

RELIGIOUS SOCIALISM



Faith in Action for a Better World

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Introduction

George Washington Woodbey was born into slavery in Johnson County, Tennessee, in 1854. He grew up to become a Baptist minister and, like most African Americans of his era, was loyal to the Republican Party of Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. Then, after careful study and listening to the speeches of Eugene V. Debs, Woodbey switched his allegiance to the Socialist Party.



Rev. George W. Woodbey

He became an immediate force. Woodbey moved to California and began delivering speeches about socialism to packed rented halls, churches, and even on street-corner soapboxes. “The general verdict is he has done more good for the cause than any of our most eloquent speakers who have preceded him,” the *Los Angeles Socialist* wrote in 1902.¹ After a series of speeches in Nebraska, an organizer said, “Omaha has never had the

¹ Philip S. Foner, “From Slavery to Socialism: George Washington Woodbey, Black Socialist Preacher,” in *Socialism and Christianity in Early 20th Century America*, ed. Jacob H. Dorn (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 66.

crowds who attended Woodbey's meetings."² Woodbey soon became known as "The Great Negro Socialist Orator."³

Woodbey went on to serve as a delegate to the 1904 and 1908 Socialist Party conventions, contribute articles to the *Christian Socialist* magazine, and publish a well-received pamphlet, *The Bible and Socialism*.⁴

But, like many religious socialists, Woodbey paid a price for his principles. On multiple occasions, his public speeches were interrupted by police who arrested and often beat him. Armed vigilantes stalked him.⁵ Woodbey lost his pulpit in the Mt. Zion Baptist church in San Diego over his advocacy for socialism, even though he had been attracting large crowds to the services.⁶

George Washington Woodbey was in a marginalized political minority. He didn't like it, but he knew how to change it. "Socialists cannot win without reaching the millions of working people who belong to various churches of the country," he wrote in the *Christian Socialist* in 1915.⁷

Reverend Woodbey was right in 1915, and he is right today.

This book is being written at an interesting time. For most of this nation's history, religious socialists made their case to a population that was, for the most part, hospitable to religion and resistant to socialism. Today, those trends are moving in opposite directions.

A majority of Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four now say they prefer socialism over capitalism.⁸

² Gary Dorrien, *The New Abolition: W.E.B. DuBois and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 459.

³ Foner, "From Slavery to Socialism," 67.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, 67–68, 81.

⁶ Dorrien, *The New Abolition*, 473.

⁷ Foner, "From Slavery to Socialism," 81.

⁸ Felix Salmon, "Gen Z Prefers 'Socialism' to 'Capitalism,'" *Axios*, Jan-

Their support helped Bernie Sanders win more votes in 2020 than any socialist presidential candidate in the nation's history. The Democratic Socialists of America's membership has swelled from 5,000 members in 2015 to over 80,000 at the end of 2020.⁹

At the same time, four in ten U.S. millennials say they are religiously unaffiliated, contributing to the rise in adults who do not identify with any religion.¹⁰ Yet, beneath those numbers lies a reality that would be familiar to Woodbey and all the U.S. religious socialists who preceded and followed him: apart from particular religious affiliation, seven in ten Americans still say religion is important to them. The percentage is even higher among Christians, who still make up far and away the majority of the nation's believers.¹¹ The constituency Woodbey spoke about, persons of color and working-class Americans, are more likely to attend church regularly than their White or wealthy counterparts. And they are more likely to hold favorable attitudes toward socialism.¹²

uary 27, 2019, <https://www.axios.com/socialism-capitalism-poll-generation-z-preference-1ffb8800-0ce5-4368-8a6f-de3b82662347.html>.

⁹ Democratic Socialists of America, Twitter post, "We are now EIGHTY THOUSAND members strong" @DemSocialists, November 9, 2020, 11:30 AM, <https://twitter.com/DemSocialists/status/1325838059506700292>.

¹⁰ Daniel Cox and Amelia Thompson-DeVeaux, "Millennials are Leaving Religion and Not Coming Back," *FiveThirtyEight*, Dec. 12, 2019, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/millennials-are-leaving-religion-and-not-coming-back/>; Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," *Pew Forum*, May 12, 2015, <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

¹¹ Megan Brenan, "Religion Considered Important to 72% of Americans," *Gallup*, December 24, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/245651/religion-considered-important-americans.aspx>.

¹² Pew Research Center, "Attendance at Religious Services" *Pew Forum*, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/attendance-at-religious-services/#demographic-information>; Pew Research Center, "Stark

Justice over Charity

Woodbey is a member of a determined group of Americans who, over the course of 150 years, has insisted that there is an unbreakable connection between their religious values and the political and economic system of socialism. To make their case, they have pointed to the grim, daily evidence of capitalism's failures.

Today, the United States is one of the wealthiest nations in human history yet with far higher poverty rates than similar countries. The disparity reveals itself through health insurance company CEO's making as much as \$83 million per year, while tens of millions of the nation's residents go without health care.¹³ It is shown by the richest Americans owning multiple homes, some worth as much as a quarter-billion dollars, while a half-million Americans are homeless.¹⁴ Three American men own more wealth than the bottom 50 percent of the nation's population combined.¹⁵ At the same time,

Partisan Divisions in Views of Socialism, Capitalism," Pew Forum, June 25, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/25/stark-partisan-divisions-in-americans-views-of-socialism-capitalism/>.

¹³ Evan Sweeney and Mike Stankiewicz, "Health Insurance CEOs Earned \$342.6M in 2017," FierceHealthcare, May 7, 2018, <https://www.fiercehealthcare.com/payer/ceo-pay-2017-342-million-unitedhealth-molina-cigna-aetna>.

¹⁴ Chris Morris, "Bel-Air Home Lists for \$225 Million, Making It the Most Expensive in America," *Fortune*, October 17, 2019, <https://fortune.com/2019/10/17/most-expensive-house-america-casa-encantada-gary-winnick-225-million/>; National Alliance to End Homelessness, "The State of Homelessness in America," End Homelessness (last visited Nov. 20, 2020), <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-report-legacy/#:~:text=There%20are%20an%20estimated%20553%2C742,people%20in%20the%20general%20population>.

¹⁵ Noah Kirsch, "The 3 Richest Americans Hold More than Bottom 50% of the Country, Study Finds," *Forbes*, November 9, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/noahkirsch/2017/11/09/the-3-richest-americans-hold-more-wealth-than-bottom-50-of-country-study-finds/#61994cb53cf8>.

one of every six children in America—12 million overall—live below the poverty line.¹⁶

Every faith tradition condemns this state of affairs. So does socialism. These faith traditions and socialism prescribe the same, straightforward remedy: all humans have the right to the necessities of life.

Note the word *right*. The capitalist U.S. system has survived its conflict with religious principles in significant part by projecting the illusion of caring about the suffering of the poor, while at the same time rejecting the recognition of any rights that would alleviate poverty. How is that tricky balancing act performed? By promising the U.S. public that the fortunate few will extend their charity to meet all the needs of the poor. If that promise is believed, massive concentrations of wealth do not seem so outrageous.

But that promise is a lie, demonstrated by the millions of American children going hungry while the wealthy luxuriate. Yet the false narrative persists, likely because it is so comforting to all of us who are not poor. In her 1998 book *Sweet Charity?*, the sociologist Janet Poppendieck concludes that the American preference for charity over public welfare programs relieves the pressure for more fundamental solutions. Charity, she writes, acts as a “moral safety valve.”¹⁷

From an individual perspective, that safety valve effect means that when we join in a walkathon for the homeless or make an online donation for a food bank, we are relieved from the burden of confronting the underlying injustice of a society

¹⁶ “New Census Data Reveals Continued Child Poverty Crisis in America,” Children’s Defense Fund, September 10, 2019, <https://www.childrens-defense.org/2019/new-census-data-reveals-continued-child-poverty-crisis-in-america/#:~:text=Almost%20one%2Dthird%20of%20the,children%20come%20from%20working%20families.>

¹⁷ Janet Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 9.

where great wealth exists alongside grinding poverty. As for our political engagement, high-profile donations of plutocrats make us less likely to demand curbs on their lavish wealth. Charity may not be very effective at alleviating injustice, but it is quite good at relieving our sense of outrage about it.

Much of that U.S. charity is delivered through faith-sponsored programs. Yet faith traditions uniformly agree that charity is no substitute for a system that treats basic needs as human rights. In this volume, you will hear from Muslim socialists who describe their faith's wealth redistribution system of *zakat*, prohibitions against wealth hoarding, and protection of the universality of natural resources. You will hear from socialist rabbis and lay Jews explaining how their tradition of *tzedakah* creates rights held by those who struggle for health care and housing.

And you will hear from socialist Christians insisting that Jesus's teachings mean, as St. Gregory said, "When we furnish the destitute with any necessity we render them what is theirs, not bestow on them what is ours. We pay the debt of justice rather than perform the works of mercy."¹⁸

The signs of the unemployed who marched during the Great Depression read, "Damn your charity—we want justice."¹⁹ Religion makes the same demand, with every bit as much passion. The response to that demand is socialism.

Faith in Action

Debs, the five-time Socialist Party presidential candidate and labor leader who inspired George Washington Woodbey, famously said, "Socialism is Christianity in action."²⁰ In these pages, socialist medical student Imaan Javeed says the same of

¹⁸ John C. Cort, *Christian Socialism: An Informal History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020), 56.

¹⁹ Cort, *Christian Socialism*, 192.

²⁰ Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs, Citizen and Socialist* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 165.

Islam. Socialist activist David Green says the same of Judaism. The philosopher Richard Rorty insisted that the term *Christian socialism* is a redundancy, a conclusion that could just as readily apply to Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism.²¹

Most of the voices in this volume are Christian, reflecting the predominance of that faith in the United States. But you will also hear equally passionate arguments for socialism echoed by Americans speaking from across the range of faiths and traditions. They point to nations comparable to the United States, where socialist influences have led to universal health care, progressive taxation, and comprehensive social services assuring safe housing and a minimum income. Compared to the United States, life in those countries is far closer to the kingdom of God on earth.

Socialism allows people of all major religions to fulfill their shared spiritual mandates to tangibly love and care for their sisters and brothers. In return, religion provides socialism with the antidote to the poison pill that has killed off generations of socialist political movements. That movement killer is the conflation of socialism with Marxism and communism, which are reliably labeled in the United States as authoritarian, violent, and atheistic.

Karl Marx argued that the state would inevitably wither away in the wake of a worker revolt. And it is true that many communist regimes—like many capitalist regimes, to be fair—have been authoritarian and repressive. But religious socialists are different. They have their own beliefs and tradition, which both predate Marxism and are distinct from it.

Religious socialists are democratic socialists. They agree with Marx's ground-breaking analysis of the way economic structures dominate all aspects of societies. They appreciate

²¹ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Press, 1999), 205.

Marx's descriptions of the devastating impact that capitalism wreaks on working people. But they part ways when it comes to Marx's antipathy to religion. And they firmly reject any interpretation of Marx that predicts political change will only come from violent revolution. For religious socialists, the ultimate instrument of reform is the ballot box, not the bullet.

So religious socialists focus their energy on exposing the ills of our broken American system and the urgent need to repair it through the democratic system. As the U.S. theologian and socialist Geoffrey Kurtz says, religious socialism doesn't just oppose capitalism, it offers a moral critique of it.²²

As Rev. Woodbey recognized back in 1915, that faith-based moral critique can translate into raw political power. And political power frightens those who defend our current state of affairs. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, a French police official is quoted as saying he is unconcerned by most revolutionaries. Religious socialists, though, were a different matter. "They are the people we are most afraid of. They are dreadful people! The socialist who is Christian is more to be dreaded than the socialist who is atheist."²³

No doubt the police official would feel the same about the Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist socialists who, alongside their Christian sisters and brothers, share their stories in this book. Enjoy reading about these dreadful, wonderful people.

²² Geoffrey Kurtz, "What Religious Socialists Bring to Our Table," DSA (April 7, 2019) <https://www.dsausa.org/democratic-left/what-religious-socialists-bring-to-our-table/>.

²³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: MacMillan, 1922), 65.