



# THE FLAG OF AN ALIEN CREED

"Let us make one thing clear. The Red Flag has never flown throughout these islands yet. Nor for 1,000 years has the flag of any other alien creed."

-Michael Heseltine at the Conservative Party Conference at Brighton, 7th October 1976.

"You look at the sky, and it is red and threatening" -Matthew 16<sup>3</sup>.

For Michael Heseltine and Margaret Thatcher, the sky is indeed red and threatening. So Mrs Thatcher calls us to a crusade against socialism, a crusade "not merely to put a temporary brake on socialism but to stop its onward march once and for all." She is not alone in seeing "red for danger". Lord Chalfont has revived the demonology of Soviet domination. Archbishop Lefebvre and his supporters fear the Marxist infiltration of the Vatican and of the church's liturgy. Others point to that great red monster, the World Council of Churches, while for Enoch Powell the sky is alternately red and black: he fears a black future with rivers of red blood. The Archbishops of Canterbury and York offer little in the way of prophetic response to this kind of talk: they speak of the enemy at the gates, warn against extremists, and recall moderate Christians to the theme of "Land of hope and glory".

Their flag is dark blue. Blue is the colour of the cold, the colour of fear, the colour of division. "Blue blood" is the symbol of a broken human society, the total opposite of the Christian gospel. Blue is the colour of the conservative, the preserver of property and status. Blue is the colour of law and order.

Against this background of blue fear and defensive "Christian" nationalism, we would do well to recall what the colour RED means for the Christian. Mr Heseltine is right to say that the Red Flag is the flag of an alien creed, for nothing is more alien to our present socio-political situation than Christianity, the gospel of universal brotherhood and love. Red is the colour of freedom, the colour of redemption, the colour of Pentecostal fire. It is the colour of the Son of Man, the Word of God whose garments are drenched in blood (Revelation 19:13). The blood-red banner of the Son of Man is the banner of justice and freedom.

"His blood-red banner gleams afar.

Who follows in his train?"

Red is the colour of him who said "I have come to cast fire upon the earth" (Luke 12:49), who baptises with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matthew 3:11). Red is the colour of the Divine Fire (Exodus 19:18), the colour of the Spirit (Acts 2:3).

The Red Flag, far from being a new Marxist invention, was the medieval flag of Catholic France, the national standard from Henry I to Charles VII. It was the flag which the rebels demanded in 1848. But its origins go back into ancient history. In the old mythologies, Minerva and Ceres were the deities who presided over wisdom, art and music, and over manual labour, agriculture and the fruits of the earth. Their flag was red, as indeed they were themselves. So when the musicians went on strike in 309 BC against playing for low wages before the war-god Jupiter, they

marched across the Tiber carrying the Red Flag. When the early Christian martyrs Crispin and Crispinian founded their Guild of Cobblers in 280, their emblem was the Red Flag. The flag of an alien creed indeed - it was the flag of subversive Christianity.

It was within this tradition that Father Conrad Noel in 1917 hung three flags in Thaxted Church - the flag of St George for Merry England, the Sinn Fein flag for oppressed Ireland, and the Red Flag for universal brotherhood. But it did not contain a hammer and sickle, but the words "He hath made of one blood all nations". That creed is very alien to the racist ideas, the gospel of the "alien wedge", which have penetrated both Labour and Conservative parties in recent years. It is alien to the pietism of those Christians who restrict salvation to the individual heart. It is a creed which proclaims liberation for the earth and its peoples, the setting free of the creation from slavery (Romans 8:21).

At a period when there has been a discernible shift to the right in both major parties, when the Church of England is too allied with power, wealth and status - with the "blue world" - to offer any real threat to the principalities of the fallen world-order, and when cold war attitudes are again on the upsurge, it is not surprising that the Red Flag should be seen as the flag of an alien creed. But the Russians did not invent it. Lenin and Trotsky simply took it over from the universal historic tradition of the common people. The Red Flag is the banner of the Son of Man, the God of Justice, who tears down the imperial powers and exalts the humble. It is indeed the flag of an alien creed, the creed of the Divine Alien who hungered and thirsted, had now here to lay his head, and died outside the gates of the city. It is the creed of the aliens, those whose true citizenship is in heaven, and who are aliens and pilgrims on earth. It is the creed of the marching people of God who are

"Seeking Jerusalem, true native land,

Through our long exile on Babylon's strand."

It is the creed of the Sabbath People of God, the Creed of the Jubilee.

OUR FLAG STAYS RED.

October 1976.

KEN LEECH

Issued by the JUBILEE GROUP in East London, St Matthew's Rectory, Hereford Street, Bethnal Green, London E2 6EX. (01-739-4730).

JUBILEE GROUP

CONFERENCE ON THE CATHOLIC SOCIAL TRADITION PAST PRESENT  
AND FUTURE

at St Matthew's Rectory, Hereford Street, Bethnal Green,  
London, E2, during the celebration of the centenary of the  
GUILD OF ST MATTHEW  
(founded 1877 by Stewart Headlam)

MONDAY JUNE 27TH to FRIDAY JULY 1ST 1977.

Monday 27th 7pm MASS in St Matthew's Church

8pm. 1st Session. "The Return of the Kingdom of God": The  
Kingdom as the "regulative principle" in Catholic social  
theology' -GRESHAM KIRKBY, Vicar of St Paul, Bow Common,  
and sometime chairman of the Socialist Christian League.

Tuesday 28th (10am Mass)

11am-1pm 'An assessment of the Catholic social movements of  
the past'

(1) 'The Guild of St Matthew' -JOHN ORENS, Lecturer in History,  
University of Boston, Massachusetts.

Lunch

2.30-5pm. *ibid* continued.

(2) 'The Church Socialist League' -JOHN HEIDT, St Mary  
Magdalene, Oxford.

(3) 'The Christendom Group' -E.L.MASCALL, former Professor  
of Historical Theology, University of London.

(4) 'The Catholic Crusade' -REG GROVES, author of Conrad  
Noel and the Thaxted Movement; The Balham Group: How  
British Trotskyism Began, etc.

NB This talk may have to be moved to another point.

(7pm Mass)

8pm Public Lecture at St James the Great Institute, Bethnal  
Green Road.

'Stewart Headlam and his Significance' -JOHN ORENS.

Wednesday 29th (9.30am Mass)

11am-1pm 'The new evangelical social voice' -PATRICK DEARNLEY,  
Director of the Shaftesbury Project.

8pm PROCESSION AND SOLEMN MASS Preacher: BISHOP MICHAEL  
RAMSEY

Thursday 30th (10am Mass)

11am-1pm 'The Catholic social tradition today' -MICHAEL  
RAMSEY, former Archbishop of Canterbury.

2.30pm-5pm 'Political Theology Then and Now' -DAVID NICHOLLS  
Chaplain of Exeter College, Oxford.

'Contemplation and the Critique of Society' -MICHAEL  
LANGFORD, Curate of St Hilda's, South Shields.

(8pm? Reg Groves on the Catholic Crusade-to be confirmed)

Friday July 1st (10am Mass)

11am-1pm Discussion on the way forward for the Jubilee Groups.

Further details from Fr Ken Leech, St Matthew's Rectory,  
Hereford Street, E2. The church is in St Matthew's Row, off  
Bethnal Green Road, E2: the Rectory is next door. If as many  
people as possible can make their own sleeping arrangements in  
London, it will help us to cater for those who can't.