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Neutrality in Politics and Religion

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This article considers the centrality of neutrality of politics and religion to the principle of open and voluntary membership.

In 1861, George Jacob Holyoake, in his capacity as editor of *The Counsellor* asked a seemingly innocuous question which caused turmoil in the board room of the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society leading to the suspension of the Society's secretary and to the issuing of a firm statement from the Society on its commitment to neutrality in politics and religion (Cole, 1945, p. 95).

The subject of whether co-operatives should give some of their profits to the workforce as 'bonus to labour' was a major topic for debate at the time and Holyoake describes his request as an innocent attempt to clarify the situation in Rochdale. He asked what groups were in favour and against bonus to labour in the town. William Cooper, the Rochdale Pioneers Society secretary responded with details of the attitudes of different groups (Holyoake, 1907, p. 160).

The following board meeting suspended Cooper (he was reinstated at the next meeting) and drafted a statement issued in the name of Abraham Howard, the President. It said:

I beg to inform your readers that the principles of the Rochdale Co-operators are — 1st, not to inquire into the political or religious opinions of those who apply for membership into ours or any of the various co-operative societies in our town; 2nd, that the consideration of the various political and religious differences of the members who compose our societies should prevent us from allowing into our councils or practices anything which might be construed into an advantage to any single one of each sect or opinion. The result of these principles has been that in the discussion and determination of all the great questions which have divided us, there might be seen ranged on both sides men of various creeds and opinions (Holyoake, 1907, p.161-2).

It was not the first discussion of the importance of political and religious neutrality and it would certainly not be the last.

During my career in the National Co-operative Archive, I worked with many and varied historic documents of the co-operative movement. The earliest mention of political and religious neutrality that I have seen is in the report of the Co-operative Congress of 1832. It was the third of a series of Congresses that took place from 1830, often known as Owenite Congresses as they were presided over by Robert Owen. The Congresses brought together representatives from across Britain and caused a huge amount of interest and engagement from the delegates — at the Second of the Congresses, two delegates from Glasgow walked to Birmingham to participate and presumably walked back home afterwards. During the Third Congress, the subject of "political and religious opinions" was raised:

Mr Owen then rose and said, many gentlemen had entertained an erroneous idea relative to his system, namely, that no person could be admitted into a co-operative community without subscribing to all his principles. This error might be removed by adopting the following resolution —

"Whereas the co-operative world contains persons of every religious sect, and of every political party, it is resolved, that co-operators, *as such*, jointly and severally, are not pledged to any political, religious, or irreligious tenets whatever; neither those of Mr Owen nor of any other individual" (Carpenter, 1832, p. 100; italics in original).

The resolution was discussed in detail, then passed — predictably — without dissent.

Several of the Rochdale Pioneers were Owenites and the influence of Owen's ideas can be seen in the way that the Rochdale Pioneers Society was formed and developed, including the commitment to political and religious neutrality. Some of the founding Rochdale Pioneers were religious, in fact one of the local Unitarian chapels was known as the Co-op Chapel because so

many of them worshipped there and three were Unitarian lay preachers. Political activity was nothing new to them either, with experience of Chartist and trade union activity. The Society had as one of its objects “To arrange the powers of production, distribution, education and government” (Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, 1844), a political aim if there ever was one.

The only co-operative societies to specifically tie themselves to politics in the nineteenth century that I know of were the conservative co-operative societies established from 1869 to 1880. One was established in Westminster, the other eight were along the Pennines, including one in Rochdale itself. While the Co-operative Union, the national federation of UK co-operative societies, recorded information about these societies in the editions of the Co-operative Directory and Co-operative Statistics, they declined to become part of the co-operative movement and information about them is sparse (Cole, 1944, p. 95).

Anders Oerne, the Swedish co-operative leader was right when he said that “neutrality is not a very precise idea” (cited by Rhodes, 1995, p. 52), but it has great relevance to the operation of co-operatives, on a local level and in the international arena. Will Watkins, lifelong co-operator and former Director of the International Co-operative Alliance counselled “neutrality does not mean and never has meant passivity or non-resistance where the interests of the co-operative movement or any of its branches are threatened or even involved” (Watkins, 1986, p. 97).

The first constitution of the International Co-operative Alliance — discussed at the second international Congress in 1896 included:

The Alliance does not concern itself with either politics or religion. Co-operation is a neutral ground on which people holding the most varied opinion and professing the most diverse needs may meet and act in common. In order to maintain this neutrality, on which the unity of the co-operative movement depends, every person and association in membership of the alliance recognises that co-operation is self-sufficient and must not serve as the instrument of any party (Rhodes, 1995, p. 25).

The debates on the meaning and impact of political and religious neutrality continued well into the twentieth century. In many countries, practical issues led to co-operatives working closely with governments with co-operative officials even being wartime ministers in some places (Rhodes, 1995, pp. 78-79).

Within the Co-operative Union a need was recognised to know the thinking of government, but it was not always easy to maintain that contact without raising questions about whether neutrality was being threatened. When the Jumbo Farm committee was formed in 1860 to discuss the establishment of a wholesale society for the co-operative movement, the first question raised was who could be contacted in the government to start the process of new legislation that would allow co-operatives to invest in other co-operatives and make the enterprise legal (Wilson et al., 2013, pp. 49-51).

By 1917, the UK co-operative movement formed what became its own political party — The Co-operative Party — not because of a wish to be involved in politics but because of a “feeling of acute grievance and a disbelief that co-operation could ever look for fair treatment from governments unless it took matters actively into its own hands” (Cole, 1944, p. 269). Wartime preferential treatment of private traders had provided the final straw leading to involvement in politics.

The fundamental importance to the co-operative movement of political and religious neutrality remains, however. There have been three international reviews of the co-operative principles, debating how custom and practice has changed from the time that the Rochdale Pioneers first set them out. In the 1966 review, the concept of neutrality was included within the first principle:

1. Membership of a co-operative society should be voluntary and available without artificial restriction or any social, political, racial or religious discriminations to all persons who can make use of its services and are willing to accept the responsibilities of membership (Watkins, 1986, p. 8).

Throughout my readings on the subject, political and religious neutrality has always felt to me to be one of the requirements for open and voluntary membership and is as vital in the twenty first century as it was in the nineteenth.

The Author

Gillian Lonergan spent her working life as Librarian at the Co-operative Heritage Trust's National Co-operative Archive in Manchester and is Deputy Editor (Production) of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies*.

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