

## Christian Socialism from 1890 to the 1920s

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Ever since the Cold War, the public has almost unanimously viewed Christianity as the antithesis of socialism. Congress went so far as to put “In God We Trust” on currency as a reaction to the atheistic Soviet Union. Many saw Christianity as the protector of American society against a radical and militant communist threat. This paper, however, argues that this has not always been the case, as around the 1890s to the 1920s, the Christian socialist movement had a strong influence in socialist parties, even though they were a minority and were met with distrust from some members of the Christian and socialist communities.<sup>1</sup> Instead of viewing socialism and Christianity as total opposites, Christian socialists saw the two as complementary, with each needing the other to achieve an ideal society.<sup>2</sup> Not all Christians felt this way though; many were hesitant to endorse an ideology whose founders saw religion as an “opiate of the masses.”<sup>3</sup>

During the early-to mid-1800s, most Christian groups were conservative. But towards the end of the century, changing social and economic situations encouraged the growth of more liberal Christian groups, such as the Social Gospel and Christian socialists. The Christian socialists of the 1890s had a slightly different ideology than the Christian socialist of the 1900s, but they did have common ground in the belief that a socialist state would usher in the Kingdom of Heaven. In addition, Christian socialism was a broad social philosophy in the 1890s but had become a political viewpoint by the 1900s. The movement did not gain much traction until the early 1900s when they adopted

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<sup>1</sup> Dan McKanan, “The Implicit Religion of Radicalism: Socialist Party Theology, 1900–1934,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78 (3): 750–89.

<sup>2</sup> Percy Stickney Grant, “Socialism and Christianity,” *The North American Review* 190 (645): 145–57.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, “Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right.” *German–French Annals*. Robert T Handy, “Christianity and Socialism in America, 1900–1920”. *Church History* 21 (1): 39–54.

more socialist aspects, such as the economic and class struggle interpretation of history, but they did not accept all facets of socialism for which Marx advocated.<sup>4</sup>

American Christian socialists criticized orthodox socialist thought as well as other Christian socialist organizations in Europe. They disliked European Christian socialists because of their anti-Semitic leanings and confrontational attitude against other socialist parties.<sup>5</sup> The Americans attempted to turn other Christians toward socialism, unlike the Europeans who tried to convert other socialists to Christianity. This stark difference resulted in atheist socialists being astounded by how much more cooperative American Christian socialists were compared to their European counterpart. Despite the difference between atheist and Christian socialists, the two groups worked well together in America.<sup>6</sup>

The chief break from Marx's ideology for Christian socialists was their rejection of his view on religion. Many also disagreed with the way orthodox socialists campaigned for the creation of a socialist state. In contrast to orthodox socialists, they believed society would slowly shift towards socialism as more industries became controlled by a democratic government as opposed to a violent revolution.<sup>7</sup>

As a result of their differing views on religion with Marx, Christian socialists incorporated theology into their political movement. Additionally, the socialist parties allowed Christian socialists to distance themselves from traditional churches and develop

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<sup>4</sup> Handy, "Christianity and Socialism in America, 1900-1920," 39-54.

<sup>5</sup> John Spargo, "Christian Socialism in America," *American Journal of Sociology* 15 (1): 16-20.

Grant, "Socialism and Christianity," 145-57.

<sup>6</sup> Spargo, "Christian Socialism in America," 16-20.

<sup>7</sup> Grant, "Socialism and Christianity," 145-57.

McKanan, "The Implicit Religion of Radicalism: Socialist Party Theology, 1900-1934," 750-89.

their own brand of unique theology; one example of this was the belief that the socialist state would cause the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven. Another example was John Spargo promoting the idea that capitalism kills religion, and many of these socialists believed Jesus was class conscious.<sup>8</sup>

Christian socialists believed Christianity and socialism complemented each other, and the ideas from the two should be syncretized. They blended socialism's focus on the community and Christianity's focus on the individual. Mainstream Christianity stressed an individual relationship to God, but many Christian socialists advocated for a communal focus as well. They also believed Christianity was needed to reform the people from being greedy to being altruistic and moral so an ideal socialist state could function. Socialists thought once society's problems were solved, individuals would be reformed, since a good society would make good people; some Christian socialists regarded this view as too materialistic. These two views reflect the following important ideological struggle of the time: in order to fix the world, did society need to be fixed and then that would lead to the individual being fixed, or did the individual need to be fixed and then that would lead to society being fixed? The former was the predominant socialist view, and the latter was the predominant Christian view, but Christian socialists took the middle ground and combined the two ideas.<sup>9</sup>

Christians who believed good people made a good society disliked not only socialists in general, but all other reform movements. Similar to Christian socialists, these Christians believed a healthy society must be inhabited by upstanding citizens, and the

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<sup>8</sup> McKanan, "The Implicit Religion of Radicalism: Socialist Party Theology, 1900–1934," 750–89.

<sup>9</sup> Grant, "Socialism and Christianity," 145–57.

Lyman Abbott, "Christianity Versus Socialism," *The North American Review* 148 (389): 447–53.

only way to reform people was through Christianity. Unlike Christian socialists, they disdained reform movements because they thought these movements were going about change the wrong way by trying to fix the body first, followed by the intellect, ethics, and spirit. They argued that Jesus focused on the people's spiritual needs, then their physical needs instead since he never spoke out against the political and economic injustice of his time; he only spoke about saving people's souls.<sup>10</sup>

The criticism of reform movements was not the only hesitation towards Christian socialism by other Christians; there were other criticisms of it that targeted the co-existence of Christianity and socialism. Many Christians and many socialists did not see Christian socialists as fully belonging to either group because they thought both groups were fundamentally incompatible.<sup>11</sup> Socialists generally distrusted Christians because they thought religion was a tool to oppress the lower class, and Christians generally distrusted socialists because of the heavy amount of atheists subscribed to the ideology. Even the liberal Social Gospel movement did not align itself with Christian socialists often.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, other Christians did not support the theory linking the socialist state to the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>13</sup> Beyond theological differences, mainstream Christians had real world evidence for their claims.

In 1901, the Herron affair further solidified many people's judgments about the compatibility of socialism and Christianity. Herron had been an influential member of the Christian socialist community. He was an important leader of the early Socialist Party

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<sup>10</sup> Abbott, "Christianity Versus Socialism," 447–53.

<sup>11</sup> Handy, "Christianity and Socialism in America, 1900-1920," 39–54. Grant, "Socialism and Christianity," 145–57.

<sup>12</sup> Handy, "Christianity and Socialism in America, 1900-1920," 39–54.

<sup>13</sup> C. C. Arbuthnot, "Did Jesus Teach Christian Socialism?" *The Biblical World* 41 (3): 147–61.

and was the chairman of the Unity Convention for a short time. In 1901, Herron joined the Social Crusade, founded by J. Stitt Wilson, which claimed the Kingdom of God would come from the Socialist Labor Party. The same year, Herron divorced his wife and quickly remarried, and his church kicked him out because of this. Afterwards, Herron abandoned Christianity, which proved to many people that socialism and Christianity could not coexist in a unified ideology. The incident almost led to the end of the Socialist Labor Party and Christian Socialism. As a result of Herron, the Socialist Party eclipsed the Socialist Labor Party, and many prospective Christians were dissuaded from becoming Christian socialists. Despite the Herron affair, a few years later the Socialist Party adopted the belief that the Kingdom of God would arrive with socialism, and Christian socialism did pick up again even though it was generally a small, but cohesive, movement.<sup>14</sup>

Even though the negative reactions to Christian socialism were diverse and wide ranging, Christian socialists still held political influence within many socialist parties and looked to the Bible for the justification of their political movement. Socialists also had doctrinal qualms with the Christian socialist ideology, but the two groups cooperated well. Today, and even throughout history, there are and were two pervasive ideas against socialism. The first is that Christianity and socialism are unable to work towards the same goals, and the second is that socialism cannot work because of basic, unalterable human nature, such as greed. The Christian socialists of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century showed that, doctrinally and theologically, it is possible to be a part of

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<sup>14</sup> Handy, "Christianity and Socialism in America, 1900-1920," 39-54.

both movements, and that there were ideas to fix human nature with religion so socialism could be achieved.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Grant, "Socialism and Christianity," 145–57.

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