a “stupefying” institution [*Verdummungsanstalt*]. Göhre was clearly appalled that workers no longer had “the slightest consciousness of guilt or sin.” In describing their suspicion of church institutions, however, he wrongly suggests that the working classes had become impious and indifferent to religion altogether.

Source

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Towards the end of my stay in the factory, I once asked a man directly how he felt about religion and Christianity. I knew he was an ardent social democrat, but he was good-nature and politeness itself, a genuine Saxon. He had once been in the household of an attorney-at-law for whom he had done many little extra services, in return for which, besides his pay, the attorney had lent him all kinds of books on geography, science, and history, whose exact titles he could not give me. He answered my frank question with equal frankness, honestly, and to the point. “I don't talk much about those things, and I never argue about them. I let everybody think as he likes, but I have my own opinion, and it is—Where you can't find out anything, there's nothing to find out. That's the end of it!”

He was more amiable than another man of the same stamp, a weaver of our suburb, and, to judge by appearances, on very small pay. I met him one evening in the Turnhalle I have mentioned. The man was what is usually called an all-round athlete; a fine powerful fellow with a splendid figure evenly developed. At the end of the exercise hour I went with him to a quiet saloon near by, a favourite resort with all of us, to get a glass of beer. He was a clever fellow, fanatically devoted to the cold-water cure, and to social democracy, and one of the leaders in the large class of Chemnitz weavers who were suffering real distress without apparently getting much consideration from their employers. He talked to me a great deal about the wage struggle as it had gone on, and in which he had taken a prominent part, earnestly, impersonally, and with the calmness peculiar to so many among the people. I gradually led the talk to religious topics, and asked for his opinion. It was brief, concise, and consistently social-democratic. The Church, he said, was merely a State institution very well devised for stultifying the people; but it ought not to be abolished, only thoroughly reconstructed. It ought to be so managed as to teach and preach natural science.

All whom I have hitherto described belonged to that group of my social-democratic fellow-workmen who were real enthusiasts and truth-seekers, men of noble natures and strong minds. With all their rejection of religion, with all their contempt for the Church, they were yet moderate in their criticism, decent in their expressions and at more or less pains to understand and be just to the standpoint of those who

believed. But there existed a much larger class of equally sincere social democrats, rougher men, who had only scorn and laughter and blasphemy for the sacred things of our faith. They, too, used the catch-word, "Nature is God, God is Nature." But they liked to vary it, and often in the most indecent manner. Such a company was gathered once in a drinking hall, when the conversation fell for a moment on religious subjects, bluntly designated at once as idiotic nonsense, one man exclaiming, "O what are you giving us? our God is a strict old woman!" A burst of laughter followed this witticism and closed the discussion. I need not set down all the wretched stuff of the kind that I overheard.

It was especially among the young people that one met with this way of thinking. With them, less than anywhere, was there any attempt to look at the matter seriously, or even impersonally. They had generally long since outgrown such things! One lad, a Thuringian, confounded Christianity with Anti-Semitism, which he hated as ignoble and unjust, and which he declared, not without truth, to be the very opposite of real Christianity. People went to church and pulled long faces, but their lives weren't a whit better than other men's who didn't pretend anything, and who were a good deal more above-board. I could only answer him as I had answered the first. He, too, was silenced; but he could not be induced to give up his equation, Christianity = Anti-Semitism. It was, besides, no easy matter to keep the talk longer on such subjects. He frankly thought them not worth talking about, like many others who said so to my face. "Religion—there's no more of that among working men," said another young fellow, a Berliner by birth. He had been particularly overbearing in his manner to me in the beginning, when I gave him to understand what was my own attitude towards Christianity. Later on, however, I was a good deal with him, and found him, in spite of his Berlin airs, a quick-witted, strenuous little fellow, who really knew no better, and who gradually—the only one of them all—came to better and more earnest feelings for religion, through intercourse with me, without any attempt at conversion on my part; although I am bound to say he could hardly be called devout! I met him one Sunday afternoon and we went for a walk together, in the course of which he asked me casually what I had done in the morning. I had gone to church, I told him. "You idiot!" he said. I asked him why he thought so, and talked to him a little about the reasonableness of my religious convictions. To make a long story short, before I finally left Chemnitz he told me of his own notion one Saturday, that he should like to go to church with me on the following day. We accordingly went to church together, and he was quite well pleased. At last he made me a sort of confession of love: he wished he could always be in company like mine—it would make another man of him!

He was already in the best society. He shared a good room with a young fellow from Pomerania of about his own age, namely, twenty years, whom he had met in Berlin, and in whose company he had come to Chemnitz. The Pomeranian was a quiet, inoffensive fellow, from a very poor artisan's family, but one of the few whose Christianity is an integral part of itself not to be sloughed off, from whom all counter influences seem to slide off harmlessly. He had a silent but strong ascendancy over his room-mate.

This same young man, a vice-hand, worked in the factory between two others of the same age. Of the religious views of one of these latter I know but little. He came from the neighbourhood of Wurzen, near Leipzig, where his father had a large well-established smithy in a little country place, to which the son was to return when he had seen the world and the factory and sown his wild oats. He showed me once a flask of fresh water, and said with a laugh, "Here's the pure Word of God!" The last of the three was a type of the ordinary young factory hand, and lived a wild life. I met him every Sunday in the dance-halls with a girl; he knew that his parents were fairly prosperous. The scepticism of the social-democratic agitation had produced its normal effect in his case. He was, to give an example, godfather to the child of a young married friend. One day his god-child died; the funeral was held three days later in the middle of the afternoon. The next day he was completely worn out; and in response to my questions he told me in one breath that the pastor had spoken beautifully at the grave, and that they had kept on drinking till four o'clock the next morning: a half-holiday for once! The dead child's father, I ought to say, went home from the saloon at ten o'clock.

I remember another young fellow exactly like this last in age, calling, and temperament. He believed in a higher Being, of whom, however, he had not formed the slightest conception, and to whom he was supremely indifferent. He “believed” merely because he was a man; man must have something to distinguish him from a brute!

These are side-lights upon the tendencies and religious ideas of our growing youth; they confirm my previous estimate. I now return to the characteristics of men of maturer years, clear-sighted social democrats.

It was in the morning, and I had been for several days painfully at work with a hand-drill, boring holes in the heavy iron work of a circular saw frame, marking them out first with chalk. A machinist, the oldest of the nine foremen, whose work was near mine, came across to me; another man, a hand-worker, soon joined us; finally a third, whom I have already mentioned more than once. The last was a consistent social democrat, much more loyal to the party idea than the other two. We fell into a long conversation.

When I was not looking they rubbed out my chalk-marks on the frame for a joke. I took it in good part when I saw what they had done, and cried out, “Only don’t destroy my circle!” “What does that mean?” someone said. I asked if they had never heard the story of Archimedes and the fall of Syracuse. “No,” they said, so I told it to them, and explained my quotation.

One of the men asked me whether that had happened at the time of the Trojan War? He knew about the Trojan War—had read all about it, and he began to repeat the Homeric tale, very picturesquely and well. Evidently he had somewhere got hold of a copy of the “Iliad.”

Then the talk made a sudden jump to Egypt and the Pharaohs, about whom they all knew something. We spoke of the Pyramids, which especially interested them on account of the workmen who had—with what an incredible toil—piled those vast stones one upon the other.

H. “Those were the beasts of burden, the slaves of four thousand years ago. To-day, we factory hands are the slaves and beasts of burden.”

That was going rather too far, I ventured, and instanced the far better general education which everyone now has.

H. disputed the point; the masses were no more uneducated and ignorant than they are, on the average, to-day.

“No; they used to be far cleverer than they are nowadays,” broke in another, S., half in jest, half in earnest. “They used to be able to change water into wine.” He said this tentatively; I could not discover his real thought.

My foreman laughed outright when he heard it, and H. smiled too, with rather a superior air. S. went on. “Yes, that’s what we believe, but —”

But the foreman cut him short. “What we believe is, that ten pounds of veal makes a good stew.”

And S. ventured no reply. The talk ran on, and fell into economic channels, and I happened to make use of the expression “social question.” That stung H., who said drily that I didn’t know what the social question was.

“May be so,” I said. “In fact, it isn’t easy to say what it is; we might talk for hours, or days, or weeks about it. Anyhow, it is a monster with many heads and with two sides, the material and the spiritual, just as a man himself is body and soul.”

But the foreman and H. began to laugh.

“Soul! There’s no such thing. There’s a brain, a nervous system that does its work like a machine. Its work, or the results of its work, people to-day call ‘soul.’”

“Who has proved that?” I said. “That’s only an assumption, an hypothesis not in the least different, in short, from mine. Besides, I have reasons for mine. Take a trumpet, for example, and blow in it; you get a tone. But the tone is something quite apart from the trumpet; and it is so, or at least so it may be, with the brain and the soul. One is the organ, the other is the content [*Inhalt*] of the organ.”

H. hesitated a moment, smiled scornfully, and said, very pertinently, to my assertions at the beginning of this chapter:

“I see! you are all for orthodoxy and the Bible. But the whole of modern science is against them.”

“Yes and no,” I replied. “And it is neither a man’s disgrace nor his misfortune, but the reverse, if he still values the Bible.”

“You only get laughed at for it. If you were to say to an educated man what you have said to me, he would just ask what you were, and when he heard ‘only a workman,’ he would simply laugh at you, and understand why you were such a fool.”

Here a fourth joined in the conversation, who, with a worker at the drill-press, had come up to us in the meantime, a manual worker, of whose ideas about religion I must say something, whose hopelessness and doubt were as great as his longing for faith. He began:

“Yesterday we were packing one of those iron coffins the factory sells now and then out of the old stock. There were three of us at it. We began to argue whether there was any future life. Both the others were positive there wasn’t any, so was the superintendent, who came along and began to talk. He said they were right, that a man is like a lighted cigar; it goes out, and the rest is ashes. Were they right or not? Shall we see each other again or not?”

“Yes, indeed, in *Buxtehude*,” laughed H.

“But why do the parsons teach us about it, then?”

“So that men may stay nice and poor, and nice and contented,” said he who had spoken of the miracle at Cana; and the foreman added, approvingly: “Man is a beast of prey; yes, worse. A beast of prey only wants to be full; man wants more than that. If it weren’t for the little religion there is in the world, we should have a lot of dead men to put away every morning.”

It was the widespread conviction in the factory that the Church, handed down from past ages, inwardly corrupt and dead, is to-day nothing but a very desirable and powerful police system of the existing State, which zealously and skillfully keeps it from falling into ruins.

Finally, after a long discussion, we came to Darwin and his theory of the descent of man from monkeys. The hand-worker and the foreman upheld it; S. was opposed to it; H. had nothing whatever to say. S. thought it was impossible, because we have our reason, which separates us absolutely from the brute creation, monkeys and all.

“That’s so,” said the hand-worker; “but I believe it, in spite of that. What is there else to believe? Anyhow, I can’t swallow the Bible story that man is made of clay.”

When the group finally broke up, the hand-worker stayed behind with me, and began to talk, as he often

did when we were together, about death and immortality. He had lost a daughter, a girl half-grown, a short time before, and the longing to see her again left him no peace. He wanted to hear over and over again what I believed and how I felt; and over and over again, when I had given him my best thought, and poured out for him my inmost feeling, he would shake his head and sigh.

“Ah, if we could only believe! But we must have certainty—absolute certainty.”

Even this poor heart had no comprehension of a certainty which is not based on sight and hearing, taste and touch.

Another time, one mechanic had sent me on an errand to another.

“Not ready yet; will be ready to-morrow unless the devil gets me first,” was the gruff answer to my request.

“There’s no devil,” interposed a workman near at hand.

“But there is sin,” I said.

“Nonsense! That’s a contradiction in terms,” the first one retorted. “Where there’s no devil, there’s no sin. Do you still believe the stuff they taught us at school?”

Generally speaking, and the characteristic is a new one, there is no longer the slightest consciousness of guilt or sin; not even among those who are still wavering and struggling with religious doubts, in the very crisis of their development.

Source of English translation: Paul Göhre, *Three Months in a Workshop. A Practical Study*. New York: Arno, 1972, pp. 164–71. A translation from 1895 is available online at:
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89095182945&view=1up&seq=1&skin=2021>.

Source of original German: Paul Göhre, *Drei Monate Fabrikarbeiter und Handwerksbursche. Eine praktische Studie*. Leipzig: Grunow, 1891, pp. 164–72. Available online at:
https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht?PPN=PPN1701936127&PHYSID=PHYS_0001&DMDID=.

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