CHAPTER I

Polemic, ideology and 'Christian Political Economy'

INTELLECTUAL HISTORY AS POLEMIC: AND VICE VERSA

To expect an historian to write with no polemical intent is not unlike expecting a privately owned business to conduct its affairs with a view to the public interest. No doubt it can be done. But to require it is unreasonable and is, moreover, to miss the point of the activity. History is served not so much by the pure intentions of the author as by the criticism of his colleagues.

The original purpose of this book, therefore, was unashamedly polemical. It was to disturb a popular view of modern intellectual history, and to challenge one of its scholarly correlatives. I have by no means lost sight of this object. But its pursuit has generated a number of secondary aims, some of which may interest historians, economists, theologians, political theorists, and others with no desire to grind my particular axe. What this means is that instead of having only one reason for existing, my book now has no fewer than five. For the evidence which supports my primary thesis bears upon two questions much canvassed by historians of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century British politics; and upon two others of importance for some, at least, among my fellow economists. Each of the five must be explained.

The popular view that I had in mind is a belief that 'Christian Social Thought' – or 'Christian Social Teaching' for the two are all too often confounded – was more or less moribund from the Reformation until the emergence of 'Christian socialism' (alternatively, the 'Social Encyclicals') in the nineteenth century. As Tawney said of the Church of England, 'The social teaching of the Church had ceased to count, because the Church itself had ceased to think' (Tawney 1947, 147). The scholarly correlative may also be found in Tawney, though it has lately been revived by E. R. Norman. 'An institution which possesses no philosophy of its own',

declared Tawney, 'inevitably accepts that which happens to be fashionable'. Throughout the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth, the church 'accepted the prevalent social philosophy and adapted its teaching to it'. Religious thought was no longer 'an imperious master' of political theory 'but a docile pupil' (Tawney 1947, 160, 161). For at least three centuries, Norman has suggested, 'the social attitudes of the church have derived from the surrounding intellectual and political culture and not... from theological learning' (Norman 1976, 10).

It was Tawney's own polemical purpose to contrast this putative quiescence unfavourably with that late-Victorian Anglican socialism to which, through the influence of Charles Gore and William Temple, he had become affected (Preston 1979, 83–110). 'Silently, but unmistakably, the conception of the scope and content of christian ethics which was generally, though not universally accepted in the nineteenth century, is undergoing a revision' (Tawney 1947, 12). Once again, after a lapse of some two or three centuries, the Christian churches are and ought to be engaged in social criticism. 'Issues which were thought to have been buried by the discretion of centuries have shown in our own day that they were not dead but sleeping' (Tawney 1947, 12).

At first glance it may seem surprising that Edward Norman should have accepted Tawney's account of the passive and accommodating nature of Christian social thought in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain. He did so, however, in order to make a polemical point which is almost the opposite of Tawney's. The secularization of European thought which the latter (incorrectly) identified in the seventeenth century was not reversed in Victorian times, but accelerated. What was true of the eighteenth century is true, *a fortiori*, of the present. 'The Christian religion has lost the power, and also the confidence, to define the areas of public debate, even in moral questions. Instead, it follows the definitions made by others' (Norman 1979, 4). Tawney's strictures upon the social ethics of Josiah Tucker and Paley apply with equal force to those of Maurice and Westcott, Gore, Temple *and of Tawney himself*. For at least since the English Revolution, shall we say,

> The theologians have always managed to reinterpret their sources in ways which have somehow made their version of Christianity correspond almost exactly to the values of their class and generation. Thus theological scholarship justified the structural obligations of the eighteenth-century world, then it provided a Christian basis for Political Economy; later

collectivist principles were hailed as the most perfect embodiment of the compassion prescribed in the New Testament; and even the contemporary doctrines of 'liberation' and 'secularization' have been given powerful theological support. (Norman 1976, 10–11).

There is no denying a large measure of plausibility to this account. It would have been strange indeed had Tawney's own views escaped the social conditioning he perceived in earlier stages of European capitalism. Norman may well hoist him with his own petard.

Like Edward Norman I wish to dispute the widely held belief that the faithful practice of Christianity, rightly understood, must create a predisposition in favour of a collectivist, or non-market social order. Yet I am easy with his strategy. For two reasons, one theoretical, the other empirical, I believe it to be vulnerable to objection. In the first place, it must be the case that all political doctrines in whatsoever period of history are socially conditioned. This tells us nothing about their truth or falsehood, nor about their logical connexion with the Christian or any other religion. Moreover, even 'theological learning' itself is and must be 'derived from the surrounding intellectual and political culture' to an extent that weakens the force of Norman's antithesis between the two. In the second place, as I have previously argued (Waterman 1983a), a close inspection of the evidence does not wholly support the claim that 'theological scholarship ... provided a Christian basis for Political Economy'. 'Theology' and 'political economy' were then (and perhaps still are) less distinctly separated than Norman makes it appear, and were frequently the intellectual property of one and the same scholar. During the early decades of the nineteenth century at any rate, 'theological scholarship' played a more active rôle than he allows.

I shall therefore adopt a different strategy to make what I take to be the same point. Leaving aside the validity or otherwise of present-day attitudes, I shall exhibit a pre-Victorian tradition of Christian social thought in order to demonstrate first, that 'the Church' had by no means 'ceased to think' at that time; and secondly, that the results of such 'thinking' were drastically opposed in their political implications to that automatic hostility to capitalism which Tawney and those of like mind held to be inseparable from Christianity.

It is of the first importance that I declare my purpose in so doing. 'Christian Political Economy' was strongly favourable to private property rights, free and competitive markets, the institutions of marriage and wage-labour, and a high degree of social and economic

inequality. I report and analyse its arguments in this book not in order to recommend them to the reader, nor because I believe they have any immediate or obvious relevance to the social problems of our own time. Nor do I expose the content of this tradition in order to criticize, appraise or refute it. Still less is it my object (as to some extent, and in different ways, it was both Tawney's and Norman's object), to provide an externalist 'explanation' of its intellectual history in terms of some causal social process and thus to discredit its message. My purpose – the *first purpose* of this book – is none of these, but rather to *understand* the tradition, and so to help the reader understand it. For in this way we may begin to discover, as Quentin Skinner (1969, 52) has well put it, 'the essential variety of viable moral assumptions and political comments'.

It is impossible to understand the political ideas of eighteenth-century Europeans without recognizing that the distinctions we now quite properly draw between specialized branches of 'theological', 'philosophical', 'scientific' and 'social' inquiry were then of far less importance and in many cases hardly possible. David Hume's *Essays*, for example, contain matter that he described as 'Moral, Literary and Political' and which we should now classify as 'anthropology', 'economics', 'history', 'journalism', 'philosophy', 'political science' and 'theology'. Samuel Johnson was expert in law, knowledgeable in 'chymistry' and theology, learned in classical and much other European literature, and omnicompetent as lexicographer. After seven years in the chair of Chemistry at Cambridge, during which he conducted many important researches, Richard Watson became Regius Professor of Divinity in 1771 whereupon he pursued his new studies with as much assiduity and success. There was then a unity to intellectual activity which is now forever lost. Above all is it impossible to understand the thought of pre-industrial, European society without an imaginative awareness of the extent to which that unity was determined by the presuppositions of Western Christianity. Though Hobbes and Helvetius, Hume and Voltaire, and many another 'infidel' had wholly or partially detached themselves from Christianity or even, in some cases, from religious belief of any kind, the 'secularization of the European mind' (Chadwick 1975) was a concomitant of widespread industrialization and did not occur until well into the next century. The terms of political debate, in the *ancien régime*, were set by the theological requirements of Christian orthodoxy.

I am aware that this claim may still appear controversial. As recently as 1985 Professor J. G. A. Pocock (1985a, 33), reviewing the 'state of the art' in eighteenth-century historiography, could report that 'we study the era in which English and Scottish writers for the first time engaged in fully secular discussion of their society and its destinies, from which point British intellectual history can begin to be written'. Insofar as this book supplies evidence of the centrality of theological concerns in pre-industrial political discourse, its *second purpose* may thus be seen as affording support for the position of I. R. Christie (1984, esp. 184–5, 206–14), J. C. D. Clark (1985) and others (e.g., Le Mahieu 1976; Crimmins 1983, 1986, 1989a; Hole 1989) who have called in question the prevailing 'positivism' and consequent reductionism, of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century historiography.

Ian Christie, Jonathan Clark, R. A. Soloway (1969) and Robert Hole have described the crucial part played by orthodox Anglican theology in 'The intellectual repulse of revolution' by British intellectuals in the 1790s. It is now generally agreed, moreover, that the English Jacobins were not so much muzzled as actually vanquished in fair fight. '... the radicals were defeated by the force of their opponents' arguments and by the climate of conservative opinion among the politically conscious, not simply by recourse to repressive measures and the forces of order' (Dickinson 1977, 272, cit. Christie 1984, 159). None of these accounts, however, nor any other that I am aware of, continues the story of the 'intellectual repulse of revolution' to its final and most interesting chapter, which is the classic confrontation between William Godwin and T. R. Malthus from 1798 to 1803. For Godwin had answered Burke in 1793 with such authority that for four crucial years, from the Reign of Terror to the French landing in Wales, the initiative passed back to the 'radicals'. Not until the first *Essay on Population* (1798) were the Jacobins finally routed.

The essential ingredient in Malthus's victory, and that which was entirely new in counter-revolutionary polemic of the time, was the 'new science' of political economy. The unassailable prestige of Newton's scientific method, and that method itself, first appropriated to the study of human social phenomena by David Hume in the mid-1750s (Waterman 1988), were brilliantly deployed by Malthus to show that *both* Burke *and* Godwin were wrong: and wrong for the same reason. Partly because of the requirement that anti-Jacobin

doctrine should be consistent with Anglican orthodoxy, there was considerable criticism and development of Malthus's ideas – by himself and others – over the next three decades, and it is this particular programme that I have labelled 'Christian Political Economy'. Its theological aspects were crucially dependent upon a 'liberal' mutation of orthodoxy which, I shall argue, had its origins in Cambridge in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

The 'ideological alliance of political economy and Christian theology' (Waterman 1983a) in these years was a decidedly new strain in British 'conservative' thought. Its social theory, whilst demonstrating both the inevitability and the beneficence of existing economic institutions, did so in a way that was wholly compatible with the most whiggish desire for 'reform'. Its theological aspects, though satisfying both the letter and the spirit of the Anglican formularies, did so in a way that successfully enlisted in the service of Christianity the new insights of the Enlightenment. It is therefore the *third purpose* of this book, and that for which I claim the greatest novelty, to demonstrate that Christian Political Economy discovered tenable middle ground, during the first three decades of the nineteenth century, between an ultra-tory defence of the *ancien régime* on the one hand, and 'radicalism' in any of its varieties, Jacobin, plebeian or 'Philosophic', on the other. In so doing it supplied the ideological underpinnings of the new 'liberal-conservatism' of Canning, Huskisson and Peel, thereby smoothing the transition from what was left of an *ancien régime* in the 1820s to the emerging industrial and increasingly pluralistic society of the Victorian age. Viewed from this standpoint my book may be regarded as an extended footnote, or technical appendix, to Boyd Hilton's (1988) recent work on 'Evangelical' social thought.

In the terminology of Lakatos (1970, 133–4), the social-theoretic 'hard core' of this programme was the central, organizing conception of classical political economy: Adam Smith's 'cheerful' vision of a self-regulating market economy, as modified by Malthus's 'gloomy' recognition of the dominance of scarcity in human social life. It is no accident that Christian Political Economy should be almost exactly conterminous with the evolution, at the hands of Chalmers, Malthus, West, Ricardo, Senior and others, of what Samuelson (1978) has aptly called the 'canonical classical model' of political economy. Though Ricardo deserved (and has always received) the chief credit for defining the formal structure of this

'model', his achievement would have been impossible but for the pioneering work of Malthus on population, diminishing returns and rent. And in fact there was the most fruitful friendship, collaboration and mutual criticism between the two until Ricardo's early death in 1823.

Those authors who followed Malthus in the theoretical elaboration of Christian Political Economy – Paley, J. B. Sumner, Copleston, Whately and Chalmers – criticized and improved various aspects of the arguments presented in the first and subsequent editions of the *Essay on Population*; and Malthus responded to their criticisms in five successive recensions over twenty-eight years. Of necessity therefore there is much about Malthus and his works in what I have to say. Viewed indeed from the blinkered standpoint of my own academic discipline – economics and the history of economic thought – this book may well appear, at least in part, as a microscopic examination of certain parts of the *Essay on Population*: carried out under far greater magnification than has ever yet been employed.

In view of the immense volume of ink that has been spilt over the *Essay* for nearly two hundred years, it may well be wondered what more of use remains to be said. The answer is a corollary of my *second* theme. Economists, for the most part, have been even more willing than historians to filter the literature of pre-industrial society through the conceptual apparatus of their own secularized, technical and specialist consciousness. Malthus above all seems to have created a problem for the 'economic mind'. Marx and Bagehot, Cannan, Schumpeter and many others equally eminent would seem to have missed the point of what Malthus was trying to say.

At bottom this has almost always been a consequence of the same, fundamental misperception. The *Essay* has been seen as a book 'about' economics, or demography, or politics, or even theology. It has not been seen for what I believe it is: an anti-Jacobin defence of property rights embedded in the religious world-view and theological framework of eighteenth-century Anglican Christianity. I am aware that this is a somewhat eccentric view, which I hold, at least so far as my own profession is concerned, with a small handful of others. I am also aware that Malthus himself displayed a certain ambivalence towards his adversaries in 1798. Though a clergyman he was a whig, reared by Dissenters. Cambridge of the 1780s had afforded but indifferent preparation for the unaccustomed rôle of

defensor fidei. There is no reason to doubt his sincerity in regarding Godwin's 'system of equality' as 'beautiful and engaging'. Nevertheless it is the *fourth purpose* of this book to supply evidence in support of my opinion that the *Essay on Population* is largely unintelligible without an intimate awareness of the ideological warfare of which it was a part, and of the philosophical and theological discourse with which that warfare was carried on.

Enough has now been said to make it quite clear that this is a polemical book about polemical books. How is human knowledge enlarged by so ignoble a purpose? First I owe an explanation of two words I have so far used without apology: 'polemic' and 'ideology'.

'Polemic' is a ritualized act of war – similar in that respect to games of chess or bridge – whereby one author seeks to 'defeat' another by demonstrating to the satisfaction of informed bystanders that his opponent's arguments are ill-founded and therefore untenable. There is no reason (save human pride, vainglory and hypocrisy) why this activity need not take place with the utmost charity and mutual forbearance. Malthus and Ricardo were intimate friends. But it is of the essence that both – or all, in a multi-person game – should play to win.

'Ideology' now has many meanings, and no meaning. I shall not use the word in a Marxian sense as a form of 'false consciousness' capable in principle of being dispelled by 'correct' social analysis. Instead I shall follow Schumpeter's usage and mean by it a set of 'rationalizations', produced in any society by those groups or classes in a position to assert themselves, which serve to glorify the importance or otherwise advance the interests of those groups or classes. In this sense Marxism itself is 'ideology', but none the worse for that. For as Schumpeter insisted, 'it cannot be emphasized too strongly that, like individual rationalizations, ideologies are not lies' (Schumpeter 1954, 36).

Though polemic may arise from many different motives, one of the strongest of which is the sheer joy of competitive sport, it is obvious that much – perhaps most – of the 'polemic' engaged in by historians, economists and other students of human society, has an 'ideological' function. Malthus sought to refute the arguments of Godwin in order to show that 'the established administration of property' maximized the disposable income of landlords, thereby affording 'everything that distinguishes the civilized, from the savage state' and so making the world safe for clergymen and college

fellows. Nevertheless it is often felt, especially by economists, that it is very unscientific, not to say demeaning, to descend to ideological polemic. Economics should be 'value free'; economists should refrain from offering advice or passing judgement upon social goals; and should concern themselves with establishing 'meaningful theorems' which 'predict', 'describe' or 'explain' observable (and measurable) economic phenomena.

Deeply as I approve of this orthodox view of social science, honesty compels me to admit that it often fails to describe what actually happens. For in some cases at least, if not in most, what is eventually acknowledged to have been 'scientific progress' emerged not as the fruit of disinterested inquiry but as the *unintended outcome* of ideological polemic. So long as a community exists of informed and critical colleagues, and so long as the prizes for polemical victory are awarded fairly by that community the operation of Gresham's Law will be suspended: good arguments – however unworthy their motivation – will drive out bad.

Economists, of all people, should find it no surprise that an Invisible Hand may operate in the history of their own discipline. It is at any rate the *fifth* and final *purpose* of this book to illustrate that point by showing that the eventual outcome of the ideological polemic I describe was of profound and lasting significance for economic science.

Before turning to these tasks it remains only to say rather more carefully just what will be meant in this book by 'Christian Political Economy'.

A DEFINITION OF 'CHRISTIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY'

The astute reader will already have noticed that I have committed, or seem about to commit, a serious anachronism. If it be true that the unity of pre-industrial thought was determined by the presuppositions of the Christian religion, how can there be useful work for the adjective 'Christian' in 'Christian Political Economy'? Traditional European society – Jonathan Clark's *ancien régime* – was founded upon the unity of 'church' and 'state'. In principle at least, all social theory was therefore a branch of ecclesiology. Only when a non-theological, empirical and 'scientific' study of society had emerged, owing no deference to the 'Queen of the Sciences', could there be any social theory (or 'social thought' or 'social teaching' – the three

are blurred together in Troeltsch's *Soziallehren*) which was *not* 'Christian'. But in that case, of course, a formidable epistemological question arises. How might such a 'secular', or 'autonomous' social theory be called 'Christian' at all? Are we hopelessly poised between the devil of anachronism and the deep blue sea of unmeaning?

This merely formal dilemma mirrors a genuine predicament of the authors to be considered in this book. For by the end of the eighteenth century the world of ideas was in a condition somewhat like that of a great lake in early spring. To a casual glance all is as it ever has been: nothing but ice to the horizon. But on closer inspection all is in flux: cracks and fissures everywhere, patches of water, and great flows beginning to break off and drift downstream. Thus did the intellectual unity of traditional society appear when Malthus wrote his first *Essay* in 1798. Europe was evidently no longer strictly 'traditional'. But as yet there was hardly a sign of what it would look like when it became 'modern' in the second half of the next century. Those who wished to welcome and avail themselves of the new knowledge associated with the Enlightenment, whilst at the same time remaining true to the faith and practice of Christianity, were treading on thin ice indeed.

Especially was this the case with political economy, which was gradually making way, in France and Great Britain at any rate, as a legitimate and useful inquiry governed by canons owing nothing to Christian or any other theology. For precisely this reason it was reviled as godless and repudiated as 'hostile to religion' by a wide spectrum of theological opinion ranging from 'two-bottle orthodoxy' at the one end to the Lake Poets at the other. The belief that political economy and Christian theology are mutually exclusive and antipathetic was shared by a very different and politically opposed party: a small but highly influential group of radicals led by Jeremy Bentham and James Mill. In the early 1820s the 'Philosophic Radicals', as they later became known, made a determined attempt to hijack political economy to their own, unashamedly atheistic programme of 'reform'. It has lately been suggested, indeed, that political economy supplied the tools for undermining the legitimacy of the English *ancien régime* (Kanth 1986). But this is to exaggerate both the political and the intellectual potency of Bentham and his disciples. It was the single-handed achievement of Richard Whately to defeat the Philosophic Radicals by showing that a defensible demarcation is possible between 'scientific' and 'theological'