Three fallacies in the essentialist interpretation of the political thought of R. H. Tawney

Gary Armstrong ¹ and Tim Gray ² *

¹ Dr Gary Armstrong, HMRC, Benton Park View, Benton Road, Longbenton, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE98 1ZZ. Email: garyarm@talktalk.net

² Emeritus Professor Tim Gray, School of Politics, Geography, and Sociology, Newcastle University, Politics Building, 40-42 Great North Road, Newcastle on Tyne, NE1 7RU. Email: t.s.gray@ncl.ac.uk

* Corresponding author

ABSTRACT This article disputes three positions entrenched in the essentialist interpretation of R.H. Tawney’s political thought. First, it contests the notion that Tawney’s work is characterised by an overwhelming consistency. Whilst the Tawney canon displays a thematic persistence, a chronological analysis demonstrates that he significantly altered his core political concepts. Second, the article asserts that the prevailing consensus among commentators that Tawney’s politics is largely a derivative of his religion is one-dimensional, ignoring the extent to which Tawney’s politics departed from its Christian foundations. Both of these mistaken notions – overwhelming consistency and derivation from religion – are exemplified in the third erroneous position adopted by commentators – the elevation of Tawney’s private diaries (known as the Commonplace Book) to a key role in setting the seal on his subsequent political thought. By exposing these fallacies, the article seeks a more authentic interpretation of Tawney’s political thought.

INTRODUCTION

The three main commentators on Tawney’s political thought – Ross Terrill ¹, WH Greenleaf ² and Anthony Wright ³ – are united in their assertion of Tawney’s consistency. Terrill claims that Tawney was “just as radical (in the British sense) in 1960 at the age of eighty as he had been forty years before, and who could republish his analyses of capitalism and socialism despite all that had happened over those four decades” ⁴. Greenleaf states that Tawney’s published works “presuppose, and may be seen to exemplify in particular and important aspects, the conceptions of morality and divine justice in which he had come to believe and which are, often so starkly, reflected in the pages of the diary” ⁵. In
his *R.H. Tawney*, Anthony Wright argues that Tawney “had said what he had to say in the 1920s, in a trio of books (*The Acquisitive Society, Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* and *Equality*) which made his name, and went on saying very much the same things thereafter…the overall impression is of a massive unity, consistency and coherence”\(^6\).

This shared perception of the consistency of Tawney’s political thought feeds directly into a second assertion – that Tawney’s politics largely derives from his Christian religion\(^7\). Terrill states that Tawney “located” his political thought in Christianity\(^8\); Greenleaf argues that Tawney’s “ideas were founded on a sincere and fervent acceptance of the essential truth of Christian doctrine”\(^9\); and Wright affirms the “overwhelming centrality” of Christianity in Tawney’s works\(^10\).

Both these assertions are exemplified in a third assumption – the major status accorded by the commentators to Tawney’s early diaries (the *Commonplace Book* – written in 1912-1914), as an expression of his Christian philosophy. Indeed, the commentators excavate the diaries to produce an ‘integral’ Tawney, with the religious musings of the *Commonplace Book* featured as the foundation of all his subsequent thought. For example, Terrill aligns the diaries with the published works in framing Tawney’s political concepts; Greenleaf stresses that the diaries corroborate what is apparent from the published works - the profound influence of Christianity; and Wright argues that the *Commonplace Book* settles the debate on whether Tawney was a secular or Christian moralist, decisively in favour of the latter.

This paper seeks to challenge these three assertions, by demonstrating that Tawney’s political thought is not consistent but changes significantly over the course of his long writing career; that one important change is that he dilutes his early attachment to Christianity as the foundation stone of his political thought; and that the diaries (the *Commonplace Book*) are not the key to an understanding of Tawney’s political thought.

In section 2, the essentialist approach to Tawney is presented, showing that the interpretations offered by Terrill, Greenleaf and Wright are marked by the prioritisation of certain aspects of the Tawney canon to produce a contrived cohesion that neglects the developmental nature of Tawney’s thought.
This results in an almost static depiction of the relationship between his religion and his politics in which Christianity, derived from the diaries, dominates. In section 3, Quentin Skinner’s criticism of the theoretical weakness of the essentialist approach in cultivating the mythology of coherence is rehearsed. In section 4, evidence from Tawney’s writings is presented to refute each of the three mistaken claims made by essentialist commentators. To refute the first and second claims, a chronological approach is used to track the evolution of Tawney’s political thought, concentrating on the key concepts of equal worth and the political realm to demonstrate that his ideas underwent considerable change from a Christian exclusivity, which held that core values were conceptually dependent on a belief in the existence of God, to a predominantly secular position that core values were based largely on rational analysis. To refute the third claim, critical attention is focused on the Commonplace Book, to show that the private nature of the diaries that Tawney kept between 1912-14, far from revealing the real Tawney unencumbered by an audience, undermines their interpretive value. Section 5 is a conclusion in which the findings of the paper are summarised.

THE ESSENTIALIST INTERPRETATION

Ross Terrill

Terrill sets himself the task of understanding the role of Christianity in Tawney’s politics to assess the capacity of Tawney’s vision to inform an increasingly secular society 11. Terrill declares his intention to make a “systematic construction” out of Tawney’s writings, with an approach that “assumes a certain constant core”, as a means of “demystifying” Tawney’s thought 12. Recognising the potential pitfall of this approach - that any sense of change with be lost - Terrill claims that this risk is mitigated by the biographical chapters in the first part of his book, which “attend to the development of Tawney’s thought through the various stages of his life” 13. However, Terrill fails to establish linkage between these two sections of his book. The biographical narrative in the first part of the book demonstrates how Tawney’s attitude towards Christianity and the Church altered over time, to the point that, eventually, “theology slipped to the unexamined corners of his mind” 14. But this shift is not carried over into Tawney’s political thought in the second part of the book, where Terrill’s analysis depicts Tawney’s ideas as a static, systematic structure, thus ignoring any element of development.
On the other hand, Terrill does recognise that Tawney’s conception of man is not derived purely from biblical authority, but also from his own life-experiences – including the classrooms of the Worker’s Education Association, and the trenches of the Great War. This concern not to exaggerate the role of Christianity in Tawney’s political thought is reflected in the analytical chapters in Terrill’s discussions of concepts such as property, social function and citizenship, which are seen as the product of a variety of influences. Nevertheless, Terrill declares that religion gave that “vital margin of meaning to a number of Tawney’s ideas”, and he argues that without the widespread acceptance of Christian assumptions, some of Tawney’s key arguments would be severely impaired. For example, the concept of the equal worth of all human beings would be left unsupported; the advocacy of the redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor would be no longer compelling; the need for the diffusion of power would be brought under question; the case for greater social solidarity would diminish; and the reason for refraining from exploiting nature to exhaustion would vanish. Terrill also includes the diaries as part of the corpus of Tawney’s work that establishes its Christian foundation, although his emphasis on them is less pronounced than in the other commentaries.

So Terrill’s interpretation of Tawney’s political thought is that it is essentially unchanging and static, with an enduring Christian influence, persisting from the diaries onwards.

W.H. Greenleaf

Greenleaf asserts that Tawney’s political theory is coherent, claiming that in 1952, he “was still of opinion that the basic impulse behind British Socialism” was “‘unashamedly ethical’…This…was broadly the Christian- and morality-based approach to political and social change that Tawney was working out in the years immediately before the Great War” The intellectual context in which Greenleaf places Tawney is pre-eminently Christian, connecting him with such figures as T.H. Green, Bishop Gore and Canon S.A. Barnett, who reinforced Tawney’s commitment to a transcendental (Christian) notion of natural law which provides a standard of truth and righteousness to judge both individuals and social arrangements. Although Greenleaf acknowledges that Tawney’s involvement in the First World War stimulated an explicit embrace of the Labour Party and the acceptance of
practical reforms, he is adamant that the fundamental themes of his socialism were laid down in his Christian beliefs. For example, Greenleaf characterises the central message of *The Acquisitive Society* as the need to alter social arrangements in line with “principles of an ethical, indeed Christian, kind” \(^\text{20}\). The notion that economic issues cannot be confined to the amoral domain of the market, and must be brought under the ambit of Christian moral standards, is a particular feature of *The Acquisitive Society*, leading Greenleaf to state that “It is most surprising, therefore, that in the exposition or appraisal of Tawney’s work, due attention is not always given to the continuous formative influence of his Christian moralism” \(^\text{21}\).

Although he accords a secondary role to Tawney’s *Commonplace Book*, in that it clarifies and reinforces the understanding that can already be gleaned from the works Tawney sanctioned for publication, Greenleaf depicts the *Commonplace Book* as saturated with religiosity, arguing that Tawney’s belief in God is revealed there in its full intensity as a profound inner feeling of an overwhelming presence. For example, Greenleaf, utilising direct quotations from the *Commonplace Book*, demonstrates how Tawney saw categories such as equality and morality as dependent on a belief in God, and that to assert the “infinite importance” and equal valuation of all human beings requires the common fatherhood of God \(^\text{22}\). Furthermore, Tawney’s vivid analogy in the diaries describing human nature as “a house built on piles driven into black slime and always slipping down”, demonstrates his embrace of the Christian concept of original sin \(^\text{23}\), and Greenleaf argues that Tawney’s sense of flawed human nature was a persistent feature of his political thought. According to Greenleaf, the diaries are clear that societal problems can only be overcome by a religious-based morality that exposes individual moral deficiencies and stimulates ethical renewal, and Greenleaf presents this as a defining element of Tawney’s socialism that differentiates his political thought from Marxism and Fabianism.

According to Greenleaf, therefore, this religious dimension is not merely an attribute of Tawney’s early thought, but continued to be a “formative” influence throughout his intellectual career: his output is saturated with Christian moralism. So Greenleaf’s interpretation sees Tawney’s political thought as consistently pervaded by the Christian doctrine which originated in the diaries.

Anthony Wright
Wright’s book on Tawney also offers an essentialist interpretation of Tawney’s political thought, portraying the *Commonplace Book* as the guide through which we must understand Tawney’s later work. Indeed, Wright imbues the diaries with major interpretative significance. Responding to Beatrice Webb’s incomprehension at Tawney’s commitment to Christianity, Wright states:

> If Beatrice, and others, had seen Tawney’s own diary, then the mystery would have been resolved...because it forms the unstated inner core of Tawney’s published work. It is not just that he believes in the existence of God (as a ‘fact of experience’), nor in Christianity as the personification of God, revealing his nature, but that he holds these beliefs to be the indispensable basis for a true morality.

According to Wright, by demonstrating Tawney’s profound commitment to Christian ethics, the *Commonplace Book* performs the crystallising role of making explicit the religious assumptions that governed the concepts used thereafter in his political works. Indeed, Wright casts the diaries as the theoretical foundations of Tawney’s political doctrine, arguing that these musings before the First World War form the lens through which to interpret Tawney’s subsequent ideas. Although Wright acknowledges that Tawney chose to express his case for socialism in predominantly secular terms, he argues that he did so for purely tactical reasons. While Tawney “held, privately, that it was necessary to believe in God in order to believe in socialism...this did not prevent him from constructing a public case for socialism in which God was conspicuous by his absence (except as an appendix for believers)”.

The *Commonplace Book* is the work of a man operating outside the public arena, content in his privacy to display his conscience and the fundamental basis of his beliefs. By contrast, the published works are those of an eminently practical man concerned to assist the foundation of a new social order, recognising in an increasingly secular society that the act of persuasion cannot be accomplished by mere faith. The task for Tawney, the prescriptive social theorist, is to “persuade people who do not naturally share his own fundamental grounds, those of Christian morality, for rejecting the existing social order.”

So for Anthony Wright, the diaries provide the key to Tawney’s political thought, showing the basis of his consistent commitment to a Christian foundation of society.
THE THEORETICAL WEAKNESS OF THE ESSENTIALIST INTERPRETATION

The essentialist interpretation rests on shaky theoretical foundations. As Quentin Skinner has argued, one fallacy of essentialist interpretations is to assume that a political theorist’s work must be coherent. “It may be…that a given classic writer is not altogether consistent…it will become dangerously easy for the historian to conceive it as his task to…find in…these texts the coherence which they may appear to lack…The inevitable result…will be a form of writing which might be labelled the mythology of coherence.” Skinner explains that in their urge to find consistency, such commentators may ignore the intentions of the theorist himself, deeming it “quite proper, in the interests of extracting a message of higher coherence from an author’s work, to discount the statements of intention which the author may have made about what he was doing.”

We argue that the essentialist interpretations of Tawney manifest the mythology of coherence in their assertion of consistency – ie their assumption that there is a consistent core of thinking which underlies Tawney’s political thought. As we shall see in section 4, this assumption (the commentators’ first fallacy) is contradicted by abundant evidence that Tawney changed his views on important political concepts and issues. The commentators’ second fallacy - that the constant core of Tawney’s political thought is its Christian foundation - is undermined by the fact that a striking feature of the changes that took place in Tawney’s political thought is the gradual secularization of his concepts. In section 4, we trace this process of secularisation in Tawney’s treatment of the concepts of equality and politics. The commentators’ third fallacy - which consists in finding in the diaries the key to this consistency – is shown in section 4 to fly in the face of Tawney’s own intentions.

REFUTATION OF THE THREE FALLACIES

Refutation of the first and second fallacies

In refuting the first fallacy (that there is an inner core of consistency in Tawney’s political thought) and the second fallacy (that the domination of Christianity constitutes this inner core), we use a
chronological approach to analyse the evolution of two of his most important political concepts – equal worth and politics. First, Tawney’s notion of equal worth will be examined to demonstrate that his later works departed from the Christian confines of his earlier work. Second, the development of Tawney’s attitude to political ideas and institutions will be tracked to show the gradual displacement of Christianity and the Church by socialism and the Labour Party, as the main architects of the Good Society.

Equal worth

Wright considers ‘equal worth’ to be Tawney’s central concept, as it resonates throughout his political thought:

there is every reason to regard it as primary. As the evidence provided by his Commonplace Book clearly revealed, this was the inner core of his whole structure of personal and social morality, the rock of Christian principle upon which everything else was based. In this sense, it was a rock of faith not a philosophical argument. It was the expression of religious-based traditions of thought about human beings and their worth…Since all men were the children of God, each was infinitely precious, an end not a means, rich in the possibilities for self development, brothers and sisters in a shared humanity and a common civilisation. 31

As Wright points out, Tawney’s concept of equal worth is embedded in a Christian ethical framework. However, Wright implies that this is the concept of equal worth to which Tawney adheres throughout his life, whereas the truth is that this restrictive conception is confined to Tawney’s early work, and he adopts a humanist conception, which acknowledges the legitimacy of a secular appropriation, in his masterpiece, Equality 32. In the diaries (1912-14), Tawney states that the concept of equal worth is a deeply and irrevocably Christian concept:

In order to belief in human equality it is necessary to believe in God. It is only when one contemplates the infinitely great that human differences appear so infinitely small as to be negligeable [sic]…What is wrong with the modern world is that having ceased to believe in the greatness of God, and therefore the infinite smallness (or greatness – the same thing!) of man, it has to invent or emphasize distinctions between men. 33
Indeed, Tawney asserts in the diaries that without its derivation from a notion of God, the concept of equal worth has no foundation:

> The essence of all morality is this: to believe that every human being is of infinite importance, and therefore that no consideration of expediency can justify the oppression of one by another. But to believe this it is necessary to believe in God. To estimate men simply by their place in a social order is to sanction the sacrifice of man to that order. It is only when we realise that each individual soul is related to a power above other men, that we are able to regard each as an end in itself. 34

Here Tawney is not merely presenting the Christian concept of equal worth as one theory amongst many, but as the only sound basis for equality. In the diaries, Tawney is positing an absolute conceptual dependence between equality and an acceptance of the existence of God. A secular advocacy of equal worth is thus fatally flawed: secular egalitarians who attempt to give a grounding to their theory or to define a strategy for equality are hampered by the fundamental philosophical failing that they cannot assert the equal worth of all humans because they are incapable of acknowledging humans’ shared inferiority in relation to the Almighty. But this is not the position that Tawney later adopts in *Equality*.

In *Equality*, Tawney’s discussion of equality 35 is framed in terms of (inclusive) humanism, not (exclusive) Christianity 36:

> humanism is not the exclusive possession either of those who reject some particular body of religious doctrine or of those who accept it. It is, or it can be, the possession of both… Humanism is the antithesis, not of theism or of Christianity – for how can the humanist spirit be one of indifference to the issues that have been, for two thousand years, the principal concern and inspiration of a considerable part of humanity? – but of mechanism. 37

The concept of equality based on humanism emphasises, not the smallness of all human beings in relation to the greatness of God, but the unifying principle of their common humanity and the aspiration of every human being towards perfection:
Its essence is simple. It is…to be regarded as a means to an end, and this end is the growth towards perfection of individual human beings…Its aim is to liberate and cultivate the powers which make for energy and refinement; and it is critical, therefore, of all forms of organisation which sacrifice spontaneity to mechanism. Resting, as it does, on the faith that the differences between men are less important and fundamental than their common humanity. 38

So while Wright is correct to assert the importance of equal worth in the framing of Tawney’s key ideas, he fails to acknowledge the logical incompatibility between Tawney’s early formulation of equal worth outlined in the diaries, which is exclusionary, and his later formulation outlined in Equality, which is inclusionary. Wright’s suggestion that Tawney tactically adopts a secular idiom to appeal to non-religious readers, is unconvincing. The change in Tawney’s thought is not merely tactical, but philosophical: an inclusive secular formulation of equality cannot but undermine an exclusive Christian core. Tawney is surrendering what he initially conceived as purely religious territory to what he would then have regarded as profane forces, and so the shift cannot be seen merely as part of a pragmatic exercise in persuasion, but as a fundamental change in the basis of his political thought.

The political realm

We can trace a similar development away from a Christian foundation to a secular foundation in Tawney’s concept of politics. Whilst essentialist commentators recognise that Tawney’s experience of the First World War introduced a greater practical dimension to his thought, they fail to acknowledge that his perception of the political realm radically altered, with major implications for his thought as a whole. In the diaries, Tawney is clear that politics is morally deficient:

Modern politics are concerned with the manipulation of forces and interest. Modern society is sick through the absence of a moral ideal. To try to cure this by politics is like make [sic] surgical experiment on a man who is dying of starvation or who is poisoned by foul air. 39

According to Tawney’s diaries, politics is categorically incapable of stimulating ethical renewal. The false philosophy that characterises Britain has infested politics so that it is confined to the function of managing interests and economic affairs, rather than cultivating the moral principles necessary for an ethical renaissance. The grubby business of reconciling divergent interests, building alliances and
forging compromises is symptomatic of, rather than a cure for, the moral malaise that scars contemporary society. Tawney appears to believe that fundamental principles can be extracted from the political realm in order to achieve an overriding consensus founded on Christian norms:

It ought to be possible to place certain principles of social and economic conduct outside the sphere of party politics, as matters agreed upon by the conscience of the nation. 40

The conscience of the nation is not merely a humanitarian disposition, but an attitude founded on religiosity. Authentic ethical knowledge is the “common property of Christian nations”, whose validity rests on the fact that when its central precepts are enunciated, no-one would deny their veracity, nor approve of the dire social consequences that follow from failure to comply with their commands 41. Tawney thus imbues Christian ethics with an elevated status, insisting that right conduct is dependent on a “transcendental, religious, or mystical” standard 42. It is this divine derivation that allows fundamental issues to be extracted from the political firmament and to serve as the subject of a Christian consensus founded on an objective morality embodied by a Church that, unlike that state, refuses “the temporalities for the sake of spiritualities” 43. So, Tawney’s dismissal of politics is an articulation of the same Christian exclusivity that characterises his concept of equal worth.

It is against this background that Tawney’s gradual acceptance of the efficacy of the political realm needs to be considered. In *The Conditions of Economic Liberty* (1918) 44, Tawney breaches the notion that politics is intrinsically bound to the morally bankrupt system it helps to administer and, therefore, wholly incapable of extricating itself to forge a new ethical existence. His position now is that the state can enter the ethical realm to encourage forms of behaviour which are morally legitimate 45. Indeed, the state should actively encourage the formation of enterprises which embody the enlightened values of social service, and discourage those organisations that remain committed to exploitative modes of organisation. Although a residual reluctance remains in Tawney’s mind - he suggests that the state can play a role “if it pleases” 46 – so there is not an unconditional embrace of state intervention, nevertheless, he has moved significantly away from a position in which the state, enmeshed in a decadent structure of short-term expediency, is unable to assist with the development of edifying organisational ideals, to a position in which the state has the capacity to extract itself from the pervasive materialism and perform a role in the creation of an ethical community.
Three years later, in *The Acquisitive Society* (1921) 47, Tawney continues with this greater secular emphasis, in that the book, barring some sparse biblical allusions, reads for the first ten chapters as a predominantly secular work. However, in the final chapter, Tawney makes a dramatic reversion to the hyper-religiosity of the *Commonplace Book*.

Such a political philosophy implies that society is not an economic mechanism, but a community of wills which are often discordant, but which are capable of being inspired by a devotion to common ends. It is, therefore, a religious one, and, if it is true, the proper bodies to propagate it are the Christian Churches. 48

This statement represents a public embrace of the private thoughts contained in the diaries, with Christianity re-emerging to the fore. The reaffirmation of the Church as the vehicle of the ethical consensus, while not a complete reversion back to the absolute Christian exclusivity of the *Commonplace Book*, does, in the absence of any discussion of the role of political parties, accord huge significance to the Church as an agent for fundamental change. Indeed, here Tawney accords the church the main role in securing the essential moral consensus necessary for renewal and also suggests it has the capacity to convert the public to this cause. He is adamant that the purity of the religious doctrine is not to be blemished by diluting its precepts to appeal to the agnostic or atheist; indeed, it is precisely its doctrinaire rigidity that becomes a source of its strength:

> It will appeal to mankind, not because its standards are identical with those of the world, but because they are profoundly different. It will win its converts, not because it involves no change in their manner of life, but because it involves a change so complete as to be ineffaceable. It will expect its adherents to face economic ruin for the sake of their principles. 49

The addition of this profoundly religious finale to *The Acquisitive Society*, viewed in contrast to the largely secular argumentation that precedes it, gives the impression of a thinker in flux, employing non-religious political language, yet still adhering to a fervent religiosity. However, subsequent works display an increasing sympathy with politics and political institutions. For example, Tawney states in *The British Labour Movement* (1925) 50 that the cause of reform necessitates action by political parties:
As one who has become concerned in labour politics merely for the practical reason that, rightly or wrongly, the particular reforms which appeal to me appeared, without the rise of a Labour Party to the control of public affairs, to have little chance of being realised with reasonable rapidity.  

This admission in *The British Labour Movement* that the Labour Party is necessary to bring about fundamental reform, dilutes the primacy of the Church. Indeed, the whole tenor of the work, covering such areas as education, the economy and international relations, stresses the centrality of the Labour Party. Tawney is accepting that a party political organisation, with an ideology primarily forged in a political environment that he previously accused of tainting all within its confines, not only has the capacity, but is actually central to ethical regeneration; the Church is not now seen as a sufficient author of moral reformation.

The resounding abstractions which are the conventional and somewhat attenuated currency of political controversy – democracy, liberty, property, justice, equality of opportunity, freedom of enterprise and the rest – however much we may like to regard them as the embodiment of eternal verities, are not like Platonic ideas laid up in heaven, but take their colour and connotations from the dominant interests and practical needs of the different classes which from time to time set the tone of society, and are reinterpreted when, with political and economic changes, those dominant interests undergo a modification.

The coming struggle will be fought on political terrain, with grand political concepts exemplifying class interests and the demands of political democracy, rather than fundamental abstract truths. The notion of a religious essentialism or an infallible harbour where ideological concepts can be safely anchored is not plausible in a fluid social and political context. This acceptance that core political concepts are not ‘transcendent’, is reinforced in *The Choice before the Labour Party* (1934), when Tawney defines a political ideology:

A political creed, it need hardly be said, is neither a system of transcendental doctrine, nor a code of rigid formulae. It is a common conception of the ends of political action, and of the means of achieving them, based on a common view of the life proper to human beings and the steps required at any moment more nearly to attain it.
The reference here to the common ends of political action founded on a view of a life appropriate to mankind, articulates the generalised humanism posited in *Equality* that all humans are of equal worth and are entitled to have their basic needs met to ensure individual development, and that all can contribute to the common culture. The fact that Tawney’s general definition of a political creed touches on his key concerns, means that he did not perceive its lack of a transcendental basis to be an impediment, or a justification for portraying political ideologies as inferior to religious doctrines. On the contrary, his acceptance that political doctrines are capable of not merely identifying the elevated ends that a society should aspire to, but also of prescribing the means of achieving them, reaffirms his abandonment of Christian exclusivity. By asserting that political ideologies, particularly socialism, can make meaningful moral appeals, and by accepting the indispensable role of political institutions, Tawney has breached the constricted Christian boundaries of the diaries. The early Tawney was in search of an Archimedean point outside the polluted political realm, where generalised Christian principles could be a basis for consensus, but the later Tawney accepts that moral and social change largely stems from the crucible of political activity.

Refutation of the third fallacy

In refuting the third fallacy perpetrated by the essentialist commentators – that the diaries unlock the secret that holds together Tawney’s political thought by setting the seal on its domination by Christian values – we make use of the Skinnerian argument that such an interpretation ignores the author’s own intentions at its peril. The private nature of the diaries weakens, rather than strengthens their interpretive value. At first sight, it may seem convincing to argue that private diaries are likely to reveal the authentic views of a writer. In writing a private document which he did not intend to publish, it could be argued that Tawney has no reason to engage in any sort of deception or invent some tactical ploy to disguise the fundamental basis of his thought. He can be utterly transparent in expressing his views, secure in the knowledge that he has only to account to himself. On this argument, it seems persuasive to assert that the religious-inspired musings of the diaries represent the real, uninhibited Tawney, and that they form the unacknowledged core of his subsequent work. However, there is a flaw in this argument: there is no evidence to suggest that Tawney wanted the diaries published, and we can reasonably infer that this was because they did not represent his considered ideas but only inchoate
thoughts. In common with most political theorists, Tawney meticulously polished his published work to ensure that it was worthy of presentation in the public domain, as Wright acknowledges: “Tawney’s work, even quite minor pieces, usually went through several versions before it saw the light of day” 55. The notion that their thoughts will be read, scrutinised and criticised imposes a discipline on authors to operate at their most reflective level. Tawney’s diaries did not require the rigour that goes with creating a work for public and peer consumption: as he was operating independently of an academic or politically engaged audience, the external discipline to advance arguments which are fully developed is absent. Since he is not involved in a sustained intellectual engagement, or contributing to a work on which his reputation will rest, we should be cautious about over-inflating the significance of The Commonplace Book or assuming that their private nature implies greater authenticity, revealing the “real” Tawney, which we can use to interpret the sanctioned works.

Moreover, as we have seen, the diaries are governed by a Christian exclusivity in which key concepts are not merely influenced by, but dependent on, Christianity, whereas in the later works, Tawney justifies concepts on largely secular grounds. The fact is that the diaries represent Tawney’s thought only in the period 1912 – 14, and to expand their remit beyond their period of composition not only entails ignoring his own intentions, but also ignoring the profound way in which his subsequent thinking moves away from Christian exclusivity towards greater secular inclusivity. It is a central contention of this article that the mistaken assumption of continuity between the diaries and Tawney’s later works leads to a distorted analysis, imbuing the Commonplace Book with a maturity and significance it does not possess.

CONCLUSION

This analysis has demonstrated that essentialist interpretations of Tawney’s political thought are mistaken in their assertions of its consistency; its dependence on Christianity; and its derivation in his early diaries. Whilst Tawney’s canon of work concentrated on a number of enduring themes, his treatment of them varied over time, most evident in his abandonment of the Christian exclusivity that characterises the Commonplace Book. Simplistic assertions of consistency, dependence, and derivation fail to capture the complex and varied nature of the relationship between Tawney’s thought and his
Christianity. The only satisfactory way of analysing Tawney’s political thought is to track his intellectual trajectory, clarifying the changes that occurred in a long career. Only by a chronological approach that brings into sharp focus the different phrases of Tawney’s thought, can we aspire to an authentic interpretation of his intellectual contribution. 56

Notes and References

4. Terrill, *op. cit.*., Ref. 1, p. 5.
24. Wright, *op. cit.*, Ref. 3.
31. Wright, *op. cit.*, Ref. 3, p. 70.
36. Whilst Tawney abandoned the absolute conceptual dependence between equal worth and religious doctrine, he persistently maintained that the idea originally emerged from Christianity.
42. Tawney, *ibid.*, p. 64.


49. Tawney, *ibid.*, p. 239.


52. Tawney, *ibid.*, p. 11.


56. This article is a digest of a larger work to be published by Imprint Academic in 2011 that tracks changes in Tawney's political thought between individual texts, rather than between stages of development of particular concepts. Given the limited space here, we concentrate on only two concepts (equal worth and politics), but a similar pattern of change is discernible in Tawney's notions of liberty, rights, duties, democracy, religion and socialism.