

# CHRISTIAN SOCIALISM

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*An Informal History*

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PART I

# The Judeo-Christian Tradition

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*Its Origins, Variations, Challenges, and  
Implications for Economics and Politics,  
Including Some Eminent Persons Who  
Enlarged on the Same*

# Introduction

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For perhaps the first time in American history Christian socialism is front-page news. Curiously, it has become front-page news without ever being mentioned. It appears under the title of “liberation theology” or in a story about some particular liberation theologian who has upset some cardinal in the Vatican or perhaps even the pope. The reporters usually do not mention that the liberation theologian is a Christian socialist, although they will probably mention the word “Marx” or “Marxism” somewhere in the story.

Nevertheless, we are being confronted with some fairly interesting questions, such as, can Christians be socialists? Should they be socialists? If so, what kind of socialist? Marxist, non-Marxist, semi-Marxist? Democratic? And what is meant by “democratic”?

If we are going to address these questions intelligently, and if we are going to write, or read, a whole book about Christian socialism, the first thing we must do is come to some agreement on definitions.

The term “Christian” seems clear enough, despite the wild variety of beliefs that have taken shelter under that word. The root of the word is obvious. Yet some who have called themselves Christian, and who merit mention in any book on the subject, have held views that cannot be reconciled with any traditional view of what Christ taught. Nevertheless, the figure of Christ remains as the focal point.

Neither does this book then require any ticket of admission, doctrine-wise, other than to claim some relation to that figure of Christ. It will, however, try to clarify and distinguish between competing and/or contradictory views of what Jesus Christ really taught. This is no simple exercise, but I will simplify it by accepting fairly literally what the Revised Standard Version of the Bible says he taught, using the New Oxford Annotated Edition, which is perhaps the most acceptable to both Protestant and Catholic scholars.

The word “socialism” is more difficult. Wild variety again confronts us, even among those who take their lead from Karl Marx. At one end of the spectrum are the Leninists, those who tend to favor violent revolution, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and almost total nationalization of property as necessary tools for the construction of a socialist society. These include some Christians, especially in Latin America and other areas of the Third World where democratic reform seems impractical or too difficult.

At the other end of the spectrum are Marxists like Michael Harrington or Rosa Luxemburg, who deny that there can be any socialism without democracy, just as they insist that there can be no genuine democracy without socialism. The Democratic Socialists of America have put it as follows:

As democratic socialists we oppose the claim of Communist countries to be socialist. We are firmly committed to democracy as the only political means to achieve the economic and social power of the people. Thus we oppose bureaucratic and dictatorial state ownership as hostile to socialist emancipation. [*Where We Stand*, merger agreement between the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) and the New American Movement (NAM), March 20, 1982, at founding convention of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).]

One definition of socialism is, in fact, the extension of democratic process from the political to the economic sphere of life. Socialism then becomes a *method* based on the assumption that if people are given the opportunity to make economic decisions, they can be trusted to make them, most of the time, so as to provide as much equality, justice, and freedom as are possible in an imperfect world. It follows from this definition that any movement toward the democratization of economic decisions is socialistic, and this would include such phenomena as trade unions and New Deal legislation designed to bring business under some measure of democratic control.

Dictionaries tend to be more restrictive in their definitions. Three typical ones: (1) “a political and economic theory of social organization based on collective or governmental ownership and democratic management of the essential means of production and distribution of goods” (*Webster’s Collegiate*, 5th Edition); (2) “a social system in which the producers possess both political power and the means of producing and distributing goods” (*American Heritage*); (3) “a theory or system of social organization that advocates the ownership and control of industry, capital, and land by the community as a whole” (*Random House*).

Emerging from these definitions is the picture of a society in which the means of production and distribution are fairly solidly collectivized under government ownership and control. The dictionaries, however, have not kept up with recent developments. In 1951 the Socialist International, meeting in Frankfurt, drew a more pluralistic picture of socialism. While opting for public ownership where necessary for “controlling basic industries and services,” the Frankfurt Declaration insists that “socialist planning does not presuppose public ownership of all the means of production” but welcomes “consumers’ or producers’ cooperatives” and is compatible with the existence of private ownership in important fields, for instance, in “agriculture, handicraft, retail trade and small and middle-sized industries.”

It adds:

Socialist planning does not mean that all economic decisions are placed in the hands of the government or central authorities. Economic power should be decentralized wherever this is compatible with the aims of planning.... The workers must be associated democratically with the direction of their industry. [Frankfurt Declaration of Socialist International, in *The New International Review* (Winter 1977), pp. 8–9].

Again the emphasis is on democratic process: “Such planning is incompatible with the concentration of economic power in the hands of the few. It requires effective democratic control of the economy.” Note that this statement distinguishes socialism from both capitalist and communist concentrations of economic power.

The first constitution of DSOC, an American affiliate of the Socialist International, included the following: “The realization of humanity’s potential requires basic changes, among which are the *social* ownership and *democratic* control of the *decisive* means of production and distribution” (emphasis added). DSA, DSOC’s current embodiment, has repeatedly made it clear that it believes that “social ownership” can mean either public or cooperative or worker-owned or worker/community-owned forms of productive and distributive enterprise.

This book will discuss the ideas of Christians who have favored Marxist-Leninist forms of socialism, ideas of those who have interpreted Marx in a more democratic style, and, above all, ideas of those who have come to socialism from non-Marxist traditions rooted directly in Christian and democratic faith.

Christian faith, and especially those elements of it that would encourage a commitment to democratic socialism, is the concern of the first part of this book. This section calls on the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Fathers of the Church, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas More, and the more radical figures of the Protestant Reformation.

The second part of the book deals with the development of an explicit Christian socialism in Europe and America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, focusing on France, England, German-speaking Europe, and the United States. Latin America and liberation theology are treated only briefly, except for Gutiérrez, because much has already been written about them. Canada deserves a chapter of its own; I have tried to deal with it in chapter, “The Convergence of Socialism and Catholicism,” drawing on the writings and the thought of Gregory Baum.

In a book of this ambitious, arrogant scope, it is inevitable that much will be missed or neglected. Important books have not been read, but there comes a time when reading becomes the enemy of writing. Important countries and persons have not been mentioned, or have been dismissed too quickly. Whole continents—notably Africa and Asia—whose importance cannot be overesti-

mated, will be almost invisible. Among those omitted or neglected whom I particularly regret, the following stand out:

1. The Jesuit Reductions in Paraguay (1609–1767).
2. African Christian socialists like Julius Nyerere (1922– ), former president of Tanzania, who in his book *Ujamaa: The Basis of African Socialism* has eloquently expressed a key principle of Christian socialism:

The foundation, and the objective, of African socialism is the Extended Family. The true African socialist does not look on one class of men as his brethren and another as his natural enemies. He does not form an alliance with the “brethren” for the extermination of the “non-brethren.” He rather regards all men as his brethren—as members of his ever extending Family.<sup>1</sup>

I saw one day on the blackboard of an elementary school in the black ghetto of Boston this definition of *Ujamaa*, a Swahili word meaning “Cooperative Economics,” which is one of the seven principles of black consciousness: “To build and maintain our own stores, shops and other businesses and to profit together from them.” Put that together with Nyerere’s Extended Family and you have a pretty good working model.

3. Benigno (“Ninoy”) Aquino (1933–83), whose assassination led to the revolution that ended the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. In a 145-page document written in prison to defend himself against the military tribunal that condemned him to death Aquino wrote:

If I must be labeled I think I will fit the label of a Christian socialist best. My ideology flows with the mainstream of Christian democratic socialism as presently practiced in Austria, West Germany and the Scandinavian countries.... It grieves me profoundly to be carelessly branded a Communist by those who never bothered to understand the difference between communism and Christian socialism.<sup>2</sup>

4. Nicholas Berdyaev (1874–1948), an original supporter of the Russian Revolution whose criticisms of Bolshevism led to his exile from the Soviet Union. His books are among the best written on Christian social theory, in his case from a Russian Orthodox viewpoint.

5. Jacques Maritain (1882–1973), the French neo-Thomist who made Catholic social teaching intellectually respectable for a whole generation of Europeans and Americans.

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1. Cited by William Ebenstein and Edwin Fogelman, *Today's Isms* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980), p. 248.

2. *The Philippine Times*, May 18–24, 1978, p. 3.

6. George Lansbury (1859–1940), Arthur Henderson (1863–1935), and Sir Stafford Cripps (1889–1952), leaders of the British Labour Party whose strong religious convictions and impressive records, and lives, helped to keep the tradition of Christian socialism alive and well in that party.

I write from a bias that is, theologically, conservative Roman Catholic; politically, democratic with both lower case and capital “d’s,” and economically, socialist in the sense defined above by the Socialist International, with perhaps a stronger emphasis on worker cooperatives and a weaker one on public ownership. Within these biases I hereby contract to be as fair and objective as possible. This effort will not be a total success. In fact, several readers of the manuscript have already mingled their compliments with charges that my biblical bias is characterized by a sort of naive fundamentalism or is irrelevant to the book’s subject, or both.

Faced with such charges I duck behind Bible scholars like Pierre Benoit, director of the *École Biblique* in Jerusalem and author of *Jesus and the Gospel* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1973), and, for a Protestant view, the work of the Anglican theologian Alan Richardson, notably in *The Gospels in the Making: An Introduction to the Recent Criticism of the Synoptic Gospels* (London: 1938) and a shorter, sharper defense of the historical Jesus in Kegley and Bretall’s *Reinhold Niebuhr*, from which I quote in Chapter 10.

The conclusion of both Benoit and Richardson, speaking for the more rational defenders of the Gospels as authentic history, is that with all due respect and gratitude for the valid contributions of historical criticism, the claims for that school have gone far beyond reason. Richardson goes so far as to conclude:

The progress of New Testament research in the 20th century has utterly disposed of the liberal picture of Jesus as in any way historical. The liberal Jesus was a figment of the liberal imagination, the reflection of the liberal critic’s own face at the bottom of the well. . . . There is no need to practice deceptions, however pious, in the matter of the miracles of Jesus or in the matter of his Resurrection.<sup>3</sup>

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3. *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, ed. Charles Kegley and Robert Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1917), p. 226. Richardson, incidentally, an early English disciple of Niebuhr, is the author of a limerick which alone should qualify him as an exegete not to be taken lightly:

At Swanwick, when Niebuhr had quit it  
A young man exclaimed, “I have hit it!  
Since I cannot do right  
I must find out tonight  
The right sin to commit—and commit it.”

(Cited by Richard W. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* [New York: Pantheon, 1985], p. 181.)

Beyond Benoit and Richardson I rely on an old reporter's ear for the credibility of differing but honest witnesses, some sense of the essential agreements, and a certain gift of faith, which is, after all, not the least useful ingredient.

As for the charge that some concern for the question of Jesus' divinity is irrelevant to the subject of Christian socialism I must politely but vigorously disagree. Whether Jesus was divine or merely human does make a difference. If divine, then we must consider his ideas, and his commandments, very seriously. If merely human, the consideration loses a certain urgency, to put it mildly.

So this is an opinionated history, but all writing of history is by definition opinionated. One dictionary defines it as "a narrative, chronicle or record of events." Which events are included and which excluded depends on the opinion of the historian as to what is important or significant and what is not. This assumes, of course, that under "events" will fall the expression of ideas by various actors in the historical narrative. With this understanding, what follows are the events that, in the opinion of this historian, are most important and/or significant in the history of Christian socialism.

This account will feature a high ratio of direct quotation, which to some may be disturbing and excessive, but I have never trusted even my own competence to render another person's thought with anything like perfect fidelity.

There will be little additional information in the reference notes, mostly just the source of quotations, but one should not neglect them entirely. A few interesting items have been stored there.