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Abstract

Recent years have seen the coalescence of two groups in the study of management and organization: the first is concerned with critical management studies, while the second concentrates on management, spirituality and religion. Though both seek to establish themselves as forces that run counter to the mainstream of management studies, the differences between them are more striking than any apparent similarity of purpose might initially suggest. Although both groups embody intentions of challenging the status quo of management studies by generating alternative, anti-positivistic perspectives, their theoretical commitments are fundamentally different. This has led some to characterise the interests of the two groups as fundamentally irreconcilable, the former being concerned with the dark side of organisations while the latter is preoccupied with ‘seeing the light’. Despite these differences there have been suggestions of a possible conjunction of interests between them with the aim of developing a critical spirituality of management and organisation. This begs the question as to what such a critical spirituality might look like.

This paper draws on liberation theology as a source of inspiration for his project, in providing an active, practical theology which is intended to make a real difference in the world through solidarity and action (Gutiérrez 1973). Stimulated by experiences of oppression, vulnerability and marginalization, it relies on sociological, in addition to philosophical methods, drawn from the Marxist tradition, to account for the unjust consequences of the capitalist system. To illustrate how such a theology may be translated into organizational praxis the paper draws on a historical case of the British industrial mission to illustrate how understandings of what constitutes critical spirituality may be put into practice. Industrial mission has provided pastoral support and prophetic ministry to people engaged in paid work through the mechanism of workplace visiting for more than half a century. It is illustrative of a mode of engagement involving the religious and the secular from which broader notions of what constitutes critical spirituality may be discerned.

The paper focuses on the role of industrial chaplains in the miners’ strike of 1984-85, one of the longest and most violent industrial disputes in British history. Although there have been some accounts of the role of the established church in the strike little is known about the role played by members of the clergy based in the mining communities where the industrial conflict took place. This paper uses oral histories of industrial chaplains involved in the strike to illustrate the realise the realisation of critical spirituality in a workplace context. It is argued that there are parallels between criticisms of liberation theology concerning the feasibility of the engagement between Christianity and Marxism and the recent hostility towards the development of critical spirituality within management and organization. Specifically, if we cease to characterise, or possibly caricature, religion as the source of delusional belief and instead explore its potential reinterpretation in the context of present experience, we can perhaps be slightly more optimistic about the possibility for development of critical spirituality in relation to management studies.
Introduction

In recent years we have witnessed the development of two marginal yet separate interests in the study of management and organizations. The first is concerned with understanding management from a critical perspective while the second concentrates on the role of spirituality and religion in relation to work. Though both groups seek to establish themselves as forces that run counter to the mainstream of management studies the differences between them are more striking than any apparent similarity of purpose might initially suggest. Hence, critical management has become established on the basis of a commitment to challenge the structural inequalities associated with established managerial practices, seeking to develop critical interpretations of management and to generate radical organizational alternatives. Spirituality in the workplace has focused on the relationship between spirituality, religion and organization and on its relevance to management, concentrating on the development of an understanding that goes beyond traditional paradigms of research.

Although both embody intentions of challenging the status quo of management thought and managerial practice by seeking to generate alternative, anti-positivistic perspectives, their underlying theoretical commitments are fundamentally different. Critical management draws on neo-Marxist, post-structuralist intellectual traditions with a commitment to feminist and post-colonial analyses (Fournier and Grey 2000; Alvesson and Willmott 1992) while spirituality in the workplace relies on the Human Potential movement (Puttick 2000), drawing on humanistic, transpersonal and positive psychologies, combined with Eastern and Western traditions of religious thought and various manifestations of New Age spirituality. Two recent edited collections on spirituality and work (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz 2003; Biberman and Whitty 2000) illustrate the group’s intellectual commitments. This has led some to characterise these interests as fundamentally irreconcilable, the former being concerned with the dark side of organisations and the latter being preoccupied with ‘seeing the light’ (Boje and Rosile 2003). Yet despite these differences there have been some suggestions of a possible conjunction of interests between them with the aim of developing a critical spirituality of management and organisation (Driver 2004). This begs the question as to what such a critical spirituality might look like.

It is important to differentiate between criticisms of spirituality in the workplace, which have involved subjecting the discourses associated with spirituality and work to critique, and the development of critical spirituality, which would involve consideration of how spirituality could provide inspiration for overcoming processes of social domination and oppression in relation to management and organization. With respect to the former some inroads have been made (Nadesan 1999; Pratt 2000; Forray and Stork 2002; Calas and Smircich 2003; Bell and Taylor 2003; Brown 2003) but attempts to conceptualise a critical spirituality that relates to the workplace or to delineate its praxis have been rare. Casey (2002) does attempt such a task, accounting for the disaffection and alienation associated with the postmodern condition and its effects on working life in terms of the potential for emancipation through ‘alternative meaning-making activities and value orientations’ that provide an alternative to ‘rationalising modernity’ and include
‘experimenting with diverse religious, spiritual and body practices… often described as “New Age” explorations’ (Casey 2002: 145). Casey (2002: 147) refers to the ‘burgeoning management literature on spirituality at work’ saying that skilled professional employees ‘are seeking alternative sources and expressions of value, meaning and self-identity’ by ‘drawing from a range of repositories of knowledge and historical practice’ deriving from the polytheistic New Age movement (Heelas 1996). Rather than being ‘frivolous’ or ‘fleeting’, she interprets this ‘re-enchantment’ as a sign of opposition to the intensified objectification of the employee, indicating a convergence of interest in alternative, non-modern rationalities between employees and organizations.

Yet the response from critical management intellectuals to the attempted conjunction of criticality and spirituality has been predominantly hostile, several seeking to disassociate themselves from what they perceive to be incompatible agendas, namely the development of a critical social science and the utilization of religious ideology which is seen as an integral part of those structures of domination that hinder the attainment of freedom. Interestingly, within this critique there is a tendency to conflate the subject of belief with the beliefs of the intellectual, implying a judgement of the underlying values that guide this project rather than, or in addition to, any technical or theoretical assessment of its intellectual feasibility or value. Hence, when Parker (2004: 176) says that Casey’s book is ‘no sociology that [he] recognis[e]’ and ‘perhaps it is better described as a religion’, in addition to discrediting the very essence of the attempted conjunction of criticality and spirituality as an impossibility, he is also striking at Casey’s intellectual credibility by suggesting that religion is the source of delusional belief, as becomes clear when he goes on to suggest that her ‘use of terms like re-enchantment or resacralization have magical powers’ (Parker 2004: 176).

This paper takes a different route to the development of a critical spirituality, drawing on liberation theology as a source of inspiration for breathing life into this project. It is argued that despite significant recent interest in spirituality and work there is a notable lack of historical perspective within the majority of this literature (Bell and Taylor 2003). Even Casey’s analysis lacks historicity, for although she acknowledges that religious preoccupations are ‘not new’ (2002: 146), there is as Parker (2004) notes, a tendency in her analysis to present the present age as representing a radical disjuncture with the past. This analysis is therefore guided by a general concern that if the current business school preoccupation with spirituality is to be more than a passing fad it must be informed by history. To this end it draws on a historical case study of the Industrial Mission (IM) and looks at their involvement in the British miners’ strike, arguing that understanding the role played by clergy who were active in supporting the strike can provide insight into possible routes for the development of a critical spirituality of the workplace.

Before embarking on this analysis it is necessary to explain the role of IM in the contemporary British workplace and to review its historical origins. IM is an ecumenical network organisation that includes ordained and non-ordained representatives from all UK Christian Churches, including the Churches of England and Scotland, who seek to become involved in the secular world of employment through providing pastoral support and prophetic ministry to people engaged in paid work through the mechanism of
workplace visiting. Since its inception in Sheffield during the mid 1940s, IM has sought to understand the impact that work has on people’s lives by focusing on the nature of employment, particularly in heavy industries, only relatively recently revising this conception of work to include retail and service sector companies. The networks of chaplains are organised regionally along diocesan boundaries. There are now relatively few full-time industrial chaplains, although at the height of IM during the late 1970s there were 115 full-time and 175 part-time clergy engaged in industrial chaplaincy in Britain and most industrial towns had some form of IM activity (Lurkins 1981). Today many of those engaged in industrial chaplaincy work on a formal or informal part-time basis in combination with their parish duties. The chaplain’s services have historically been provided free to companies as part of the mission of the church. However, since the mid 1980s, IM has received progressively less funding from churches sources and has thus sought to establish contractual financial engagements with companies. Similar ministries have evolved in the United States, Australia and other parts of Europe and have faced similar difficulties. With no central organising structure and relatively few resources, IM has tried to remain sensitive to managerial trends and worker experiences. Its critics have suggested that identification with power structures, powerful figures in industry and the ideologies of management means that too much IM work has been allied to the interests of management rather than workers (Northcott 1989). However, there have also been occasions when industrial chaplains have adopted a more radical position in defending employee interests and critiquing the ideologies associated with capitalism, including neo-liberalism and globalisation. This has brought them into conflict with employers and the Churches. Although there has rarely been an explicit theological or ideological basis for this more critical standpoint, in these moments industrial chaplains share some important similarities with liberation theologians in their common concern for social justice.

**Marxism, Liberation Theology and Critical Spirituality**

Stimulated by experiences of oppression, vulnerability and marginalization, liberation theology is described as rooted in ordinary people’s everyday experience of poverty, referred to as ‘the preferential option for the poor’ (Rowland 1999: 5). Based on an interpretation of Scripture that is closely related to that experience, liberation theologians start from struggle and deprivation as the basis for doing theology. They argue that the perspective of the poor or marginalized offers an alterative story to the one told by those who wield economic power, which often becomes the ‘normal’ account (Rowland 1999). Liberation theology is thus intimately connected to context as it seeks to utilise the experience of life and oppression as the basis for a reading of the Bible ‘where the emphasis not placed on the text’s meaning in itself but rather on the meaning the text has for the people reading it’ (Mesters cited in Rowland 1999: 8). Its emergence stems from the experiences of a group of Latin American priests including Gustavo Gutiérrez (1973), who trained in Europe in the late 1950s and became involved in a period of reflection on the Christian tradition within Roman Catholic theology through the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council from 1962-65, leading him towards a collaboration with social scientists in pursuit of a renewed understanding of Christianity and modernity.
Latin American theologians began to study Marx and Freud as well as Augustine and Aquinas. They returned to their countries with new theological ideas and a solid grasp of sociology, psychology, economics and political theory. There were well equipped to respond to Vatican II’s call for a renewed, socially committed Christian community. (Cadorette 1996: 5)

Flourishing in countries like Brazil, liberation theology led to the establishment of ‘base ecclesiastical communities’, local groupings for expression of religious and secular concerns about poor conditions of health, employment and education (Dawson 1999), and become established as a means of empowering the oppressed by giving the voiceless the chance to speak. However, this reading of the historical development of liberation theology has been challenged by those who point out that it occurred contemporaneously with black and feminist theology in other parts of the world. Its emergence was also concurrent with developments in the pedagogic field where the concept of a liberating education as an act of consciousness enabling a critical reading of reality (Freire 1972) were also emerging. The development of liberation theology has also been linked to the rise of the French Catholic worker-priests, a group of around one hundred French and Belgian Catholic priests who in 1943 entered factories and took up full-time manual work, stimulated by the view that the French church had become distanced from the proletariat and seeking to overcome this by sharing in the oppression and suffering of the working classes as a means of achieving solidarity with them. The worker-priests initially sought to conceal their ordination, labouring alongside workers in industry in exchange for wages. Many became politically as well as spiritually committed, turning to socialist politics and trade union activism as a means of challenging what they perceived to be the injustices of the workplace. The Vatican became increasingly concerned about the Marxist politics of the worker-priests leading the movement to be condemned by the Vatican in 1953. An official statement requiring abandonment of the term ‘worker-priest’ was released by the French episcopate, dictating that their manual work be limited to three hours a day and demanding that all trade union and political associations be given up although many protested and some actively resisted the will of the church by continuing their secular work. It is suggested that many of the values and practices of liberation theology ‘found their precursors in the experience of these French and Belgian trailblazers’ (Arrul 1986: 171) The main conclusion to be drawn from these historical analyses is that the origins of liberation theology remain diffuse and contested, however, the theoretical basis of liberation theology is more consistent.

The concept of praxis is dear to liberation theologians (Cadorette 1996), who believe that action should be informed by reflection, not simply as a knee-jerk response to injustice but as a sustained way of living and thinking informed by a community’s understanding of itself. Hence ‘for liberation theologians faith runs parallel to real life and is in dialectical relationship with it’ (Rowland 1999: 3). It is therefore an active, practical theology which is intended to make a real difference in the world (Gutiérrez 1999) through solidarity and action, rather than merely intellectual appreciation. This includes practical strategies for achieving human betterment through satisfaction of basic needs such as health, education and employment.
Liberation cannot forget either the interior and personal aspect (liberation from personal sin) or the historical aspect (liberation from the current economic, social, political and cultural situation described as social sin). (quoted by Gibellini 1987: 4).

This analysis of the material conditions of existence relies on sociological, in addition to philosophical methods, drawn from the Marxist tradition, to account for the injustices of the conditions faced by the poor. Hence, although the capitalist system, based on the private accumulation of capital by individuals and firms, with the support of the capitalist state, is acknowledged by liberation theologians to have brought certain benefits, they argue that these have been achieved at the cost of ‘massive human and environmental destruction’ (Fitzgerald 1999: 220). They ‘regard the modern world economy as intrinsically involving increased poverty and cultural domination, arising from unequal exchange in international trade… and the dominance of multinational corporations’ (Fitzgerald 1999: 220). The civilisation of poverty thus relies on the dynamic principle of ‘dignification’ of labour, wherein the aim of work is ‘the perfection of humanity, individually and collectively, as the basis for a new society’ (Fitzgerald 1999: 221) rather than the accumulation of capital.

Marx’s thesis of capitalist development and the economics of class conflict and in particular his views on religion are highly relevant to liberation theology’s treatment of Marxism and thus to this analysis. Marxist analysis conceives of religion as ideology, comprising ideas that are used to preserve the capitalist social order through obscuring its contradictions and serving the interests of the dominant class. Much of Marx’s writings on religion are relatively small in extent and are contained in his earlier work, perhaps reflecting a loss of interest subsequent to initial condemnation (Turner 1983; Kee 1990). It is here that he expresses an unequivocally hostile attitude towards religion, some of his best-known polemical passages adopting such a tone, perhaps the best known of these being found in Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. Introduction (1843-4) where he states:

> Religious suffering is at one and the same time the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

This aphorism is taken to be Marx’s final dismissive statement on religion, expressing man’s alienated position in society. For Marx, religion arises from an inverted world order based on the reversal of reality wherein man creates God as a reflection of his confused and alienated situation. However, Marxist analysis also embodies a tension, between the consolatory aspect, seeing religion as a distorting influence and a hindrance to emancipation and a revolutionary aspect, whereby some religious rebellions were seen as having contributed to the relief of oppression through protests against the misery and suffering associated with the capitalist system (Kim 1996). Moreover, read in context, Kee (1990) has suggested that the above quote appears more ambiguous; in the nineteenth century when medical science could diagnose without being able to offer a
cure, opium, and religion, provided the few means whereby people could live their lives ‘in face of constant pain’ (Kee 1990: 33). Thus whilst the quote contains an acknowledgement of the parallel purposes of opium and religion in achieving consolation from misery, the assumption that it implies absolute condemnation of them both stems from our different contemporary perspective.

Analysis of Marx’s life suggests early religious influences had a profound and continuing effect on his intellectual development. Hence, his ‘metamorphosis’ through which he came to be a scientific philosopher can be read as a conversion experience that shifted him from evangelical Christianity to neo-Hegelian philosophy, as Kee (1990: 11) argues, ‘Marx was never content with a merely intellectual position. He required a faith which… gave him the courage to pursue his vocation in life’. However, these caveats do not detract from Marx’s fundamental criticism of religion which is that ‘religion makes the intolerable tolerable’, stealing ‘from the mind the imagination that there must be another and better order of things’ (Kee 1990: 33-4). His critique is therefore ontological, for as long as religion continues ‘it will reinforce and legitimise all forms of the inversion of reality and will consciously or unconsciously support the ideology of the ruling class’ (1990: 86-7). Conversely, once capitalism is overturned religion will lose its purchase on the human imagination.

Given Marx’s views on religion, it is perhaps surprising that liberation theologians embraced Marxism as part of the solution to the problems they faced in their theological work in the developing world. Their position certainly stimulated criticism from the Vatican which claimed that Marxism was a reductivist form of social analysis inseparable from ‘a praxis of class hatred and struggle, which offends against Christian norms of charity, and… strikes at the core of Christian belief about God and the human’ (Turner 1999: 201). In addition, their early optimistic aims of achieving radical change on a spectacular scale led to criticisms of liberation theologians for treating the poor and history romantically, to which they responded that theologians in the developed ‘North’ had become too much characterised by detachment and objectivity and thereby divorced from the everyday world and its injustices. A further criticism of their position relates to their use of a rhetoric that suggests it is possible to supersede capitalism, without having been transformed by it. This is, according to Kee (1990) a misrepresentation of historical materialism, which cannot jump over time and place in history, liberation theologians thus risk condemning ‘the people of the Third World to live in the ancient world’ (Kee 1990: 277). However, the most significant criticism of liberation theology stems from questioning the feasibility of the engagement between Christianity and Marxism that liberation theology seeks to promote. Related to this is the contention that attempts to separate Marxist analysis from Marxist ideology are fundamentally flawed.

Marxism cannot, at the eclectic whim of the theologian, be exploited for a merely empirical analysis of the structures of class exploitation and oppression, leaving aside as dispensable and ‘ideological’ components, the critique of religion itself. (Turner 1999: 203-4)
Must the radical and comprehensive Marxist critique of Christianity as involving a falsification and a mystification of the relations of class and domination be seen as true of religion in general or is there some possibility for religion to play a more positive role in the revolutionary process? Turner (1999) suggests that the former possibility misconstrues Marx’s position on Christianity which was as strongly opposed to nineteenth-century Feuerbachian atheism as it was to Christian theism, arguing that both traditions involve an essentialist preoccupation with the question of the existence or non-existence of God. Socialism, on the other hand, deconstructs oppositions between the sacred and the secular, offering the possibility for reintegration of theological and political projects. Acceptance of Turner’s argument leaves the door open for the development of a critical spirituality of management and organisation that is inspired by liberation theology. To gain an understanding of what such a project might look like we turn to examination of the role played by the industrial chaplains in the UK miners’ strike of 1984-85.

Methods for Historical Study

Oral history involves research participants in reflecting upon specific events or periods in the past. In so doing it provides a valuable method for documenting the experiences of groups that tend to be marginalized in historical accounts, either because of their lack of power or because they are generally regarded as peripheral to the subject of research, so allowing these voices to be heard (Samuel 1976). This is not to naively suggest that the method enables marginal groups to ‘speak for themselves’, for the construction of the narrative firmly remains in the hands of the historian who contributes to the shaping of the testimony by asking questions and gives the narrative its ‘final published shape’ (Portelli 1998: 72), but it does force the speaker’s subjectivity onto the historian more than other historical methods. Hence, ‘oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing and what they now think they did’ (Portelli 1998: 67). Oral history is an established method in the study of industrial conflict where ‘the recounting of a strike through the words and memories of workers rather than those of the police and the (often unfriendly) press obviously helps (though not automatically) to balance a distortion implicit in those sources’ (Portelli 1998: 71-2). It has also been used in the study of the role of women of the British coalfields during the UK miners’ strike (Gier-Viskovatoff and Porter 1998) providing a valuable contrast to the ‘public narratives’ (Somers 1994) through which miners’ stories became homogenized as they developed a group consensus about past events (Viskovatoff 2004).

The oral histories on which this analysis is based is a subset from a larger set of interviews which formed part of a study looking at the changing role of IM in Britain since the 1940s. This analysis focuses on three oral history interviews with individuals who held full-time positions as coal industry chaplains during the 1984-85 UK miners’ strike. All three men are aged over sixty and have retired from IM work. As the number of coal industry chaplains who held full-time positions during the strike was small, only four or five in the whole of the UK, this analysis is based on interviews with those who could be traced. The interviews took place in the narrators’ homes and lasted between
one and two hours. It became evident from these interviews that the narrators had evidently been ‘wholly absorbed by the totality of the historical event of which they were a part’ (Portelli 1998: 70) and this is reflected in the epic style of their narrative. They also claimed to have been influenced by liberation theology at a time when IM was strongly influenced by left-wing politics.

One of the main difficulties with the oral history method stems from the possibility of bias introduced by memory lapses and distortions (Grele 1998). The Tyne and Wear Archive, which contains records of meetings, correspondence and reports relating to industrial chaplaincy in the Northeast of England during the strike, together with personal records and documents kept by the chaplains, provided additional documentary data which was used to verify and support the oral histories. Interviews with ten other industrial chaplains involved in the wider study also helped fill in missing details and confirm the oral history accounts. The interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim, research participants were sent a copy of the transcript and encouraged to fill in any gaps and clarify areas of confusion regarding the events they had described and views they had expressed during the interview. The small number of oral history interviews used in the analysis reflects the overall size of this community. However, this only serves to emphasise the importance of oral history as a device through which to voice these alternative, marginalized stories and as a means of challenging taken-for-granted, ‘normal’ accounts.

**IM and the UK Miners’ Strike 1984-85**

The UK Miners’ Strike of 1984-85 was one of the longest and most violent industrial disputes in British history. Initiated by the threat to cut capacity and jobs in the coal industry it was the first major strike of any duration to be fought over the question of employment (Beynon 1985). The strike pitted the Marxist revolutionary Arthur Scargill, head of the N.U.M. (National Union of Mineworkers), against the prophet of free market capitalism, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Other key players on the political scene included Ian McGregor, president of the National Coal Board, and Peter Walker, the Secretary of State for Energy. Seen in a broader political sense, the strike represented an ideological struggle between the left-wing labour movement representing traditional ideas of working-class solidarity and the Thatcherite principles of individualism and market economy associated with the Conservative right. The strike involved 135,000 men and lasted for nearly a year (Church, Outram and Smith 1991). In 1983, the coal industry employed over 287,000 in its collieries, by 1989 just five years after the miners’ strike defeat, this figure had declined to just over 80,000 and almost half the collieries had closed (Beynon, Hudson and Sadler 1991). However, the significance of the strike relates to its intensity as well as the magnitude of its consequences. Conflict between the mobile squad of police equipped with riot gear that moved from colliery to colliery in an attempt to restrict the movement of ‘flying pickets’ by setting up road-blocks and prevent intimidation of ‘scabs’ (strike-breaking miners), was intense and sometimes violent. As the strike continued, police violence spilt over into the mining communities where one commentator suggested ‘to be known as a strike activist was to court constant routine harassment if not assault and eventual, inevitable arrest’ (McIlroy 1985:108). In the battle
to win public opinion media coverage became a powerful weapon, television images showing violent scenes on the picket line providing the basis for government supporters to assert that there could be no surrender to this kind of conduct (Adeney and Lloyd 1986).

Although there have been accounts of the role of the Church of England in the strike (Church of England Industrial Committee 1984, 1985; Jenkins 2002) little is known about the role played by members of the clergy based in the mining communities where this industrial conflict took place. Did they support or condemn the strikers; what form did their action take? At the forefront of this engagement were members of the National Network of Coal Industry Chaplaincy (NCCIC), a special interest group within IM run by chaplains in the coal industry for the purposes of providing mutual support and sharing experience. In the notes for training of part-time IM chaplains in the Northeast coalfields chaplains were told that ‘visiting a colliery means the whole colliery and it is important that relationships be developed at all levels’. The objectives of their work are ‘to discover the effect of industry on the people who work in it, the society which depends on it, the world order being shaped by it’. Chaplains are encouraged to wear their ‘dog collar’ and remain persistent in their efforts to ‘get down the pits’ as an act of ‘showing your face in a place where the clergy have not traditionally gone’.

The role of the chaplain in this context had two strands, first to provide pastoral care to individuals in their place of work and second, to find a meeting place where wide ranging questions could be raised about, for example, the closure of pits and the possibility of unemployment. But jobs in manufacturing had been in steady decline since 1979 and other nationalised industries were also under threat, the contraction of one serving to ‘precipitate the collapse of others (like steel and coal) in a vicious spiral of decline’ (Beynon, Hudson and Sadler 1991: xvi). Chaplains were therefore conscious that the days of visiting workplaces where several thousand people were employed were fading fast. With them went a pattern of engagement between church and industry based on paternalist principles and a welfarist concern for labour (Jeremy 1990). As one chaplain, describing his entry to the Swan Hunter shipbuilding yard in the early 1970s recounted:


I contacted initially, as I was bound to do, Sir John Hunter, the top of the tree, and Sir John Hunter’s attitude was, “Of course you come in, Padre. Of course! Of course!” So I said, “Well, I think really I’d like to consult the unions.” “No need whatever to consult the trade unions! You have my permission to come in. Good heavens! Why should they have any say in the matter?” So I said, “Well, it’s very good to gain their consent.” “No need whatever! You come in!” So I had no alternative, but to come in... and to say to the unions straightaway, “I’ve had permission from Sir John and I wanted to be able to consult with you but sadly the opportunity wasn’t given to me.” And the union’s attitude was, “Well, clearly this is some management ploy, but it is such a stupid ploy that we’re perfectly happy for this guy to come in and we’ll be kind to him, but the whole thing’s quite ridiculous.” And it took me some six months to explain slowly and patiently to people what I was actually about... I had no opportunity to do [this] through any kind of joint consensus initially.
Coal Industry Chaplains

Coal industry chaplains saw their work as fulfilling a fundamental theological duty of the Christian church to be alongside the marginalized in an industry that was under threat and facing possibly terminal decline. In the strike they saw themselves as standing alongside those who were suffering whilst simultaneously working towards an attempted reconciliation of interests on both sides of the dispute. Steve was an industrial chaplain in the steel industry in South Wales in 1970s later becoming a coal industry chaplain in the North East where he remained from 1978 to 1990. His experience began in parish curacy in a large pit village in the early 1960s but he moved into industrial chaplaincy in 1970 when he was appointed to a full-time position in a steel plant in South Wales with two other full-time and three part-time colleagues. After eight years he left to become chaplain in the North East coalfield where he remained for twelve years. However at the start of his IM career Steve (like many other industrial chaplains) was provided with very little formal guidance concerning the nature of his role.

I was a novice… I’d never done any of this work before properly at all. So I just walked through the gates for the first time in my life and I was terrified because I didn’t know really what to expect… I’d worked as an apprentice in the shipyard before I was ordained… so I knew a bit about working places. I had an instinct for it though because I came from a working class background. My dad was a warehouseman on Newcastle quayside so I had a background and an understanding - I hope - and I dived in at the deep end. I started to visit the works… if I remember rightly, there were 15,000 people working there. It’s a massive plant producing 3 million tonnes of steel a year. And I was just literally visiting, I went round and talked to people… I talked to people from the very senior management level through to process. I got to know what the trade union movement was really about because those were the days, of course, of powerful trade unions. We had 83 full-time trade union leaders on site, literally full-time. They never did anything else but trade union business and they were employed by the steel company, paid for doing it. I worked alongside them very closely just finding out what their problems were, talking through things with them. There was a great mythology amongst people that we used to solve problems… [I] was the person who [got] in touch with people to [help them to] think through what their problems were and to understand the way they do things. So when it came to negotiations… I knew a long time prior what was happening because I was involved with the people who were going to be in [them and I] often discussed it with them.

Industrial chaplains like Steve tend to view their marginal position as key to their success in gaining an understanding of industry from both managerial and worker perspectives. Leading up to the strike, management and unions sought to inscribe this marginality, for example by arranging the seating position of the chaplain in meetings to emphasise the neutrality of his position.
The management would sit on one side of the room and trade unions on the other and they always put me on the [cross] benches with the local welfare officer and that’s where they wanted me to sit. They didn’t want me sitting on the other side. However, sometimes it was impossible for the chaplain to remain distanced from the activity of production when it absorbed everyone.

There was a new plant opened in the [steel] works… It had a target… [to produce] 60,000 tonnes… and I just used to go in twice a week to that factory and the first question I used to ask is, “Have you made it yet? Have you done it?” You know, because everybody’s anxious to do it…When they eventually [achieved the target] one of the managers from headquarters came through… and he congratulated them and said, “You know what caused this? It was that bloody chaplain coming in here asking you that did it!” [chuckling] It was silly that, but it made me feel I was part of the proceedings and that was important and just being part of that I grew in confidence.

Moving to the North East coalfields meant that Steve was trying to cover an even larger industry than before, with 35,000 coal miners and 80 separate units to visit. At this point he received training which allowed him to go underground accompanied by a supervisor. Going underground was seen as a crucial method for gaining understanding of the miners’ situation.

You couldn’t meet people en masse… You might have a thousand people working in a coal mine but you might have to travel ten miles… underground to find maybe a dozen… and sometimes those faces are ten miles away from the shaft you go down. So you have to go down and then travel by train. It’s a different world. So it was much more difficult to meet a lot of people underground so I kept my underground visiting… to a very strict limit of maybe once a week [but] it was important that I should be seen to do it... Because I don’t think you can talk to a coal miner about his job unless he knows that you’ve seen what he does and what it’s like… It’s a world apart. It’s like living in a different place.

In 1982 he wrote in a report:

I have continued to visit six pits on a fairly regular and frequent basis and I now know quite a lot of people in important positions. But it is difficult to develop any meaningful relationship mainly because seeing people is totally haphazard. The only guaranteed way to see a pit manager is by appointment… They are extremely busy people constantly in meetings or underground.

In an effort to overcome these difficulties Steve changed his approach concentrating on key trade union officers and managers in the regional headquarters where most of the decisions were taken. His relationships with management were also positive during this period. When visiting a pit he always made an effort to visit the manager and senior trade union leader before going underground. Relationships between industrial chaplains were
also important. During the late 1970s IM was an expanding organisation and a sense of camaraderie was emerging between industrial chaplains, based partly on a shared masculinity.

I: What unified you in those early days then as a group? What made it good?
R: Probably the stories we used to tell each other and we used to drink rather heavily in the bars.

Hugh worked as an industrial chaplain in the Grangemouth area in Scotland during the 1980s visiting around 4,000 employees in the coal mines and the power generating station that they served. Having grown up in an ex-mining area south of Glasgow and formerly worked as an engineer Hugh visited the miners underground and the power station on a weekly basis listening to their concerns and also visiting injured workers in hospital. As he gained experience and knowledge of the organizational structures he also began to find ways to participate in joint consultation and board meetings.

Tony was an industrial chaplain at the Maltby colliery in South Yorkshire during the 1980s where approximately 1,500 men were working at the time of the strike. He saw his role in the coalfields as about:

Going to the canteen to talk to people, going round the tables. It meant having a meal and being seen to be part of the fabric really [and] going in some of the surface offices... Of course visits to mines are heavily regulated...and there were certain points where you couldn’t go [but] everybody... and they were still mostly men at that time, would readily assent to the view that it was right that the church (as represented by the clergy)... should be there...at the coal face.

The chaplains’ presence was thus connected to the continuing dangers associated with coal mining work. Although conditions in the industry had improved, thirty miners were killed at work in the UK 1983 (Adeney and Lloyd 1986), this providing the basis for a powerful symmetrical relationship between chaplains and miners, as Tony explains:

Sometimes people would joke about this...[saying] something like, “Oh, we need you down here [down the pit] to make sure that we’re alright way up there”. [pointing heavenward]

The Strike
In recounting their experiences of the strike, all three narrators convey a sense of having lived through a climactic personal experience. Hugh explained this in terms of ‘five years of industrial mission put into [one] year’. Steve’s testimony of the strike suggests that it represented an epic moment in his experience as an industrial chaplain.

It was probably the most formative period in my life... Initially I was just puzzled by what the heck I should do... I just didn’t know what to do initially so I tried to just keep doing the same things. To some degree I was successful because I was able... to learn the way you actually face a picket line and talk your way through
it. But generally, that wasn’t so difficult because I probably knew the people on the picket line anyway and they knew very well that I had a responsibility to those inside as well. So I just started spending time with them on the picket line and I would go through the picket line into the pit… I would also spend a lot of the time with the trade union officers. I tried to keep abreast of what was happening. I was really fortunate in some respects… the back of my house faced onto the car park of the police station and if the police were forming a convoy I used to see these [vans] coming and I used to… get in my car… and follow them to see… what the problem was and to… try and get involved in talking with people… You’d go past the police station and you’d see massive buses pulling miners out and shoving them in the police station… It was actually quite frightening for somebody who wasn’t involved…

The strike fundamentally changed the basis of the chaplains’ involvement with the coal industry. As Hugh explained

Suddenly of course things were entirely different. I couldn’t just visit collieries like I had been doing and I had to make a basic decision – either I had to stay with them [the miners] during this period or I had to withdraw and say ‘This is a fight you chaps have got, I’ll come back when you have sorted it out.’ And [I decided] to hang in, I think that was right.

The chaplains used the same principles for gaining understanding of the miners’ situation in the strike as they had always done; the main difference was that instead of going down the mines they now concentrated on the experience of the picket line. Tony described how he sought to maintain a physical presence alongside the picketing miners.

What I did [during the strike] was to visit [the picket line] nearly every day and take a bottle of milk [for them to make tea]. I’d stand about for half an hour and chat to the men. When it was quiet and if I thought the guys there would trust me not to create a problem, then I did go through the picket line to see the management… [It was] very hard to… walk along the long road [leading to the pit]. [But] with the deputies going in… it wasn’t a total blockade and many of the people were related to one another. [It was a case of] getting up at 3am in the morning… just to be there. It’s perhaps difficult to get over the sense of supporting people without saying out and out I was supporting the strike… I’m proud and I’m pleased to say that I did stand on the picket line and when it was difficult, I was there.

Being present on the picket lines changed the basis of the relationship with miners, many of whom expressed initial surprise at the presence of the industrial chaplain in such a context. The bond established during that time was strengthened and deepened as a result of this shared experience, as Hugh explains:
It would have taken me at least five years to get to know the men as well as I did in one year… you really got alongside people very quickly and at a level which would have taken you years to achieve otherwise.

As events of the strike unfolded some chaplains became more directly involved in the dispute. This made it difficult for them to relate to what they perceived as the detached position of the established churches.

When you are moving in industrial mission circles during the week… a lot of the stuff you hear on Sunday has no connection… and when you make that connection you are accused of being political.

Hugh also found himself going underground into mines to speak to miners who were protesting underground.

It started with a small number of miners who sat in collieries to stop them being flooded. You see, the managers knew the future of the industry and they knew which collieries were at risk and in some cases they brought forward the closure programme and the quickest and most effective way of closing a colliery is to shut the pumps and let it fill with water. And to stop that some of the men went underground.

He also became involved in speaking at political meetings organised by the NUM, speaking on a platform which he occasionally shared with Scargill.

I got to know him quite well… [although] I didn’t share his enthusiasm… I thought he was misguided, but he was very committed, almost puritanical.

Steve also became more closely engaged in practical action in support of the striking miners through administration of the hardship funds and he found himself conscious of being labelled as a strike supporter.

It’s hard to believe… now… there were miners stopped half way down the country… police were stopping them and turning them back and not allowing them to carry on because they were frightened of what they were going to do, even though they were often nothing to do with the strike at all… I’m pretty sure my car was noted.

Tony also became caught up in charges of political activism.

People thought I was in favour of the strike and I would say that I was in support of the miners and the communities… but as a priest… you’re concerned for everybody and for truth and justice.

And in the violence:
At the time miners started returning to work at Maltby... the police sought to... break up the miners who were gathering to demonstrate and there were members of the public amongst them including the [local] MP and myself... {he} was hit on the shoulder and I was able to escape by turning tail and running. But there’s a lovely story somewhere... describing me as the fastest vicar in the West. There’s quite a lot of myth attached to it.

In Scotland, Hugh had less contact with strike violence than the other chaplains. However, he was present at meetings which were reportedly bugged and describes ‘strange clicks’ on his own telephone line and suspected that his name was probably on lists that would affect him in employing for jobs outside the church. He also heard stories told by miners who had travelled to Yorkshire on demonstrations which provoked fear amongst those they spoke to on their return.

Some of them said they’d never been so terrified in their lives before and I can believe that. The impression I got...was as though someone had pulled a curtain back and you were seeing the naked power of the State. It was really quite frightening, sobering.

Throughout the strike NNCIC members wrote a series of letters to political leaders at the centre of the dispute. In September 1983 they received a letter from Scargill agreeing to meet with them but this meeting was cancelled due to the impending crisis. Several more letters were sent to Scargill, McGregor and Walker in the months that followed, expressing concern about what was happening to the mining industry and requesting that conciliatory action be taken. Steve also visited Scargill, McGregor and Walker to try:

To get involved and to discuss with them what was going on because it became a kind of national crisis. We were under tremendous pressure.

In April 1984 he received the following response from Scargill:

I too have got deep concern about what is taking place, particularly the decision of Mr Ian McGregor to close over twenty pits and reduce manpower by over 20,000 during the twelve months to next March... I therefore hope you could use your influence to persuade Mr McGregor to stop practising the same type of butchery that he inflicted on British steel and British Leyland.

And from McGregor:

I can assure you that the NCB finds the present situation distressing, especially as the people suffering the most are the mineworkers themselves... We are always ready to talk to the Unions about the industry’s future, and especially the future of the people who work in it, for whom we have a serious responsibility.

The then Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins had also expressed concerns about Thatcherite policy and was supportive of the work of the NNCIC. He wrote to Peter
Walker concerning the miners’ strike and in September 1984 received the following reply:

You have preached that the miners must not be “defeated”. But you have not clarified who is trying to defeat them. You imply that it is Mr McGregor and the Government. Such implication has no justification whatsoever… As a Christian I hope that in your moments of meditation and prayer you will ask why the 70,000 miners who were given a democratic vote, decided overwhelmingly not to strike. At such moments you could also ponder why it is that these men have day after day been threatened by mobs from outside their own communities… Can I perhaps ask you as a Christian bishop what you believe the Government or the nation should do if Mr Scargill continues, as he has for six months, to refuse to negotiate or to move from this demand?… You and I agree that the miners must not be defeated. But we must do our best to assess who is the true enemy.

However, some clergy involved in the dispute, such as the writer of the following letter to his bishop, were seen as having become too much involved in this political agenda.

It became obvious early on [in a meeting of striking miners and their wives] that an appeal for non-violence on the picket lines is a waste of time. The miners see the Establishment (represented by Mrs Thatcher and her “bully boy” police) as the Great Enemy of the Working Class… Violence – as they see it, the violence of the destruction of communities and the destruction of jobs within our communities – must be met, if necessary, with violence… So preaching Christian reconciliation/forgiveness is regarded as weakness, almost an insult to the working class. And who is to blame the mining folk for this attitude? The Church of England has been feeding them the doctrine of the “just war” for 400 years. They believe – rightly, in my opinion – that their cause is “just”. So why shouldn’t they hurl bricks at the police, fire nails at them, injure their horses, and set fire to Establishment property? Isn’t Mrs Thatcher’s violence just as bad? But in her case, it’s classed as “preserving law and order”… We clergy – pacifist and non-pacifist alike – are written off as sentimental idealists…[written in pencil at the bottom of the letter: ‘needs help!’]

The End

We have been out for a year and we have had the church on our side and we have lost, which only goes to show how strong the devil is in this world.
[Durham Trade Union Leader]

The miners’ loss seemed to spill over into the lives of the industrial chaplains who had supported them. As Steve explains:

As soon as the strike was over… it started to go to bits quite clearly all over the place and there was nothing miners could do about it. They’d been on strike. They’d lost. So they lost their jobs. I went on for four years trying to do something… seeing the closure of the headquarters offices and it really just
totally depressed me and I think I had to get out, for my own sanity in fact, at that stage.

Hugh found himself looking back and questioning whether, in giving the miners’ hope in a situation which he had felt from the start that they would not win, he had helped to prolong their situation and suffering.

The miners’ initial return to work was confused and fragmented, as Tony recounts from his experience of how the strike was broken.

It was the 20th September 1984, word had got around that one or two men were going to be going in. So I got up at 3 am and walked to the pit at 4 am… I met the union secretary and the president, or one of the other officials [and we] walked through a police line to get to the [hut] and we stayed there as the demonstrating miners gathered in front of the police lines… bricks and missiles coming down on the picketers when we were inside… The following Monday morning… I walked to the pit and [was] set upon by the Met emerging from the wood at the side of the colliery road and… being hit.

The end came for Tony around 5th March 1985.

R: I think people went back with a sense of defiance and not defeat…
I: So you felt defiant?
R: Well, I think we … Well, I think you do. I mean it was hardly a victory parade, but … [finding some photographic material]… Oh, here we are, this is marching back to work, yeah. Yeah, you see.
I: So there was a procession.
R: So what’s the demeanour on people’s faces there? Well, I look a bit grim, but …
I: Where are you?
R: That’s me, [xx from left] but some of the lads have got a smile.
I: They have, yeah!
R: Yeah. Yeah.
I: A sort of resolved look.
R: Yes. Yes. They’ve had a period of time where they haven’t had to go into the big, dark, dangerous hole in the ground… Nowadays no longer do hundreds of thousands of men have to go to work in these difficult conditions and for a year these men haven’t had that. So a lot of them are a good deal healthier for that… and they’ve also been able to build up a lot of camaraderie and maybe have spent more time with their families… who will have been committing a lot of time to the strike as well. But yeah, I mean there’s relief that what was in some ways a civil war was over and that things would get back to normality of a sort. But well, would they? Because things would always be different.
In addition to being one of the longest and most violent disputes in recent British history, the UK miners’ strike of 1984-85 signalled the ending of a period in which work identity was defined in terms of masculinity, physicality and production (Pahl 1984; Roper 1994), the strike being seen by miners as a test of these values. Strike breakers were accused of not being ‘real’ men and miners described how they enjoyed the physical, intellectual and moral stimulation associated with the strike which most who had not ‘undergone war’ would ‘never emulate’ (Adeney and Lloyd 1986: 7). The miners’ strike also represented a pivotal moment in the development of IM since their defeat challenged many of the workplace values that had been associated with the success of the movement up until this point. The general decline of heavy industries called into question the entire purpose of IM and undermined the credibility of the chaplain in the workplace, which was based on an understanding of work identity founded on these core values. Despite the defiance expressed in the final quote, industrial chaplains found that the factory as the ‘heart of industry’ was no longer ‘where men were’ and many were left searching for a revitalised sense of purpose.

Although industrial chaplains in the miners’ strike were not explicitly using liberation theology they were working with a concept of belief informed by local context and seeking to challenge the reality expressed by more powerful voices in the dispute. Through their experience of coal mining work the chaplains developed a perspective that...
was sensitive to the marginalized position of striking miners and provided an alternative to the story told by political leaders on both sides of the conflict. It is perhaps ironic that the chaplains themselves have been marginalised from historical accounts of the strike. Critics might see this as an indication of their failure to develop a critical spirituality with the potential to achieve lasting political or social change. It is in part due to their non-confrontational approach which is driven in part by the knowledge that any overt criticism of management is likely to result in cessation of access to the organization. Despite having critical insights into the managerial labour process chaplains often remain silent, for criticism carries with it the risk of becoming ‘persona non grata in these places’ (Paradise 1968: 133). The miners’ strike was relatively unusual in that a small group of chaplains became actors in an industrial relations dispute that affected entire communities. However, the actions of these few isolated individuals did not meet with strong support from the Church, which in the main sought to distance itself from the coal mining chaplains’ involvement in what was seen as an overtly political and highly sensitive issue. Although the chaplains were deeply committed to their involvement in the dispute, the tensions that this produced at an individual level were significant and the sense of loss that defeat aroused in the miners extended to the chaplains too.

Towards a Critical Spirituality

There is much we can learn from this history that can inform the development of a more critical spirituality of the workplace. First, it is an underlying premise of industrial chaplains that to understand the industrial world they must interpret it from the perspective of those people who are engaged in it. In trying to develop an understanding based on lived experience, chaplains had to acknowledge the economic, political and cultural situation faced by miners, their families and managers during the strike and this provided the catalyst for the development of their own practical, political strategies for action. The chaplains’ religious beliefs thus had to be reinterpreted in the light of this lived experience. In some cases this meant they put their own identity at risk (Roberts 2001), risking their status as chaplains to remain faithful to their religious beliefs and translate them into practical action. This illustrates how the development of critical spirituality relies on pursuit of an emic perspective which enables reinterpretation of religious principles in the context of current structural inequalities associated with employment and management. Second, by virtue of their own marginality the experience of chaplains illustrates how public voice in relation to one silenced group can be achieved through understanding based on engagement with another marginal group. This has the potential to overcome one of the criticisms of critical management as imposing a subject position on informants (Wray-Bliss 2003) by illustrating how critical engagement can involve mutually disempowered groups working together in pursuit of social justice. Finally, this account emphasises the potential role of oral histories in helping to challenge orthodox accounts of industrial relations which fail to acknowledge marginal voices.

Liberation theology provides a source of inspiration for a critical spirituality of the workplace, by breathing life into this idea and illustrating how it may be translated into praxis. Liberation theology’s concern with the exterior or social aspect of religiosity, in addition to the interior or personal aspect contrasts with mainstream spirituality in the
workplace interests which have predominantly focused on the interior aspect through which individuals seek a more holistic and meaningful existence in the workplace that enables them to feel connected to a higher purpose. By drawing attention to structural inequalities and destructive effects of global capitalism, liberation theology reminds us that individual spiritual transformation occurs in a social and political context, thereby highlighting one of the main weaknesses of the spirituality at work literature by pointing out the limited value in seeing individual enlightenment as the goal if organizations founded on exploitation and inequality remain unchanged by this.

This is not, however, to suggest that liberation theology provides a template for the development of critical spirituality, for it is evidently fraught with conceptual contradictions and it has been only limitedly successful in relation to its original emancipatory ambitions. Does this make liberation theology a failure, and does it confirm what critical management scholars have already suggested, that spirituality is incompatible with the goals of emancipation and transformation of power asymmetries in organizations? The answer to these questions hinges on whether we consider religion, according to a rather particular Marxist interpretation, to be the source of delusional belief. It is this assumption that underpins some critical management scholars’ negative interpretations of the possibility of developing a critical spirituality. Alternatively, it may be that religion is not delusional in nature if it is sufficiently flexible to permit the reinterpretation of belief in the context of present experience. The oral histories of chaplains involved in the miners’ strike illustrates how religion can become a force that is used to oppose domination and oppression, even if the efforts of these individuals did not have the full support of the Churches that they were representing.

As is often noted, Marx did not anticipate the survival of capitalism beyond a relatively short period and, because of this, neither did he anticipate the survival of religion. How then can the delusional view account for our current situation where religiosity, defined broadly to encompass all forms of spirituality rather than just commitment to a mainstream religion, has persisted despite the progress of science and rationality, particularly among those such as the employees cited by Casey (2002), who are most educated and familiar with the scientific and rational principles which were originally thought to guarantee its ending? A critical spirituality of the workplace involves exploring the possibility that religion need not necessarily be an instrument of class domination and in some circumstances can play a significant role in opposing the values of a dominant managerial culture. This does not of course mean that we should stop criticising the processes of social domination that undoubtedly exist in relation to religious experience, but rather that we should also remain open to the possibility of alternative forms of spiritual expression which employ the values of empathy and social justice as means of challenging the prevailing orthodoxies of management and organization.

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References


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iii All direct quotes in this paragraph from archive sources.

iv From archived document.

v Quote from interview with an industrial chaplain.