



Motivated by our different religious traditions, we believe that attitudes, priorities, and institutions can be changed to reflect a just and democratic use of the universe's bounty; we believe in the value of work that contributes to the common good; and in the healing influence of respect for the differences as well as the commonness of human experience.

SPRING 1999

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Religious Socialism

THE JOURNAL FOR PEOPLE OF FAITH AND SOCIALISM

Get Debt-Free Now

ANDREW HAMME

Debt is a bit like an outbreak of the flu. Each of us either has had it, has it now, knows someone who has had it, or has it now. For far too many of us, in our modern world of wonderful material things — big things, little things, all kinds of things — debt is a shady traveling companion on the road to a "better tomorrow." At least we're to that's where the road of things leads.

Television game shows used to give away cash prizes or new cars, or a complete kitchen set. Now there is actually a television game show called "Debt," in which contestants are given the money they need to pay off the debts they incurred while buying their own new cars and kitchen sets on time. In the most prosperous nation on earth, debt



counseling agencies are doing a bang-up business, with television commercials offering their services more frequently today than the *Kiplinger Letter* offers investment advice. And if the omnipresence of debt is big business in the rich United States, do we even consider the role it plays elsewhere in the world? Alas, we dare.

Sorry to disappoint you, but this article is not about your personal debt. It is about a kind of debt that makes the fact that you paid 300 percent of the price you thought you paid for your television (the one you watch the debt counseling commercials on) seem like an unimportant bit of whimsy. What we're dealing with here is the global debt crisis; it is ugly, unbearable, and it consigns millions of the world's men, women and children to a life of inescapable poverty.

Let's cut to the chase with a few quick, clean facts. The problem of global debt, which is adversely affecting the Third World, is not really a "Third World problem." It begins, as do most international economic problems, in the G7 nations (Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the USA), where banks rich with money from the 1973 oil fiasco began aggressively lending it out at low interest rates to any Third World nation that was interested in asking for it. Some of the nations taking out loans were doing so in an attempt to develop their societies. More however (like Mobutu in Zaire), were simply using the money to develop armies, and palaces in remote parts of their countries. But the banks were happy, and no one seemed to give too much thought to how and when these loans would be paid back.

editor's notes

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," "Proclaim liberty throughout the land" in the year of Jubilee. . . As we approach the millennium, communities of faith are mining their traditions for a language that speaks to the suffering caused by global debt. A friend who returned recently from an international conference on women and children in Zimbabwe reported that she went there thinking that Third World issues could be compartmentalized: women and children here, violence there, global debt over there. Within five minutes on the first day she learned that for Third World people there is only global debt. It drains the resources that could, with political will, be available for health, nutrition, education, infrastructure. Andrew Hammer describes in brief the problem and the response of the international religious socialist community and points us to ways that we can be involved in the campaigns to change debt structures.

For us, in this corner of the First World, where our own debt to Africa for unpaid labor easily eclipses whatever Africa "owes" us, many of us continue to enjoy an illusory affluent lifestyle built on the backs of people of color, new immigrants, the poor, and on consumer debt. "Follow the money," says Tony Kushner, in an excerpt from a guide to socialism, capitalism, and religion that speaks to our modern dilemmas. Among many salient questions, he asks what kind of a world we live in where the Disney Corporation, opposed on the left for its sweatshops and anti-union practices, is a defender of gay rights. This is the same Disney Corporation, as Bill Talen points out, that is bringing us the "silent apocalypse," the deadening of the spirit in mindless consumerism. Jack Clark brings us a personal reflection on consumerism, family values, and faith.

David O'Brien and John Endler explore issues of discernment, activism, and socialism from different traditions. Peter Laarman and John Cort review books that trace the social-activist strains in Protestantism and Catholicism.

Marlene Gerber Fried urges pro-choice activists to speak to the reality of women's lives and form coalitions based on an understanding of the ways in which economic and reproductive rights are intertwined.

A reminder: each issue of *Religious Socialism* is edited by one of four editors. Each of us brings a different perspective influenced by faith, age, gender, life experience, culture, and bound perhaps only by our commitment to democratic socialism. We anticipate that our readers will find much to agree with and much to argue with. We encourage your letters, your contributions of articles, your suggestions for future topics.

Coming in future issues: "What have we learned since the collapse of Marxist-Leninism? ", engaged Buddhism, an interview with Cornel West, socialists and New Age religions, communitarianism, the seduction of the Charitable Choice Act, and much more.

Help us grow. Give a subscription to your local library. Order an extra copy (\$3, including postage) for us to send to a friend along with a subscription offer. And best of all, read us.

—M.P.

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Winter 1998-99



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Spring 1999



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Religious Socialism (ISSN 0278-7784) is published four times per year by the Religion and Socialism Commission of the Democratic Socialists of America, and is produced by the Democratic Socialists of America Fund. Subscriptions at the basic rate are \$7.50 per year.

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•Articles in this issue are the opinion expressed by the writers, and not of DSA or the Religion & Socialism Commission or *Religious Socialism*. Contributions to the Democratic Socialists of America Fund are tax deductible.

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PRINTED ON RECYCLED PAPER

Get Debt-Free Now!

cont'd from cover page

Interest rates go up as well as down, and sure enough, that's exactly what happened to borrowing nations who now were faced with the added burden of declining costs for their raw materials, most of which were cash crops, and most of which were being grown by each of the other nations at the same time (on the sage advice of the G7, of course), thereby driving the prices down. So now we have the classic debtor's problem of one's "out-go" being more than one's income. With no way for Third World nations to get higher prices for their raw materials, there was no way to get the money to pay back the loans, so new loans were taken out in order to pay on the interest. Now while the G7 nations and their financial institutions (the IMF and the World Bank) were quite pleased with themselves at creating this situation where they could essentially get cheap raw materials, the deeper reality of the matter is that the debtor nations are essentially trapped in a vicious cycle of unpayable debt, and it is actually costing millions of lives as well as billions of dollars. It has fueled the international drug trade, as farmers have found higher paying, illegal cash crops like opium and cocaine. Brazil is destroying its rainforests to pay back its debt. The long-term consequences of debt are unimaginable.

Let's look at Africa, whose nations are hardest hit in the debt crisis (African nations owe 83 percent of their GNP in debt — Latin America owes 36 percent). Africa spends four times the amount of money on debt payments that it does on health care. As a result, health care is dangerously underfunded, and diseases that were thought to have been eliminated (e.g., tuberculosis, yellow fever) are returning. The UN estimates that the lives of seven million children worldwide will be lost to the consequences of world debt before the year 2000. Education and employment are also gravely affected worldwide, with schools becoming available only to those who can pay fees, and IMF-forced austerity programs downsizing people out of work, and pushing the wages down of those who are employed.

But before you get too depressed, there is some real hope around the corner. The Jubilee 2000 Coalition was launched in Britain in April of 1996. Taking its inspiration from the biblical Jubilee Year, when all debts are cancelled, Jubilee 2000 is calling for the cancellation of the majority of the debt owed by the world's poorest countries by the year 2000. (In some cases, all debt would be cancelled.) Since its launch, Jubilee 2000 has grown to a coalition of religious, labor, student, and other organizations in forty countries, and has been endorsed by the International League of Religious Socialists. It has gained a great deal of international attention for its demonstrations at G7 meetings, and has gotten the attention of world leaders like Tony Blair, Jean Chrétien, Nelson Mandela, and Kofi Annan.

cont'd on page 15

LETTERS

Dear Editors:

I am not a DSA member or activist,. But I have over the past three or four years enjoyed your occasional presentation of authors whose religious viewpoint is faithful to a tradition and whose social viewpoint is essentially socialist. This combination is very rare.

How will things go in *Religious Socialism's* future? My hope is two-fold: first, that religious socialism could demonstrate how to be faithful to a tradition and also be socialist—so often it appears that only the rebels within a church are socialist. And second, that socialism could show itself as originating from the ordinary religious and moral inclinations found in the human race—that socialist inclinations are common and not hothouse-cultivated academic notions. If the intent is to widen the readership of *RS* and the influence of socialism, it is important to decide who to impress,—a few university-employed radicals or regular folk who work, go to church, love their families, and pay a lot of bills.

Will socialism ever challenge conservatives for the religious high ground? It is rare to hear anyone espouse traditional religious practice these days except the strictest conservatives. Second, will religious socialism ever challenge the liberal politicians for the moral high ground? Acceptance of fornication, homosexuality, drunkenness—St. Paul's whole list—is their reverse morality. And intolerance is their curse upon traditional morality—the morality understood and practiced at this very moment by many people through traditional forms of Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. We socialist types can talk our academic and revolutionary talk all we want. But we're not going to get anywhere until we recognize that we are stuck between that rock and that hard place. And there's no easy way out.

Harry James
Somerville, NJ

ERRATUM We apologize to Peter Laarman and Peter Steinfelds for mixing them up on page 4 of the Winter 1999 issue. The sentence should have read "When Peter [Laarman] suggested that I talk on this date...."

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR We welcome letters to the editor and reserve the right to edit for space. If you are responding to an article in the publication, we need to have time to offer the author space for reply. Therefore, write quickly and succinctly. *RS* is published quarterly. In order for your letter to appear in the Summer issue, you should be in touch with us by mid-May at the latest. John Cort is the editor for the Summer issue.

Reproductive rights



Reclaiming the Moral Terrain

MARLENE GERBER FRIED

Last year, the 25th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade* produced a media barrage of articles, TV movies, talk shows, and opinion polls showing that a majority of Americans believe abortion should be legal but restricted. Fifty percent respond “yes” to the question of whether abortion is murder, yet large numbers of the same people believe that abortion is sometimes the best choice. Younger women, according to focus-group research, may be mixed on the question of the morality of abortion. They are however clear about believing it will be there for those who truly need and deserve it. What these polls tell us is that most people in the United States do not share the view that abortion should be available when needed, for any woman, for any reason. In 1999 this is apparently as radical a position as it was in 1973.

And yet, millions of women continue to have abortions at close to the rate they have had them for many years. Abortion remains the most common surgical procedure in the country. This means that many of those who say abortion is murder have had abortions and will have them.

Recent polls also show that a majority of people in the United States believe that the anti-abortion, or pro-life, movement is extremist. At the same time, they give high marks to anti-abortion activists for being “principled.” Conversely, while pro-choice activists are viewed as more reasonable and moderate, we are often not viewed as holding an ethical position.

How should we understand this complicated picture of abortion today? And, how, after so many years of battle, do we assess what pro-choice activists have accomplished?

It is painfully clear that the battle will be ongoing rather than settled once and for all through the law. Those of us who believe in every woman’s fundamental right to make her own reproductive decisions must find the language, strategies, and allies to turn that right into a reality. We have to find ways to interrupt the widespread complacency about abortion rights and engage new generations willing to fight for reproductive freedom.

One way of doing this while simultaneously challenging the “ethics” of the anti-abortion movement is to resurrect for ourselves and for public discussion the history of abortion.

“The Deaths Stopped Overnight”

There is overwhelming documentation from the criminal era, beginning in the mid-1800s, of death and serious health consequences from illegal abortion. Before *Roe* 1,000 to 5,000 women died annually. In the 1920s and 1930s abortion accounted for 14 percent of all maternal deaths. Race and class were significant factors—the death rate for women of color was four times that for white women. Although the same advances in health care that reduced mortality in childbirth and surgery in general would have made abortion safe, it remained dangerous because it was criminalized.

Roe transformed abortion from a life-threatening and terrifying experience to a safe one for those women who had access to it. A coroner who worked at a hospital in Pennsylvania said it simply, “The deaths stopped overnight in 1973, and I never saw another abortion death in all the eighteen years after that until I retired.”

Twenty-one million women have had 35 million abortions since *Roe v. Wade*. The pre-*Roe* figures are more difficult to come by, but what we do know tells us that abortion was quite common then as well. In the first half of the 1800s, before criminalization, an estimated 25 percent of all pregnancies were aborted. In the 1920s and 1930s there were an estimated 1.2 to 2 million abortions a year — 20 percent of all pregnancies in the 1920s. Kinsey’s study found that white upper- and middle-class women aborted 24.3 percent of their pregnancies. The legal status of abortion does not affect whether women have them. It does determine the toll on the lives and health of women.

“Perhaps most problematic is the characterization that women fall into two categories, those who want to have babies and the others who want abortions, denying the fact that it is the same women having babies and abortions, just at different times in their lives.”

Re-framing the Issues

Successfully publicizing this history could be the basis of clarifying the public health and moral aspects of abortion. Even the reality of abortion has been framed by its opponents, and the picture is a distorted one. The anti-abortion movement pretends that widespread abortion was caused by legalization and denies the consequences of criminalization. Perhaps most problematic is the characterization that women themselves fall into two categories, those who want to have babies and the others who want abortions, denying the fact that it is the same women having babies and abortions, just at different times in their lives.

“Anti-abortion violence is simply not treated with the same degree of intolerance as other forms of violence. . . .If hundreds of banks rather than abortion clinics were being targeted, we would see a very different response.”

Allowing the opponents of abortion to determine the factual and ethical terrain is key to understanding the polls about the morality of abortion. Respondents understand the need for legal abortion but they have trouble claiming it as a moral choice. It is acceptable to have an abortion just so long as you understand that you are doing the wrong thing. This position ensures that stigma, silence, and guilt will continue to surround abortion.

In focus-group research, young pro-choice women are more sympathetic to abortion if the woman had responsible sex, but not if she failed to use contraception. Why is motherhood deemed appropriate “punishment” for failure to practice effective birth control? It seems that the “personal responsibility” campaigns of the right—in the welfare reform and teen pregnancy debates—have been successful in shaping these opinions. This suggests the importance of engaging the realities of contraception—their failures, the conditions of women’s lives, including abuse, that make it difficult to use birth control consistently, a culture that still refuses to talk candidly about sexual activity, policies that tie federal monies to mandates to teach abstinence-only curricula.

The larger issue, however, is that the pro-choice movement must decide to confront the widespread moral ambivalence about abortion rather than hoping to evade it with the notion of choice. Given the fact that women continue to have abortions at sustained rates, we have, too often, deemed such views irrelevant. But the “murder but” position is fertile ground for opponents of abortion to exploit. The anti-abortion movement has been able to turn ethical qualms into restrictive policies that especially burden women without power and resources and that place abortion in a

climate of negativity. We have feared that engaging in moral discussion cedes too much ground. But refusing to do so has left morality to the opposition. An abortion rights position does rest on ethical principles that require that morality be grounded in the reality of women’s lives, which make women’s autonomy central, and which prioritize access issues because they are questions of social justice.

Anti-abortion Violence as “Ethics”

Any discussion of the ethics of abortion cannot ignore anti-abortion violence. The focus-group research cited earlier showed that young women felt it would be dangerous to become activists for reproductive freedom. What effect such fear has on “ethical” considerations about abortion can only be speculative, but certainly the anti-abortion movement has created a climate in which promoting or providing abortion services means risking one’s life.

The 1998 Clinic Violence Survey Report (conducted by the Feminist Majority Foundation) identifies the current pattern of anti-abortion violence. Severe violence still plagues almost one-fourth of clinics, including blockades, invasions, bomb threats and bombings, arson threats and arson, chemical attacks, death threats, and stalking. At the same time the percentage of clinics not experiencing violence, harassment, or intimidation has continued to grow. Anti-abortion violence is becoming even more concentrated on a small number of clinics that are subjected to multiple types of violence on a daily basis, including routine threats to clinic workers, stalking their children, murdering their pets, damaging their property. Clinics that devoted more than 75 percent of their practice to providing abortion services were especially hard hit.

The report analyzes this as a continuation of the “war of attrition” in which one set of clinics and health care workers is targeted, the violence causes the workers to quit and perhaps the clinic to close, and then the anti-choice forces move on to another clinic. In 1993, one in five clinics had staff members resign because of clinic violence. In 1994 and 1995 the number was cut to one in ten and dropped even further in 1996 to one in 25. In 1997 it was up again to 7 percent but in 1998 it fell to 4.9 percent (although this does not include the resignations following the murder of Dr. Barnett Slepian).

Obstructing Women’s Rights Is Not a Moral Stance

Anti-abortion violence is simply not treated with the same degree of intolerance as other forms of violence. As has been observed before, if hundreds of banks rather than abortion clinics were being targeted we would see a very different response. For example, in Florida a doctor complained to the local sheriff about threats to himself and to his clinic. The sheriff responded that he would do everything he could to support the demonstrators.

cont’d on page 22



ABOUT THIS PLACE

BILL TALEN

store itself, where I was arrested and charged with "trespassing."

This corner is an orgy of all things Disney. Going up its two sides are billboards covered with pictures of gleeful children, giant mouse ears, Florida theme-park ads, movies in release, ABC TV shows and credit card tie-ins. The advertising of every new Disney product must be shown here, and the buildings beneath are lost to view. The "magic" of The Disney Company seems almost uncontainable, so superior is it to its surroundings, so much brighter and freer—subject to a set of laws that is denied the little pedestrian down below. But if the outside of The Times Square Disney Store is like a daunting stage set, the inside of the store is no backdrop. I call it the high church of retail.

Our anti-consumerist troupe is studying the change people go through when they open the glass doors by the metal Mickey doorknobs. We are convinced that there are physiological and psychological shifts that shoppers experience walking the aisles. They have come from all over the world to drift here in this strange hush. The ceiling is thick with big theater lights, a homage to Broadway. They point down at the customers as if, having made their entrance, they are now on a stage. But only the Disney characters, the thousands of stuffed animals, are getting the cue. None of the real humans here expresses enthusiasm; indeed, all facial maneuvers have transferred to the products. To walk the length of this long room, shoppers walk through a tunnel of Vaudevillian facial contortionists: Pluto, the seven dwarfs, Donald, the Beast, Dumbo...

The people who walk
through these doors
are from
anywhere
and
nowhere;
they are simply
DISNEY
now.

This is the new nation,
THE NEW CITY.

To walk the length of this long room, shoppers walk through a tunnel of Vaudevillian facial contortionists: Pluto, the seven dwarfs, Donald, the Beast, Dumbo...

As Reverend Billy, I have put forward a scenario, a counter-apocalypse, where the rule over people by Mickey Mouse (the Antichrist) is imminent. This is an unexpected eternity, where the island of Manhattan wakes up to find itself entirely within the walls of a Hellishly expanded Disney store. This vision is beyond exaggeration, in the tradition of apocalypsemaking, but it is a point of view that many New Yorkers understand when they reflect on Times Square

I first saw author-actor Bill Talen at my church, where he had been invited to present a work in progress about the takeover of the East Village by Barnes and Noble, Starbucks, the Gap, and a host of other lookalike emporiums. His message rang true. My suburban teenage nieces from Maryland, eager to shop and hang out in the fabled East Village, had been horrified to discover that it "looks like the mall at home." Later, I discovered that as the "Reverend Billy," a Pentecostal-type preacher, he stood on the sidewalk in front of the Disney Store at 42nd Street and preached about the evils of the Disney empire and of consumerism. I'd stood in front of other Disney stores to protest Disney's use of sweatshop labor; I knew of its disdainful treatment of employees in its theme parks; and as a parent I'd battled in my own home against the racist, sexist, homophobic messages implicit in almost every Disney cartoon epic. The topic was irresistible. Talen showed me the following notes, which he wrote in the week before "preaching" during the Christmas shopping days at the Times Square Disney Store, and I attended a recent theater performance by "Reverend Billy," who performs alone in theaters, but works with a rotating group of New Yorkers, some actors, some not, to take "tourist dramas" inside the Disney Store (see sidebar). -Ed.

"Times Square used to be a place where stories started."

—Jimmy Breslin, 1998

We have shouted "Don't Shop! Save your Souls!" in the area of The Disney Store at 42nd and 7th Avenue, at Times Square in New York City. This is the place. This includes the sidewalk area around the store as well as the premises of the

developments. Often they go straight from the subject of Broadway/Disney to the ruination of their own neighborhoods as they fill with Gaps, Banana Republics, Kinko's, Starbucks, K-marts, et al. — "the sea of identical details."

Many New Yorkers have never walked inside The Times Square Disney Store, but they claim that they know it. Everyone seems to know how bad the center of all this damage must be. When we have described Disney's products expressing themselves so powerfully, with customers frozen in a utopian trance—many in this city seem to respond "Yes! Yes of course!" It is a place they have seen constructed inside themselves, an apocalyptic place, where they fear that they have become the perfect citizen smiling emptily at the point of purchase.

So this place exists in the city, at 42nd and 7th Avenue, where at one time in this neighborhood's history original staged dramas numbered in the hundreds each year. And that this Disney store is here, on Broadway, somehow makes it the flagship of homogenization. This is the takeover of the neighborhood of stories. And, this place is also revealing because it is under construction inside the individual, in the part of the mind where language and story are created.

There is another sense of place that I would like to talk about. As our troupe feels its way forward, trying to define what form an effective resistance to consumerism might take... we feel compelled to return to a single place, to this particular store.

Beyond the fact that this is the Holy of Holies of retail, it seems crucial that our troupe not journey from one place to the next, appearing wherever the political opposition would make sense. For instance, we've never gone to a second Disney Store.

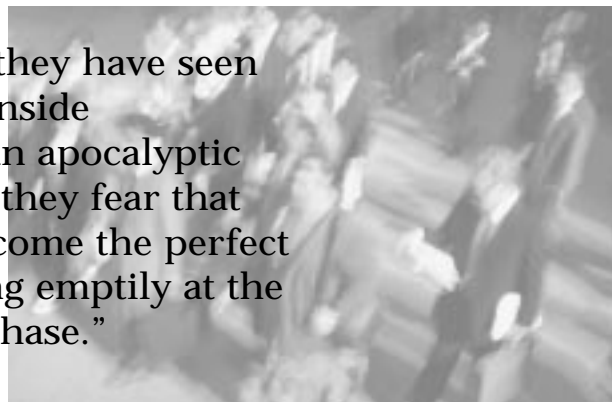
Disney does not necessarily want New Yorkers to return here; Disney needs New York, not New Yorkers. Probably 80 percent of this store's customers shop here once or twice a year, coming from outside the city, budgeting these expenses in their long-range family planning. The only people who stay here for any appreciable length of time are those who work here. And this includes, ironically, Disney's extensive security force. When I was arrested for "trespassing," the October 20 *Village Voice* piece described how the Disney employees said, when they saw Reverend Billy come in and begin to preach, "Oh not him again." Precisely. The story of my arrest, when the cops handcuffed me to a life-size Mickey doll and left me in the back seat of the cop car...that story then generated from this series of encounters in one place with the same people, including the familiar boys in blue, the NYPD from Midtown South Precinct. The story has become part of the theater piece, and each new encounter adds to it.

Thus our "church" tries to re-create what the Disneyfication

of Times Square designs out, which is the activity that generates storytelling. This involves, as it always did, people who meet each other in an act of public choice. It is a return to original places, the barbershops, the vendors, the Blarney Stone taverns, and yes— the sidewalk preachers' tables— places that are human scale and in which those humans, not overwhelmed, are not speechless. Given the chance, these folks will repeat and embroider the stories that they hear and send those stories on. There are ever fewer places of this kind. Non-media storymakers are attacked by Rudy Giuliani in his violence against those he sees as vulnerable. At 42nd and 7th Avenue, with much greater effect, they are made irrelevant by Michael Eisner's towering nostalgias.

Continuing with this idea of "place,"—recurring meetings by the same people in the same place— creates a reception of that place's history. Our faux church wants to talk to the descendants of those folks who worked in the buildings that Disney tore down at 42nd and 7th Avenue. We've read names on beautiful old longhand documents, from leases to

"It is a place they have seen constructed inside themselves, an apocalyptic place, where they fear that they have become the perfect citizen smiling emptily at the point of purchase."



plumbing permits, which we've found in the city's archives. These anonymous dead handed off their language, their lives, to us. We have all of it here in us, somehow. They chose to meet here, to live here, in the dress shops and hotels and bars and secret upper rooms in 200 and 202 and 204 and 206 and 208 West 42nd Street. The five buildings now make one long room for Mickey and his prancing deluge.

We are gradually creating profiles of people who were here before Disney, with records we've studied dating back to the previous century. It is telling that doing this, looking for something pre-Disney, feels so subversive. The single-family dwellings of the 1890s on the upper floors, with a restaurant down on the street, gave way to offices and stores by 1910, then a hotel. In the roaring twenties they were remodeled into impressive deco structures. We want to imagine them peopled, and put them in our plays that retake this stage— that is, force a coexistence with The Disney Store.

Thus far, our attempts to insinuate our performance into the space between the crowd of Disney characters and the crowd of listless consumers, has been... more brutal; mostly my preaching, shouting things like, "The jolt you feel, when the product smiles up at you, you are actually at that

cont'd on page 9

STANDING AT THE GATES

*It is said that the Baal Shem Tov, the founder and spiritual leader of the Hasidim of Eastern Europe, would go to a certain place in the forest when he had a problem to solve. There he would light a fire and say a special prayer, and he would find the wisdom he needed. In the next generation, one of his disciples faced another difficult problem. He traveled to that same place in the forest and lit the fire, but he could not remember the prayer. Yet the fire was enough. He found the wisdom he sought. A generation later, his son had a troubling issue to face. He also went to the forest, but he could not remember how to light the fire. "Lord of the universe," he said, "I cannot recall the prayer, and I cannot light the fire. I only know the place in the forest, and that will have to be enough." And so it was. Generations later, Rabbi Ben Levi sat in his study with his head in his hand. "Lord of the universe," he prayed, "look at us now. We have forgotten the words to the prayer. We do not know how to light the fire. We cannot return to the place in the forest. We can only tell the story of how it was done." Yet, telling the story gave him all the wisdom he needed. (Adapted from *While Standing on One Foot: Puzzle Stories and Wisdom Tales from the Jewish Tradition*, by Nina Jaffe and Steve Zeitlin.)*



Bill Talen never heard of the Baal Shem Tov when he was growing up as a Calvinist in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and South Dakota, but he knows the power of story. Talen has stood in the New Times Square and told the story of a people in danger of forgetting their past, a people in danger of losing their souls to the faceless gods of the market. "We believe in the God that people who don't believe in God believe in," Talen tells his audiences, both on the street and in the theaters, classrooms, and Web site where his "character," Reverend Billy, takes the message of his "Church of Anti-Shopping." At a recent "service"/performance in the theater of St. Clement's Church on 46th Street, I watch Talen move on stage with the grace and sexual magnetism of a good televangelist. His eyes bore into individual members of the audience as he congratulates us just for making it to the theater and not succumbing to the desires of the flesh along the way. The 40-foot high billboards with supermodels promising us the good life if we would only buy the clothes she advertises, the neon signs flashing "Buy, buy, buy." "Some of you did not make it here this afternoon, my children," he laments. He warns of the "apocalypse designed not to be noticed," as we drown in the "sea of identical details." He

recounts his own stories of preaching to the tourists in front of the massive Disney store at 42nd Street and Seventh Avenue—the man who heard him at first in disbelief and then set up his own mini-revival to preach about Barbie as the Antichrist, surprised tourists in The Disney Store who ignore him and his two-foot-high Mickey Mouse doll. The audience laughs, not because he is exploiting a genre of preaching that "sophisticated" New Yorkers might be expected to sneer at, but because the message strikes home. At the end, the altar call is for members of the audience to walk in pairs or threesomes into the Disney store and engage shoppers in "anti-shopping improvisations."

A few days later I sit across from Talen in a theater-district diner and ask what brought him to this place. He speaks of his mentors, novelist Charles Gaines, performance artist Spalding Gray, and Sidney Lanier, an Episcopal priest who co-founded the American Place Theater in 1962 at St. Clement's Church, where he was vicar, and who was a supporter of Talen's theater group in California. Lanier, a cousin of Tennessee Williams, is the model for T. Lawrence Shannon in *Night of the Iguana*. When the California group broke up, "we talked about what to do next and came up with the character of a priest" who, in Lanier's words, "was trying to liberate the church from a dysfunctional mythology." Talen admits to being "very influenced by Elaine Pagels's *The Gnostic Gospels*."

It was a different view of Christianity for Talen, who comes from a strict Christian Reformed background that he tried to leave behind when he struck out for the University of Wisconsin at Madison, discovered the anti-war movement, and "didn't spend much time in school."

As Talen and Lanier worked on the priest character, with one-man shows that re-interpreted the Christian story, he found himself drawn to another type of story, one of resistance to the all-consuming consumer culture. "Jesus told stories that startled people out of their role in context. He knew how to upend the culture. I saw my character evolving more toward an old-fashioned sidewalk preacher. And I decided to educate myself more." He recruited several clergy to serve as an advisory group that suggests broader reading and critiques his work. At the moment, along with labor history, he is reading Erich Fromm's *You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and its Tradition*, especially its study of Jeremiah and Amos. Indeed, his performances are nothing if not jeremiads against the Disney juggernaut.

Is this political theater? "I'm an agent provocateur, not a person with a political agenda," he declares. He is in touch with the National Labor Committee and

incorporates information about the sweatshops used by Disney in his monologues, but he sees his work as helping people find their own stories, of opening up the possibility of spiritual space. "So much has been replaced by the ritual of buying and selling. People know they're bored, but we don't know how to resist consumerism, how to be in the Mall of America and maintain our idiosyncratic spirit." Nevertheless, his real-life arrest and impending court case have been incorporated into Reverend Billy's performances, so that the political interacts with the artistic.

Where does Reverend Billy end and Bill Talen begin? Talen admits that in the beginning it was hard to put himself out there and preach. But now, "I love preaching. What I'm doing is not a parody." Still, he looks forward to the time when he can "write projects free of this character." He hopes to "share the millennial moment with Mickey in Times Square," and then move on.

* * *

In the theater that Sunday afternoon, I hesitate about joining the mostly young crowd in their foray into the Belly of the Beast. I haven't done any street theater since I was the age of most of them and there was a war in Vietnam. Is this Marx redux, tragedy and farce? No matter. I find some people close to my age and we enter the temple of small creatures. "This was made in

China," says one of my new comrades as he peers at a label. "Did you see the story in the paper about those sweatshops where they pay teenage girls fifteen cents an hour?" "Yeah," I say, but before I can add more, the shopper is off, drawn to yet another attractive display. We try variations, anything to strike up a conversation, but we are talking to each other. Most of the tourists do not speak English, and those who do have children in tow who dart from one table to the next. Our most "successful" improv is with a woman who says, "You know, my girlfriend went to Taiwan and said that everything there she could get here and cheaper. So she didn't buy anything there." Indeed.

A block from The Disney Store I see a crowd around an open space and hear some shrieks and laughter. It could be a street artist, but it isn't. A rat has run across the sidewalk, parting the sea of tourists. It cowers in a clothing-store entrance. I fantasize about opening the door and shooing it inside, where it would certainly create some memorable anti-shopping moments. Mickey Mouse as the Antichrist? A cornered rat in the pristine, gentrified New Times Square? The stories continue.

—Maxine Phillips

Maxine Phillips an editor of Religious Socialism who as a child loved The Mickey Mouse Club.

Talen

cont'd from page 7

moment walking in the lake of fire!" Their responses? Sometimes they argue, sometimes they agree, sometimes they're just pissed. One recent troupe outing featured a public argument about consumerism, between the comic monologist Reno and the writer Richard Baimbridge (who claimed that the Rev was upsetting his grandmother, a grandmother no-one could find). This resulted in a town-hall style debate, with tourists arguing with our skills. The young minimum-wage security people, in their green Disney blazers, said "Code One" in their cell phones, and New York's finest made their way toward us.

The people who walk through these doors are from anywhere and nowhere; they are simply Disney now. This is the new nation, the new city. And the consumers' own personal histories, what they remember about themselves, are rearranging also, in the shopping process. The moments in their lives when the Mickey Mouse Club or the Lion King were experienced are coming back into them and arranging the purchase. The tourist shopper's own non-Disney past is as suspect as the lives of the people in the history of this address, who lived their lives right here.

And so, our recent collecting of life histories has begun to include the tourists themselves, so that we are becoming,

well, dramatic tourists. Our troupe is acting as if we are also tourists, but with our non-Disney selves closer to the surface, resisting the abandonment to this system of myths. Put broadly, we are interested in becoming personal here in the environment where only products have personalities. Gradually the tourists are beginning to talk, and after all, the revolution must be theirs. What we can do is make a play and invite them to join in.

Scenes will be performed in irregular intervals (and of course unannounced) over a period of months. With the players dressed as tourists, much of the play may never be noticed by Disney security. We are intrigued by the resulting confusion of public and private property. Or, from Disney's vantage, the confusion of shopping and acting. One point that this experiment makes is—when the corporations own so much square footage, in the sense of our psychic space as well as of our real estate—where does original language have its place?

Finally, to find what is beyond consumption, we keep returning to 42nd and 7th Avenue. The place wants a play. The place is Broadway. It got that way because of people telling stories... ▀

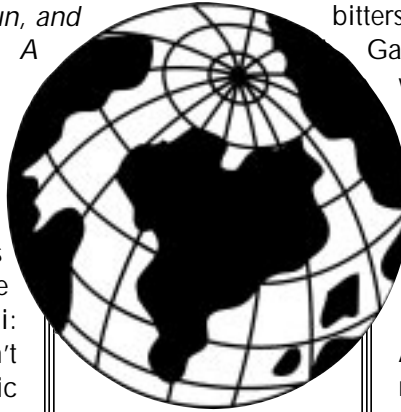
Bill Talen and the "Reverend Billy" can be reached at revbilly@revbilly.com and visited at www.revbilly.com.

THE INTELLIGENT HOMOSEXUAL'S GUIDE TO CAPITALISM AND SOCIALISM WITH A KEY TO THE SCRIPTURES

TONY KUSHNER

"Every day the world wakes up eager to run, and this is precisely how it should be. Texaco. A world of energy."

Perhaps you've seen this ad. It's like many commercial spots on millennial TV. There's a new formula now. The product being flogged is almost never visible, or is to be seen in fleeting, fugitive glimpses, like a movie star evading the paparazzi: advertising having learned that its job isn't really about creating a desire for a specific thing as much as it is about creating Desire itself, the more free floating, the less specific the desire the better, because desire for something dies when the something is obtained, whereas Desire itself is unappeasable, everyone wants what they can't have — or in the case of millennial TV, what they can't even get a really close look at. Advertising is about creating consumers as much as it is about creating consumption. If a celebrity spokesperson is employed in these ads he or she is usually even less visible than the product, seen, not heard, someone so famous their voice alone suffices — indeed their invisibility intensifies the power and allure of their almost-presence by abstracting celebrity itself into a kind of distilled incorporeal essence, disembodied like a Godhead. The camera work in the millennial commercial spot is collage-y, channel-surfery, jittery, ideal for the age of Ritalin Addiction: a hundred hasty skimshots, carefully intentional, carefully multi-ethnic, careful to include at least a couple of outrageously gorgeous expensively clad fashion models pretending to be ordinary people among carefully selected ordinary looking actors looking like ordinary ordinary people doing the things ordinary people do, only magnificently back- and side-lit; and with every mundane activity underscored with airbrushed, rock-and-gospel-inflected, grand-opera inflected music, carefully uptempo, ideal for the age of Prozac, and yet carefully



"The writings of the left will give you, I believe, a better chance of making sense of a world in which the Walt Disney Corporation is champion of gay rights. Socialist, progressive thinking will follow the money and the ideology the money has shaped."

bittersweet, ideal for the age of No Pain, No Gain. The music is almost always vocal, but wordless, interpretable both as cyberbanshee lamentations for the imminent apocalypse— the apocalypse sells, for one thing we're all more willing to blow our budgets and buy impulsively if we're convinced there's no tomorrow— or as sexual ecstasy, or both.

Attention must be paid to what these newfangled commercials are selling. Along with the fossil fuels that ravage our coasts and kill our shorebirds and blast holes in the ozone layer and begrime our lungs and produce carcinogenic metastases in the spongy and retentive tissues of our besieged and beleaguered bodies, what is being sold in these commercials is a little fortune-cookie philosophy, deadly serious for all that it's a flatheaded commercial jingle.

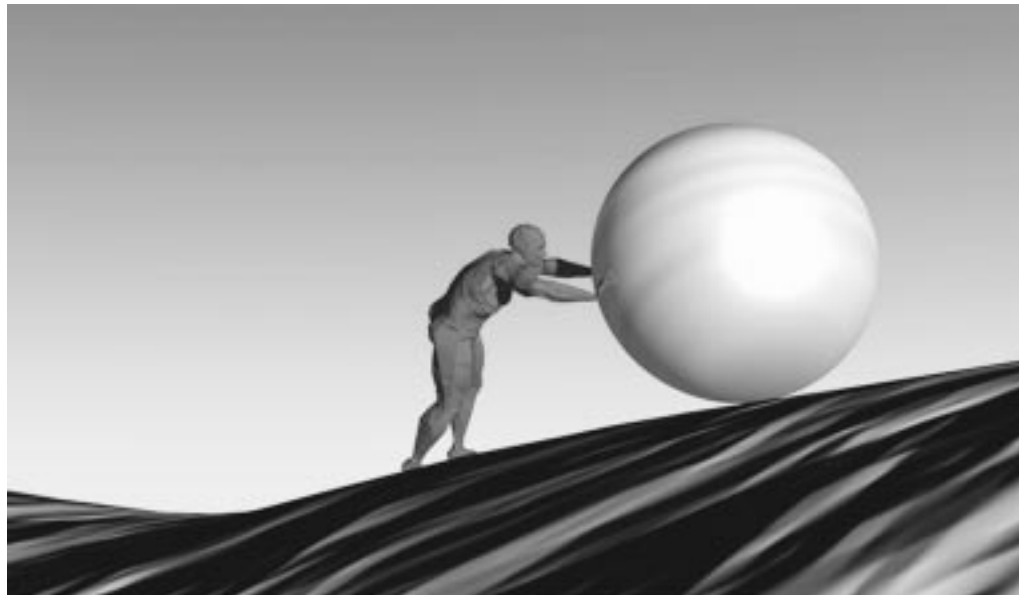
Texaco used to tell us simply that we could trust our car to the man who wore the star, and that wasn't so long ago. In the thirty years since, trust of any sort has become either a lame or a sitting duck, the demise of trust waiting only for the next devastating scandal or recovered memory. You'd think, considering how little trust there is left in the world, that Texaco's claims would have shriveled: the jingle ought in fact to be something like: Buy our gasoline and even though eventually you'll choke on its exhausts and we'll probably dump a few million gallons of it on your favorite beach and we'll collude in the assassinations of third world anti-colonialist insurgents if they interfere with our looting of their natural resources, at least your car won't explode

when you turn on the ignition, probably. But instead we get: "Every day the world wakes up eager to run; and this is precisely how it should be. Texaco. A world of energy." Texaco used to sell gasoline; now it's selling cosmology.

The world that is eager to run; that should only ever be eager to run and never eager to sit or strike or siesta or fuck or goof off or do anything other than run, on the run, each day, every day; this world of energy, not of people and their problems and their relationships, not even of their products anymore, this world of dis-incarnated; quasi-spiritual intangible overwhelming mythified totalistic energy: Welcome to the world Capitalism hath wrought. There was a time, not so long ago, when Just was an adjective, as in a Just person, to be Just. Just implied that

already pays less. That's not true, but you know what I mean. Money, like salmon, is swimming upstream. In 1975 the top 20 percent of our population controlled 43.2 percent of the nation's wealth. In 1998 it controlled 48.2 percent. ALL other quintiles controlled less in 1998 than they did in 1975, and the poorest 20 percent, which in 1975 controlled 4.4 percent of the nation's wealth, today controls a puny 3.7 percent. The richest 5 percent of our citizens in 1975 controlled 15.9 percent of America's money; in 1998 it controlled 21 percent. These are, rather

“Any politics
deserving
of its “ism”
is a politics
of utopia,
which is to say
future-oriented,
large-gestured....”



one had some lived connection with the precepts and dictates of Justice. Nowadays if you see the word JUST printed on, oh, say, a tee-shirt, you will look for what inevitably must follow: DO IT. From Justice to Just Do It Every day the world wakes up ready to run. Which is precisely, or should I say, just how it should be. A world of energy. In which it is manifestly, perfectly, clearly obvious what a human being is and how to be one: Just do it. It's all exactly how it ought to be. This is not your father's Oldsmobile. Is this a great time, or what?

I do not believe this is a great time. I believe in fact that my laptop computer is a great computer and it's great to have a great laptop computer and yet it is not a great time. The top five jobs in the growth category of the American economy are janitors and cleaners, salespeople, waitpersons, and nurses. CEOs of the top 500 American companies made on an average 273 times more money last year than the average American worker, and next year, if current trends continue, the CEOs will all make twice that much. Mike Eisner, CEO of Disney, made \$203 million in 1995. After the capital gains tax is eliminated he will probably pay less in taxes than I pay. He probably

famously, the days of the greatest discrepancy in wealth between rich and poor in our country's history. It has always seemed to me a reasonably good measure of the health of a society that as time passes, more and more people can afford more and more things: bread gets cheaper. To create the illusion of this, we measure reductions in poverty by the number of people, one year after the passage of the barbaric Welfare Reform Bill, who have either fled or been thrown out of the social net, who have gone to work for a hard-won minimum wage no one believes for a minute anyone can actually survive on, which is by definition sub-sub-minimum.

Oh God of the Free Market, whose Bible is the *Wall Street Journal* and whose dwelling place is the University of Chicago, HEAR our complaint! Even if statistics, those slippery things, can be manipulated to make it appear that your purportedly rising tide will raise all boats rather than drown us, look at our lives, look at what we are expected to put up with! We are failing to meet our already sub-sub-minimum emission standards; our world is killing us, because we are killing our world. The Balanced Budget,

cont'd on page 18

Ten Reasons to Be A Democratic Socialist



DAVID O'BRIEN

It is no small matter to declare oneself a democratic socialist in the United States. Never was. One day I wanted to do that, at the dedication of a memorial to a colleague, who had been our resident self-described Marxist philosopher, and a devout Catholic. He rarely spoke of the relationship between these two vital sides of himself. He liked to use language everyone could understand, Christian or not. When I spoke in his memory, I wanted to do the same. I present those thoughts here, hoping at a later date to offer a series of comments on the relationship between Roman Catholicism in the United States and this vision we call democratic socialism.



I cannot define exactly what democratic socialism means. But I insist on the need to underline the word *democratic*. Failure to do that has cost socialism dearly in the past.

I also understand that contemporary socialisms are drawn in at least three directions.

One direction still leads toward centralized power and the use of the state to reallocate incomes, wealth, and resources. This still might mean selective nationalization and experiments in centralized planning. The point is to use the instrument of a democratic state, accountable to the people and under law, not just to compensate for the failures of markets, but at times to assert control over private concentrations of power and at other times to direct market forces toward socially beneficial ends.

A second direction of socialism has been and remains toward distributive justice. George Bernard Shaw told his intelligent woman reader that it was a matter of money: who gets how much? This direction led to the welfare state, sometimes compensating for the failures of the market, sometimes attempting more radically to shape incomes toward a higher level of equity.

The third direction, smaller, less indebted to Marx, often in tension with the other two, leads toward decentralization

and popular participation. Friends of the first two tend to think industrial capitalism has solved the problem of production, leaving only distribution to be resolved, but advocates of the third position have reservations about industrialism as well as capitalism. Historically, this has expressed itself in cultural criticism of technology and industrialization, in the romantic radicalism of syndicalist, anarchist, and agrarian movements, in cooperatives, and in more moderate efforts at employee ownership and worker control.

All three threads must be woven into any serious socialist strategy. The first is essential because state power is the only available instrument to bring powerful private interests to account, and because the value of the common good must find institutional expression. The second is needed because essential human needs must be met now, not after some indefinite future; the privileged, not the poor, must bear the major burdens of social change. The third cannot be dispensed with because democratic and socialist values alike require that each person have access to the decisions that affect the conditions of life, again, not after the elites have created a new order, but now, while the new order is being constructed. As Latin American radicals of recent years liked to say: "the poor must be the agents of their own liberation." And as for the non-poor, Eugene Debs told people he would not lead them into the promised land, even if he could, because someone else could lead them back out again. They would have to get there through their own commitment and collective action.

Isaac Hecker, a nineteenth-century American Catholic I admire, thought the biggest problem with people was that they did not believe in the reality of their own highest aspirations. They doubted there was really an answer to the questions of their minds and the yearnings of their heart, so they settled for what they could get. The task of artists and intellectuals, and of churches, mosques, and synagogues, especially today, in the midst of this century's human being-made tragedies and disappointments, is to affirm the possibilities of human history. Humanity and its friends have a future: that is what democratic socialism is about, and why we should be about building it.

So, I offer ten reasons for supporting democratic socialism:

1. The United States needs a socialist movement to rally those who share a commitment to democratic

participation; to construct institutions that nourish values of cooperation, community, historical continuity, and social responsibility; to compensate for the extreme individualism that informs American economic, social, and cultural life; to provide an intellectual foundation for community organization among poor, minority, and immigrant populations; to challenge the cultural hegemony of neo-conservatism and the belief systems of free enterprise; and to take up the challenge of defining the meaning of American national symbols.

2. The United States needs a socialist party to open our imaginations to better ways to resolve public problems; to broaden the political agenda; to combat the subordination of public welfare to private interests; to make the common good a counterweight to the excessive individualism of both right and left; to renew a sense of community consciousness; to direct attention to those services needed for vital communities; to take on the politics of debt, and especially the transfers of wealth associated with interest payments; to reverse the no longer viable strategy of providing an articulate socialist presence within the Democratic Party; and to raise the banner of a political alternative that is clearly and deliberately internationalist.

3. We Americans need to make our own the perspective of the poor and disenfranchised, the victims, in order to build on our national and family histories of liberations achieved and yet to come, to experience public debate from the margins, to reimagine the center of history, to restrain and discipline our use of power, and to develop a cultural vision and political movement strong enough to challenge the powers that must be overcome if justice is to be achieved.

4. The poor need a program for the whole society to move beyond social engineering and scraps from the table, to mobilize their talents and energies for the common good, to overcome the demoralization of youth by authentic experiences of solidarity and shared responsibility in community organizations and local political action, and to rekindle a spirit of democracy among those who are free to choose by inviting their participation in movements of liberation aimed at a richer common life for all.

5. The middle class needs a sense of purpose to give meaning to freedom, to overcome cultural inertia, to raise standards of public discourse, to inspire students and young adults with the possibility of devoting their talents to

building a peaceful and just society.

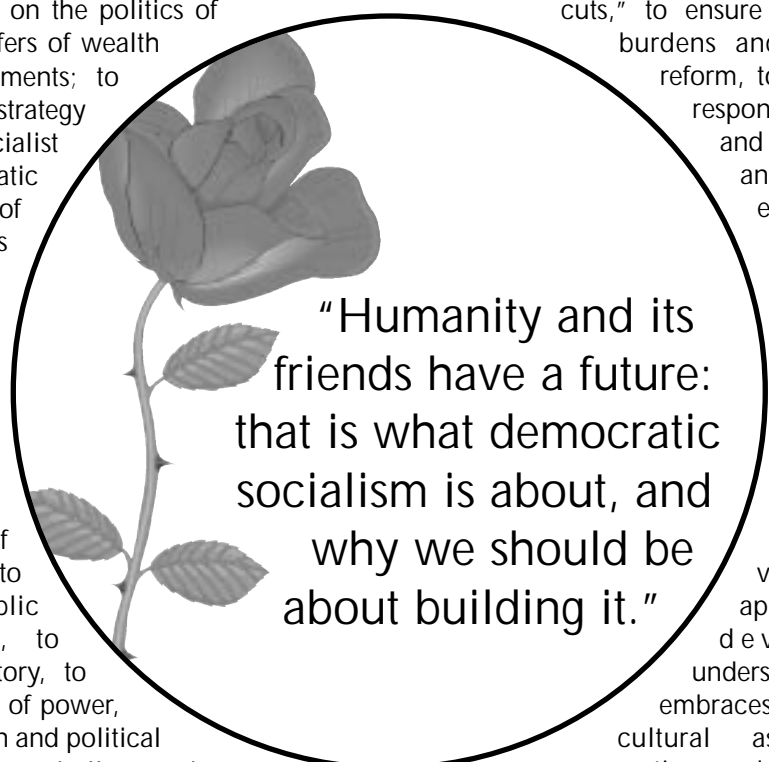
6. Concentrated economic power needs to be made accountable to make basic elements of life less dependent upon the decisions of private and largely irresponsible private institutions, to make corporations creatures of the public rather than its masters, to revive government institutions as responsible for the public good, to modify the mobility of capital and to renew the vocation of public service, and to revive a sense that economic and professional careers should serve not private gain but public purpose.

7. Structures of cooperation are needed to make market forces serve socially beneficial purposes, to finally overcome the gap between apparent political equality and radical economic inequality, to fix a broken economy by providing "a thousand Band-Aids for a thousand cuts," to ensure an equitable sharing of burdens and benefits in economic reform, to build a sense of public responsibility by actually sharing and exercising responsibility, and to give those affected by economic decisions a share in making those decisions.

8. People need to participate in decisions that affect their lives to make democratic responsibility real; to redefine the distinction between the public and private sectors; to revive voluntary associations appropriate to the times; to develop a renewed understanding of citizenship that embraces economic, social, and cultural as well as political cooperation; and to make so-called public institutions authentically public.

9. Professors and students need an ethics and politics of social responsibility to make knowledge and its bureaucracies (like those in the learned professions) accountable to and for the public, to combat the commercialization of scholarship and teaching, to locate the horizon of meaning for education beyond the school, to escape from the patronizing elitism and meaningless isolation bred by excessive specialization, to combat the subordination of knowledge to power and the retreat into self-serving ideologies, and to redeem the promise of modern culture.

10. Our country and our times need a democratic, and



Living Faithfully: God in the world today

JOHN F. ENDLER

When religious activists try to demonstrate the relevance of the religious life we commonly make the connection between faith and practice in a host of dimensions: faith and politics, faith and culture, faith and liberation. We sense faith as an embodied stance in the world, as opposed to an abstract posture that seeks to transcend the stuff of this life for a supposedly spiritual connection to heaven or eternity. But what is the nature of that connection between faith and practice? Why are we able to affirm a coherence in the relationship between faith and socialism, for example? We may understand our faith as being grounded in the divine life, while our resultant practice is simply a human response to that faith. Thus we construct a dualism of faith and practice, so that practice becomes a derivative, the product of the exegesis of our faith. But we can transcend this dualism when we reconsider the place and the presence of the Holy in faith and practice. In this reflection I suggest that the practices to which we commit as religious socialists are the very shape of God, for this collective activity is grounded in faith and in the life of God itself. This affirmation is critical, because too often we look for engagement and practice consistent with our faith without realizing that such moments are those in which the Holy is revealed, the real presence of God unveiled.

In this regard, the vision of theologian Paul Tillich remains relevant for us today. Although it is beyond the purview of this essay to explore the labyrinthine character of his work, I want to examine Tillich's foundational insight into the nature of God to provide a theological framework in which to understand our commitment to democratic socialism.

Tillich served the German Army as a chaplain in World War I. It was this experience of the barbarity of warfare, of death on a mass scale that utterly shattered the assumptions and commitments with which he had entered the Army. The horror of the war demolished for him the bourgeois German liberalism that so deeply shaped the dominant theological discourse of the time: a Heavenly Father, the brotherhood of men (sic), and inevitable progress to the human construction of the Kingdom of God. His loss of belief in this theology coincided with his discovery of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose proclamation of

the death of God and of the possibilities of new styles of existence provided the reeling Tillich with new philosophical resources for the reconfiguration of his own theological commitments. This "death of God" is not a proclamation of atheism, as many assume. Rather, as Graham Ward argues, "God in Nietzsche's assertion is used metonymically. That is, it is a name which substitutes for and sums up a way of doing philosophy in which a highest principle is sought that grounds the possibility of all things." The death of God represents the death of modernity's Great Chain of Being, at the top of which sits a Supreme Being over and against the many. No longer captive to what he would later refer to as a "supernaturalist" perspective, in which there dwells a God "out there," a God who is one Being among many, Tillich passed through the fires of this God's death to encounter God anew as a transcendence in the midst of the structures of world and existence.

Tillich speaks of God as the Ground of being, the source of the structures of life, yet never exhausted or wholly circumscribed by those structures. The heavens may have emptied, but God is to be found in the sustaining of world and existence, disclosed in the structures of existence. These convictions led Tillich to begin significant theological reflection upon the arts, psychology, philosophy, and political theory. For Tillich, the Holy is given shape in the cultural, political, and social practice of humankind. Our existence participates in God, enjoys its possibilities precisely because of its Source. The implications of this are staggering. For in this scenario, the revelation of God is wholly incarnational: the Holy is

*...as we proclaim a vision of a
world in which justice and
reconciliation are embodied,
our God is with us.*

revealed in persons and patterns and practices of social and cultural life. This point has been significantly developed by Peter Hodgson, who describes the presence of God as a gestalt or field actualized in the actual practices of humankind. He writes, "What God 'does' in history is not to intervene in the sequence of causes and effects in the form of special acts, or to become a god disguised in human flesh, or to speak literally through human speech, but to "shape" — to shape a multifaceted transformative praxis. God does this by *giving, disclosing, engendering*, in some sense being, the normative shape, the paradigm of such a praxis" (Emphasis in the original). Hodgson seizes upon Tillich's critical insight regarding

God and presents us with the social implications of Tillich's rejection of the supernaturalist God as Supreme Being. Following Tillich, Hodgson argues that it is God who shapes our practice, it is God who is the shape of our practice.

Tillich has demonstrated a dynamic alternative to the customary dualistic construction of faith and practice, predicated upon a God "out there," by arguing that prophetic life reveals the transformation of the structures of existence, of which God is their Ground. This dualism is transcended when faith and practice are apprehended as participatory in the divine life. Tillich proclaims to us that it is precisely in our practice—be it cultural, political, and so on—that God is present. God is present because God is the Source of all that is. God is present because it is God who shapes the transformative structures of our existence. God is not "out there," solely as a Being for us to reflect upon for inspiration. God is with us, moving us in transformative ways so that God might be embodied within the world.

I suggest that our commitment to democratic socialism is precisely the sort of gestalt in which the Holy is revealed. For as we proclaim a vision of a world in which justice and reconciliation are embodied, our God is with us. The prophetic demands of our sacred writings reveal to us that this is of God: together then we incarnate the very presence of God through our collective activities and ministries of justice and reconciliation.

We are a people of faith and socialism. We recognize that faith demands the kind of hope that the socialist vision offers. May we now see that our political commitment is not simply derivative of our faith, but is indeed grounded in the divine life. May we be inspired to see the shape of God, the Holy, revealed in our collective life and work together. May we also be mindful that the Holy is inexhaustible, identifying with us, yet always transcending us, calling us further into a future of peace and good will, re-shaping us constantly along the journey. May we find strength in knowing that we have responded to the prophetic call of our God to live and struggle as one people whose faith is marked by justice, reconciliation and solidarity—a shape which is that of God for this day. ▀

John Endler is Chair of the DSA Religion and Socialism Commission and pastor of the First Baptist Church of New London, CT.

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Get Debt-Free Now!

cont'd from page 3

Until the Birmingham [England] Summit in May of 1998, the issue of debt was not even on the agenda of the G7. Jubilee 2000 organized 70,000 people on the streets of Birmingham to call on the leaders of the world's richest nations to take seriously the need for debt cancellation. The demonstration received major coverage in the world media (except in the United States, where the *Washington Post* conceded — in an article on the summit itself — that the issue is "barely a blip on the screen in the U.S."), and gained the organizers of Jubilee 2000 a 25-minute meeting with Blair to discuss the matter. Blair brought the issue to the summit, where it was promptly quashed by Helmut Kohl. Socialists will take note that Germany has a new, social democratic chancellor, and Gerhard Schroeder has already raised the issue of global debt. With four of the G7 nations now having socialist governments, and Canada's Liberal prime minister Chrétien already stating that his nation will move to unilaterally cancel debt, only the United States and Japan remain to be persuaded of the need to cancel the world's debt. France has already moved to cancel the debt of its Central American debtors in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch. So for once, we can actually say that there is a chance to make this political goal a reality in the near future. The next G7 summit is in Cologne in June, and already Jubilee 2000 is planning a massive presence there at another demonstration.

That's where you come in. Although the socialist prime ministers have expressed interest in doing something about debt, it's always the case that people raising their voices is what makes the difference. Our leaders need to know that their citizens are aware of and want something done about the global debt crisis. Jubilee 2000 has a petition that has gathered signatures from 120 countries, and is working to educate people about the debt crisis. In the United States the Jubilee 2000/USA effort has been endorsed by the AFL-CIO, and supporters have been delivering paper chains (symbolizing breaking the chains of debt) to their congresspeople to make Congress aware of the problem. Your support and involvement are needed if we are to make the Jubilee Year a fact and not just another great idea. You can contact the coalition at the following address:

Jubilee 2000/USA
222 East Capitol Street, NE
Washington DC 20003-1036
Phone: 202-783-3566
Fax: 202-546-4468

Internet: <http://www.j2000usa.org>

Andrew Hammer is an editor of Religious Socialism.



Can Mainline Christianity Be Revived? Peter Laarman

Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity, by Gary Dorrien.
Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1995, 389 pp. \$26

"I hate, I despise your feasts," growls the Lord of Hosts in classic lines from Amos that all Social Gospelers learn to quote. "Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream."

If the God of both the Jewish and Christian Bibles equates true worship with the active pursuit of justice, how is it that God's people can be so at ease in a Zion purchased at the price of staggering injustice? The question has haunted progressive American church leaders since the founding of the Republic, but it was posed most acutely in this century by Walter Rauschenbusch in his pathbreaking *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907). It had dawned on Rauschenbusch that all of Jesus' preaching about the Reign of God is not pointing to pie in the sky but is urging human beings to create a "cooperative commonwealth" here and now: one either builds a new society fashioned around Kingdom values or one is complicit in the existing satanic order that rewards the strong for exploiting the weak. There's no middle ground.

Rauschenbusch and his Social Gospel colleagues challenged the basic premise of capitalism, thus breaking with the meliorism of their predecessors. But within two decades their movement was all but exhausted. How this happened, and whether Rauschenbusch's core vision can be rehabilitated, is the burden of Gary Dorrien's *Soul in Society*. This is not new territory for Dorrien (see especially *Reconstructing the Common Good*, 1990), and he offers an insightful reading of the main currents of twentieth-century social ethics among American Protestants.

Of course, there's no real mystery about the inability of the Protestant mainline to generate much righteous indignation over the ravages of capitalism. The culture we have, the culture of subservience, is largely the creation of nineteenth-century Protestant leaders, all good friends of Free

Enterprise, who wished to see religion confined to issues of personal, not social, morality. They did their work well, so that when Rauschenbusch & Co. started propounding their Kingdom ethic, most ordinary Protestants couldn't recognize it as having much to do with the tame Golden Rule morality on which they were weaned. Charles Clayton Morrison, the influential editor of *Christian Century* magazine, perceived early on that the Social Gospel was in fact a "preacher's gospel" that never really penetrated the consciousness of an upwardly mobile laity. And even many otherwise gutsy preachers fled in terror from this gospel's more radical implications. Thus Harry Emerson Fosdick, the scourge of Fundamentalism, confiding to his patron, John D. Rockefeller: "I say far more critical things about my own realm, the ecclesiastical, than I ever dream of saying about the industrial realm."

Notwithstanding the inherent conservatism of the Protestant establishment, Dorrien believes the Social Gospel might have enjoyed a longer ride had it not been for the relentless assault it suffered at the hands of one Reinhold Niebuhr. The 800-pound gorilla in Dorrien's story, Niebuhr disdained Rauschenbusch-style perfectionism from the start of his long career, accusing the Kingdom crowd of gross naiveté at the same time he himself embraced and promoted socialism as the solution to the crisis of the 1930s. But then, drawing first on Marxian and then on classical Christian sources, Niebuhr began to develop his trademark "Christian realism" that stressed the corruptibility of all human institutions due to the corruptibility of human beings themselves. Some Christians might be capable of practicing the "love perfectionism" preached by Jesus, but, Niebuhr insisted, this could have nothing to do with social change. He argued that most Christians, rather than seeking to build the Kingdom of God on earth, would be well advised to concentrate on keeping evil in check by participating in the rough and tumble of corrupted power politics.

Dorrien serves up a masterful and much-needed critique of the mixed Niebuhr legacy, a legacy lately appropriated by neoconservatives such as Michael Novak and Richard John Neuhaus. That neoconservatives would wish to claim for their cause the towering Protestant icon who rediscovered Original Sin comes as no surprise. Niebuhr spent the better part of 40 years deriding soft utopianism; though he himself remained firmly committed to left-liberal politics, Niebuhr's basic anthropology was always far better suited to the conservative project: a perverse compatibility "Reinie" himself recognized and regretted in the last years of his life.

As a trained theologian, Dorrien is quick to spot the thin patches in Niebuhr's eclectic theology. In particular, Niebuhr lacked a developed theology of the church, a lack that in turn reinforced his penchant for ridiculing Kingdom ethics. And Dorrien finds that despite Niebuhr's huffing and puffing about corruptibility, Rauschenbusch actually thought more deeply—and wrote more persuasively—about the persistence of evil by means of oppressive social structures.

Dorrien is equally adept at spotting flaws in Niebuhr's social and economic analysis. Niebuhr dominated mainline Protestant opinion at a time when progressives viewed the federal government as the best available agent for promoting justice. Dorrien correctly notes that earlier generations of progressives, ever suspicious of federal motives, had championed decentralized power and small-town populism. But the progressives of Niebuhr's generation were seduced by the blandishments of the liberal state. Accordingly, Niebuhr always dismissed promoters of cooperative enterprise as "unrealistic": out of touch with the scope of the change required to create approximate conditions of social equality.

Dorrien himself sees producer cooperatives as crucial to third-way economic modeling in the era of global corporate domination. His own constructive ideas matter less than the clarity with which he sees the weight of Biblical and republican tradition arrayed against our reigning social ethic of acquisitive individualism. He is absolutely right to see the key challenge as resuscitating "morally generative communities of memory" in the midst of a consumption-crazed America.

But can 30 million thoroughly enculturated mainline Protestants be resuscitated at this late hour? An interesting question. My guess is that as long as they can count themselves among the economic winners, most mainline Protestants will continue to slough off the Social Gospel as a mere "preacher's gospel." But let the current bubble economy come crashing down hard and there's a chance that some in the main line (now more of a spur) might yet discover a common bond with the millions now expected to make bricks without straw for no reason other than the insatiable greed of the new American overclass.■

Peter Laarman is pastor of Judson Memorial Church in Manhattan and a leader of the Campaign of Resistance against workfare without meaningful jobs at a living wage.

The Struggle Continues John Cort

Church and Revolution: Catholics in the Struggle for Democracy and Social Justice, by Thomas Bokenkotter
Image Books/Doubleday, U.S., 1998. \$15.95/ Canada \$19.95, 580 pp.

The first thing that strikes you about this book is the last thing in, or on, it. The back cover reveals that Bokenkotter is not only a pastor of a Catholic church in Cincinnati, but has run a soup kitchen for 20 years, plus a refuge for homeless men and woman, has a doctorate from Louvain, teaches at Xavier University, and has already written a popular history of the Catholic church.

The second thing that strikes you is that none of this prodigious activity has prevented him from filling 580 more

pages with lively detail and thoughtful observations on the French Revolution, Karl Marx, European Catholic socialists and reformers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and, in this hemisphere, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, and liberation theology.

The third thing that struck this reviewer was a conviction he holds in common with the author about the pivotal significance of the year 1848, quite apart from the fact that Marx and Engels published *The Communist Manifesto* in that year. This is the way Bokenkotter puts it:

The year 1848 was a great watershed for French Catholicism. It meant the end of the attempt to reconcile the church and modern society on the basis of a democratic socialism. Great numbers of workers now joined the camp of the socialists, having been disappointed in their hopes in Catholicism.

One can pinpoint the peak of the watershed even more precisely, namely, the evening of June 25, 1848. On that evening Frederic Ozanam, a popular professor at the Sorbonne and devout Catholic with socialist sympathies, persuaded the archbishop of Paris, Denis-Auguste Affre, to make an effort to stop the slaughter that the Revolution of 1848 had brought to the streets of Paris.

The archbishop, clad in full regalia and preceded by a worker carrying a white flag, approached the rebels' barricade in the Place de la Bastille, crying out, "*Mes amis, mes amis!*" What exactly happened then is lost in ancient arguments, but somebody, perhaps suspecting a sneak attack, perhaps aiming badly, shot and killed the archbishop. All France was horrified, on both sides. Moderates and many who sympathized with the workers switched to the conservative side. The rebellion was crushed.

Earlier the National Assembly had elected one Christian socialist, Philippe Buchez, as president and another, Anthime Corbon, as vice president. With Ozanam winning over the intellectuals at the Sorbonne and sympathetic churchmen like Affre heading the hierarchy, Christian/Catholic socialism seemed to have a chance of winning over France and the French church.

"Seemed" is the right word. Even before Affre's death, reaction had been setting in, Buchez's poor health had forced him to resign, and the reactionary popes Gregory XVI and Pius IX were setting their mitres firmly against socialism, which they lumped with communism in one blistering anathema. And Ozanam, aged only forty, followed Affre to the grave in 1853.

Today, Ozanam is remembered as the founder of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, which is an organization of Catholic men devoted to individual works of charity at the parish level. His interest in political action to correct the systemic causes of poverty is not on their agenda. This is not a

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that new trumpet of millennial doom, signals in advance the end of environmental control, decent public education, any hope for health care, funding for the arts, funding for scholarship, meaningful international aid, and the whole phalanx of miseries the gleaning of any daily paper will pile up. And we can't even talk about what it's like for a human being to spend his or her day tightening a wing nut, answering a phone, waiting tables, schlepping boxes, spraying carcinogenic fixatives on aluminum siding, every day for a lifetime; can't talk about the right people have to employment, or whether or not an injustice is done when someone is downsized, when someone loses an accustomed way of life due to a downturn on Wall Street—I always love it how the stock market falls every time they announce employment is up — is that healthy? Is that right? And forget about exploitation, disenfranchisement, alienation; the more subtle refinements following from an unflinching look at how most people on our planet spend most of their lives. Work, like economics, like money itself, have become the great undiscussables. The liberal left in America worries endlessly about how the right has stolen the discussion about ethics and values from us, not noticing, because it knows which side it's really on, how the discussion of money has been completely and entirely shifted to the right, to a perspective that Louis Althusser, a French Marxist, described as “accounting from inside the firm.”

This isn't a world of simple dualities: This is a world in which one must decide whether Mr. Hankey the Christmas Poo is good poo or a bad one, and that is a very very complicated question. Ours is a time in which the most reliable champion of gay rights in the United States is the Walt Disney Corporation; in which, as mergers and acquisitions replace production as the source of the Dow Jones great phallic upward thrust, Compuserve merging with AOL merging with Nike merging with the Gap merging with Citibank merging with Boeing merging with Murdoch merging with Archer Daniels Midland merging with Beatrice may be the next historical development after the increasingly irrelevant nation-state, internationalism of labor replaced by multinationalism of corporations. This is a hard world to figure, and though I think good and evil, right and wrong are still discernible amid the electronic howl, discernment is unquestionably harder, and this is probably a good thing. If we make the effort to discern.

For help I recommend one turn to writers, thinkers, historians, maybe even a playwright or two, Shaw and Brecht and Ibsen and Chekhov and Williams, for instance, who have recorded, voiced, analyzed, emblooded the grit and tragedy and failure and defeat and occasional triumph, however momentary, that in its entirety constitutes that to which I refer when I refer to the tradition

of socialism. The writings of the left will give you, I believe, a better chance of making sense of a world in which the Walt Disney Corporation is champion of gay rights. Socialist, progressive thinking will follow the money and the ideology the money has shaped; toward thinking shout political economies; socialism will entangle your brain in the vast dialectics of liberty and justice, freedom and responsibility; socialist writings will trace the historical development of liberalism and its ossification into individualism, the subversion of individualism by identity-based politics and the politics of liberation, and the counterrevolution these revolutions produced; it will see the bad new thing; the dialectic. Whereas the “moderate” right will tell you that people, who are basically bad, under capitalism have their best shot at a dignified existence—and if you believe that I suggest you take a trip to almost any public high school in any big city in the United States— while the radical and religious right will tell you Disney supports same-sex benefits because Mickey Mouse is Satan in rodent disguise. And they're right. in a sense, but not in the sense they intend.

The creation of the social world, the unknowability of the Real world, the laboring animal who creates the social world into which he and she bring offspring, in which life is lived at a remove from the real, the dignity and the obscenity of labor, the dream of a world without work or want: These are the ideas of socialism, which is a politics of Political Ideas. The Politics of Ideas perhaps began with the introduction of self-consciousness, of subjectivity into the field of an political endeavor around the end of the eighteenth century; before which, as it is said, people struggled for freedom and a better life but did not know what it was they struggled for. In opposition to the growth and accompanying turmoil and devastation of industrialization, the Goal was named—perhaps for the first time in the American and then the French Revolution—and the goal has been a site of vital, violent contention ever since. Until recently. Political ideas are in deep disfavor these days.

There is a politics of ideas of the right, too; fundamentalist militancy can be said to participate in it. There is a real danger to the visionary in politics; just look at Israel and all those visionaries; but what is often forgotten is how dangerous politics can be without vision — look again at Israel, especially under Netanyahu, last seen having lunch with Jerry Falwell — in the absence of which Ideology with a capital I can be seen to work unopposed, unquestioned, usually for the purpose of profit maximalization. We are right to distrust meta-narratives and grand theories; we are fools to think we can do without them. Utopia is a meta-narrative, Utopia is grandly theoretical, is fantastical, in fact; what hope have we, to use everybody's favorite Bush-ism, without The Vision Thing?

Any politics deserving of its "ism," is a politics of utopia, which is to say future-oriented, large-gestured, not a politics expressed in State of the Union speeches bizarrely obsessed with the manufacturing of school uniforms.

The rejection of the future by our Fleetwood Mac-playing president is odd; the rejection of the future as the millennium approaches is unseemly. My favorite statement so far about the big calendar event we're all about to suffer through the media overkill comes from, of all people, Bob Dole, who is always at his best when at his crankiest, and he was at his crankiest when he was interviewed — I believe by Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times*, the day before Clinton's second Inaugural. You may recall that Bill "Bipartisan Compromise" Clinton had had constructed, for the inaugural festivities, for the purpose of literalizing his favorite sound bite, an actual Bridge to the 21st Century. I think it spanned some Washington side road. When Bob Dole was asked what he thought of Clinton's bridge, the former senator replied, "They tell me it's made of plywood. Glad I don't have to walk on it."

Here is a grand American paradox. Most of us believe with the Dour Former Majority Leader that Bubba's Bridge, constructed as it seems to be on a principle of balancing the budget based on figures drawn up by arithmetically-challenged Panglossian accountants, will most likely collapse in a stiff breeze. Even those of us who despise Dole's politics and the party of which he is a former pillar, among whose number I can be counted, feel a certain fondness for him as an American archetype, the Grump (as opposed to most of the rest of his party, who represent another American archetype, the Gump, as in Forrester). All Americans sort of love the Grump, but we couldn't vote for him for President because we insist that our President manifest an optimism bordering on insanity —or at least an optimism indicating an overdose of Halcyon. We don't trust the manic positivist we elect farther than we can throw him, we know he's a con man, we prefer the mordant wit of the Grump, beneath which flows a river of bleak despair with which we can easily identify; we believe the Grump at least sometimes tells the awful truth about life but we want the indefatigably cheery maniac to run the country or, since we all know the President doesn't run the country, (Microsoft does), we want the indefatigably cheery maniac to be the one who's got his finger on the button of the world's largest nuclear arsenal. Maybe it's wise; you don't want such a person to be moody. Americans want a President who believes in the Future, who believes that it is Bright.

Believing the Future to be Bright is another way of saying you believe in Progress, and you more or less have to believe in Progress. You don't have to believe that we are progressing, you may believe that we are too committed to the idea of making progress happen—or not committed

enough, or too committed to the idea that ideas make progress happen — you may even believe, as every American politician these days seems to, that what makes progress happen is having no ideas at all, that progress, like shit, just happens, and you only need Alan Greenspan to step in periodically to threaten to raise interest rates, and otherwise everything takes care of itself. But whatever you are or believe yourself to be, you have to believe in Progress. What are the alternatives? Belief in eschatology, or in sensuality —but the afterlife doesn't really need our beliefs, there either is one or there isn't one, it will either be waiting for us after we die or it won't, in which case we won't even be disappointed, and this will or won't happen whether we pray for it or not. We must pray to be spared eternal punishment, but that's really begging, isn't it, and obedience, and what we are talking about here is faith. The pleasures of the flesh certainly don't require belief do they? The body and its pleasures are materialist affairs, you'll know fun when you find it, whatever price you may be asked to pay for it afterward. What requires belief, or perhaps I should say faith, in this world it seems to me is some conviction that things will improve, that there's something worth waiting around for; some reason to inflict this grim thing we call life on the charming unsuspecting creatures we call newborn infants; some reason not to try to hitch a ride on Hale-Bopp or the next available comet The future needs our prayers—and a whole lot more besides, but to begin with, the future, progress needs our prayers.

Why talk about socialism? Here are a few reasons: Because there's such beauty in the idea, and some of history's best people have talked about it. Because I believe that the world will end if we don't. Because nobody else is, or very few are, and the near-complete burial, within less than a decade, of a globally significant millennia-old history and idea, seems to me premature. And because capitalism sucks, it's evil, we all know it and let's be done with that debate: capitalism, the free market, to the extent that such a thing as a free market exists (as opposed to a globally hegemonic sadomasochistic death dance between the world's peoples, its nation-states, and the multinational oligopolies daily losing their nominal distinctiveness merging into one great shell game for the sole purpose of moving all money and all wealth to the very most infinitesimally measurable micro-quazillionth of an inch of the utmost tippy-top point of the social pyramid), the principles by which we have organized and continue to organize our society, and increasingly all our world, are principles that guarantee our costly subjection to chaos, to cycles of boom, bust, colonialism, war. And globally vast environmental despoliation. And people stuck in crummy jobs, day in, day out for all the years and decades of their lives. And social evils with which we are familiar, like racism, sexism, and homophobia, all of which I believe derive their longevity and persistence

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through the ongoing contribution each form of bigotry makes to keeping power drastically, catastrophically imbalanced; and the social evils with which we are perhaps less familiar, because no one talks about them anymore: things like alienation, disenfranchisement, and exploitation. But if you think, from time to time, and you must, that human life at the end of the twentieth century lacks dignity, beauty, meaning, hope, if you feel trapped by the unreasonableness of what it simply takes and costs and requires to get through life with a roof over your head; if inflation rates and downsizing and cloning and vagrant nuclear arsenals for sale and Bill Gates scare you, and unless you're insensate as a sponge, they should scare you, scare you very badly, scare you so badly you might even think of doing something about them — if any of this seems familiar to you — then perhaps alienation, exploitation, and disenfranchisement are already concepts with which you are familiar, and perhaps you already know why we should talk about socialism. The world is a mess and whether or not there's an alternative it would be so depressing to accept that there isn't one; so let's talk about socialism, and see what happens.■

~~Tony Kushner is a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright. This article is an edited excerpt from the President's Lecture given at Brown University in the fall of 1998. Reprinted by permission of the author.~~

Cort

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criticism, because such organizations will always be needed. It is, however, a measure of our good fortune that Bokenkotter is setting the record straight and calling attention to Ozanam's socialist side.


A major problem in this book starts in the subtitle: "Catholics in the Struggle for Democracy and Social Justice." The French Revolution highlighted that problem; namely, the fact that there was not one struggle but two, one for democracy and the other for social justice. And there is a third struggle against a Catholic church most of whose hierarchy had aligned themselves with the rich and powerful. All of these struggles culminated in the Reign of Terror, which slaughtered Catholic bishops, priests, and laity, democrats, and fighters for social justice without prejudice. The ultimate winners were the atheistic, anti-clerical bourgeoisie who saw to it that unions remained illegal until 1884. In short, a tangled tale.

Bokenkotter helps to untangle the story, but he might have helped even more if he had added a final chapter of conclusions instead of ending abruptly with the defeat of Lech Walesa and Solidarity by the smarter, slicker ex-communists.

Nevertheless it is a good book, well worth reading. And if you ever see Liam Neeson in the movie *Michael Collins*, you will want to read the full tragic story told here of how two good Irish Catholic democrats, Collins and Eamon DeValera, fought to the death (Collins's death, that is) over the problem of how to win democracy for Ireland.

And one final correction: 1848 may have been "the end of the attempt to reconcile the church and modern society on the basis of democratic socialism" in the nineteenth century, but that effort continues up to this very moment.■

John Cort is an editor of Religious Socialism.



The Democratic Socialists of America is the largest socialist organization in the United States, with John Sweeney, Dolores Huerta and Cornel West among its members.

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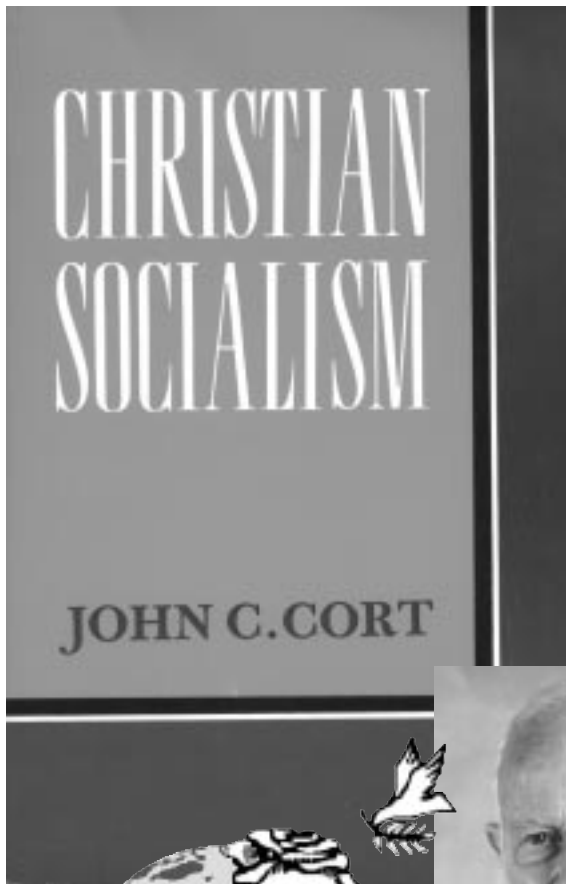
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Reproductive Rights

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The issue here is not whether the sheriff is entitled to his own beliefs. The question is whether it is permissible for him to refuse to uphold the law. Surely the answer must be no. This exemption allowing doctors not to learn about or to perform abortions (abortion is the only medical procedure that has a "conscience clause") has already given permission for an increasing range of people to claim moral legitimacy for obstructing women's decisions. More than 80 percent of pharmacists surveyed thought they had the right to refuse to fill prescriptions for drugs like RU 486. An anti-choice doctor in Massachusetts refused to write her patient a prescription for birth control pills. A receptionist at a local hospital told women, falsely, that the hospital did not provide abortion services. An insurance company worker refused to provide a woman with a referral for an abortion.

These are not isolated cases. The anti-abortion movement encourages its members to obstruct wherever they can, and the societal response has been one of tolerance. We must challenge that tolerance. Why should OB-GYNs be permitted to refuse to perform the most common surgical procedure that women undergo? I am not suggesting that they be forced to do abortions. I am suggesting that they not be OB GYNs if they cannot offer women the full range of basic care. Similarly, medical schools should not be permitted to refuse to teach abortion when 43 percent of women will have had at least one in their lifetime if current trends persist. And hospitals cannot permit anti-abortion nurses to treat abortion patients with hostility. They must be held accountable and either refuse to allow nurses who won't participate to work in OB GYN or be sure that an adequate number of nurses are available who will be involved in abortions.

Our ethical concerns in these cases should not rest with making sure that an individual's rights to act in accordance with their own beliefs is protected. We must also be concerned that institutional policies protect women's rights by ensuring access to abortion and create a climate in which women having abortions are treated with care and respect. That is why it is so important to fight the marginalization of abortion within mainstream medicine and the stigmatizing of both those who perform abortions and those who have them.

Expanding Abortion Access

We are in what the director of a clinic in Shreveport, Louisiana, calls "a war of small losses" — funding prohibitions, mandated lectures, mandatory waiting periods, parental consent and notification laws, the ongoing attempts to ban D and X abortions, delays in bringing RU 486 to this country, and of course, violence against providers. As a result, thousands of women must overcome incredible obstacles to get their abortions, and thousands more cannot obtain them.

Fighting for access is crucial but especially difficult in this period of privatization and victim blaming. Punitive welfare reform policies that limit the possibilities for poor women to have children are just the other side of the abortion restriction coin. Ultimately, securing abortion access requires that abortion services be part of comprehensive health care available to all women, and an even larger human rights, feminist, and social justice agenda.■

Marlene Gerber Fried is the executive director of the National Network of Abortion Funds. This article is adapted and updated from an article published in the March 1998 Sojourner: The Women's Forum and in the April 1998 Resist newsletter and remarks made at a recent meeting of Women of Faith that looked at the intersection of poverty, morality, and reproductive freedom.

Ten Reasons

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therefore socialist, faith to overcome the fatalism that informs much social consciousness, to motivate the commitment and sacrifice needed if the drift toward one or another form of self-destruction is to be overcome, to renew an understanding that democratic institutions require a democratic culture, which rests on confidence in the worth of ordinary women and men, and to shape a leaven of egalitarianism, upsetting all forms of power and domination and opening minds and hearts to communitarian futures rooted in truth, justice, freedom, and love.■

Contributing editor David O'Brien is Loyola Professor of Roman Catholic Studies and history at Holy Cross College in Worcester, MA.



witness

A Lapsed Agnostic on Faith in Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, and God

JACK CLARK

When she was six, my daughter composed the following note:

*Dear Tooth Fairy,
I love you.*

I lost a tooth today. Please can you give me 2 sets of markers. If you don't have markers, I don't mind. Anything you want to give me would be nice. I like you. I don't mind if you don't have money. I still like you. You're my favorite toothfairy. I wish I could see you. But you are my friend.. You like me, too. You like the kids all over the world. If any of them lose a tooth, you come. I love you toothfairy.

Veronica

Veronica's note reflects faith (she also displays hope and love in her musings, but let's stick with one virtue for now). On other occasions, she displays equally strong faith in Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny.

I have done little or nothing to dispel her faith in these unseen benefactors. My wife and I adopted Veronica; she came to us when she was four, and she was available for adoption because her early family life had been pretty rough. Depriving her of the wonder and comfort she feels around these standard childhood myths would add cruelty beyond its already sufficient measure in her young life.

I wonder whether we could shake her very strong beliefs in Santa, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy even if we tried. All around us, the faith is celebrated, the rituals well defined. For a family with a young child, apostasy within this community of faith is nearly unthinkable. Within my own family of origin, my younger brother Paul and I have shared a worldview more cosmopolitan, more secular, and more left wing than that of our parents or our other four siblings. In our teen years, we both strayed from our Catholic upbringing. Paul became an atheist; I described myself as an agnostic. Paul began his family before I began mine. He made a difficult and principled decision not to baptize either of his children. Both of his children believe in Santa. Paul has a good friend and neighbor, also a lapsed Catholic, who is far more militant in his atheism. His kids grew up believing in Santa, too.

I want to live in a society that makes atheism and agnosticism as socially acceptable as piety. And we do live in such a society. When it comes to Santa, though, the social cost of open disbelief is just too high.

Crude determinists might point out that in an increasingly marketized world Santa and the Easter Bunny carry commercial values; God just doesn't do anything for the seasonal cash registers. Sometimes crude determinism hits the mark, but that's not the case I want to make right now.

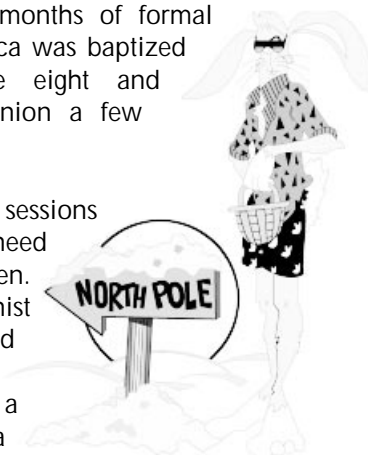
My wife and I decided that Veronica needed to know that Christmas involved more than Santa, Easter more than painted eggs and candy. We started with a book of children's Bible stories. The parting of the Red Sea excited Veronica more than even the Power Rangers. And Jesus' urging his disciples that we must all become as children to enter the Kingdom of Heaven made her feel great. Mass at Christmas and Easter became part of our family ritual, and then we decided that an occasional visit wasn't enough. After several months of formal religious instruction, Veronica was baptized a year ago at Easter at age eight and received her First Communion a few weeks later.

I remember the college bull sessions where I argued against the need for religion in raising children. A solid grounding in humanist ethics would do as well, and spare me the hypocrisy. That was before I confronted a child whose faith in Santa ran deep and whose notion of God was vague at best. Whatever exalted notions of humanism I imagined imparting to my child, they didn't include the Easter Bunny. And could I really have thought that hypocrisy was an exclusive franchise of religious people?

In bringing Veronica to church, I find some of my perspective very functional. Religion serves as a useful aid in forming a child's conscience. Christianity shaped a large part of our world; she needs to learn about the traditions. The church I am re-entering is also different from the church I left. The liturgy and the sermons reflect Catholic social teaching on the preferential option for the poor. I've lived for more than a dozen years in a racially changing and sometimes racially tense neighborhood; the parish emphasizes diversity and acceptance. Our pastor leads a citywide effort for community organizing for social justice. Veronica learns many good lessons from all this. And there is more.

Parents teach and lead children, but we also follow their leads and learn from them. In returning to the church, I have learned from Veronica about faith. My doubts are strongly rooted, but our family is at Mass fairly regularly. That New Testament passage Veronica likes so much says something about a little child shall lead them.■

Jack Clark is a former national secretary of Democratic Socialists of America.



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