

Summer 2003

Review: Jacob Dorn's 'Socialism and Christianity in Early 20th-century America'

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Trollinger, William Vance, "Review: Jacob Dorn's 'Socialism and Christianity in Early 20th-century America'" (2003). *History Faculty Publications*. 25.

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JACOB DORN, ED., *Socialism and Christianity in Early 20th Century America*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1998. Pp. 252. \$72.95.

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During the 2004 presidential campaign there will be much talk by television and radio evangelists of the urgent necessity for "Christian voters" to go to the polls on Election Day. It will be assumed—by the preachers, by their audiences, and by the general media—that these "Christian voters" will vote Republican (implying,

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of course, that only “non-Christian voters” would even consider pulling the lever for the Democratic candidate).

Jacob Dorn summarizes this state of affairs in his introduction to *Socialism and Christianity*: “the rise of the Religious Right” has “overshadow[ed] the potential of American Christianity to stimulate social action predicated on a very different reading of the Bible” (xii). But Jerry Falwell, Ralph Reed, and John Ashcroft notwithstanding, there have indeed been alternative Christian political visions in U.S. history. In this volume Dorn, history professor at Wright State University and longtime member of the Conference on Faith and History, and his fellow contributors illumine one such alternative: the Christian socialism of the first two decades of the twentieth century.

In an introductory chapter Dorn provides an insightful overview of encounters between Christianity and socialism. He documents the hostility of many socialists to Christianity as well as the general animosity of institutional Protestantism (and the markedly more fierce antagonism of the Catholic Church) toward socialism. Despite all this opposition, and despite the presence of a competing and more moderate Social Gospel that did not demand reconstruction of the social order, many American Protestants gravitated toward socialism, seeing there—to quote journalist and socialist Charles Edward Russell—“the practical application of the doctrine of Jesus Christ” (29).

At the heart of this book are case studies of seven Christian socialists. These are individuals who actively supported the Socialist Party of America, and whose Christian commitments were crucial in their decision to become a socialist. Six Protestant traditions are represented here (from Baptist to Episcopal to Universalist), and both clergy and laity are included. All seven individuals understood Christianity as containing an ethical imperative, and all seven had some sort of transforming experience that revealed to them the depth of social ills afflicting American society. And while all were Socialist Party activists, most became much less active after World War I (which was in keeping with the Party’s general decline).

Three case studies are particularly compelling, and worth special mention here (and for whatever reason, all three of these individuals ended up in California). The late, great historian Philip Foner has a fascinating piece on African-American preacher George Washington Woodbey, who was the preeminent black socialist of the day, and who put his body on the line in free speech fights up and down the West Coast. While, as Foner observes, Woodbey was so focused on class oppression that he did not deal substantively with the realities of racial discrimination, his powerful preaching and writing (including the article “Why the Socialists Must Reach the Churches with Their Message”) drove home the point that “the economic teaching of the Bible and of Socialism are the same” (81–82). The same argument was made by the most famous woman socialist of her time, Kate Richards O’Hare (“Red Kate”), a Kansas native who—a la Frances Willard and others—progressed from temperance activist to socialist leader, exhorting sweatshop workers, miners, and farmers across the country to unite under the socialist banner. As nicely detailed by Sally Miller, it was while she was in prison for her antiwar activities during World War I that her sense of fellowship with Jesus

profoundly deepened, as did her contempt for Protestant ministers who failed "to live up to the teachings of their faith and its founder" (93).

One minister who left the pastorate in order to live up to the Gospel was Methodist preacher J. Stitt Wilson. In a fascinating chapter Douglas Firth Anderson—another long-time Conference on Faith and History member—discusses how Wilson's exposure to the ideas of Congregationalist minister George Herron led him to leave his Chicago pastorate and launch a "Social Crusade," to be led by Herron. When Herron became caught up in a personal scandal, Wilson dropped the Social Crusade and moved to California, where this marvelous orator became a Socialist Party activist, running for a host of offices, winning the Berkeley mayoral race in 1911. While Wilson left the Socialist Party in 1915—and soon thereafter returned to the Methodist church—this did not mean he had abandoned his commitment to social justice, as he "had never completely identified . . . the SPA with the Kingdom of God," although, Anderson notes, "he had, like most Christian socialists, seen them as largely overlapping" (55).

Jake Dorn's invaluable essay on primary and secondary sources concludes this volume. It is just one more reason why college and seminary libraries need to add *Socialism and Christianity* to their holdings. It is particularly important for evangelical and fundamentalist schools to purchase this book, if for no other reason than to suggest to their students that there exists—bizarre as it may seem these days—a tradition of Christian political thought that imagines the possibility of government as an agent of good, and that understands a just society to be one in which the basic needs of all its citizens are met.