



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.

## FALL 2003

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# Religious Socialism

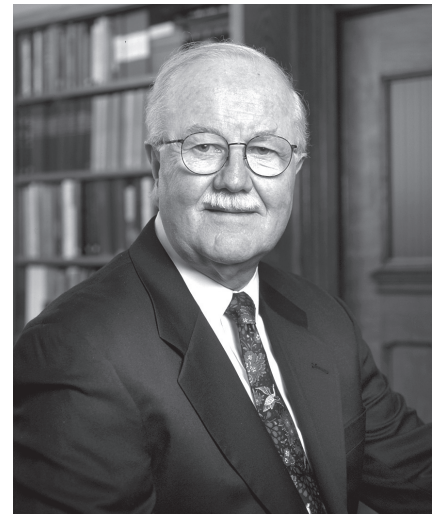
THE JOURNAL FOR PEOPLE OF FAITH AND SOCIALISM

## A Call for a New Reformation

JOSEPH C. HOUGH, JR.

*The International League of Religious Socialists has launched the Campaign Against Religious and Political Extremism, which was described in our last issue (Vol. 27, No. 2). This article is presented as a discussion starter in the spirit of that campaign.—EDS.*

The Reformation that Protestants usually celebrate is that moment when sweeping new forms of faith created a truly ecumenical Western Christianity. But the times call now for a powerful new reformation, a reformation of the triumphalist and exclusionary beliefs that characterized Christianity long before the great Protestant Reformation and continue to bedevil us today in the global village of religious pluralism.



Unfortunately, belief in the Protestant version of Christianity as the one, "true" Christianity has become deeply ingrained in American Christianity. If we include many Catholics, It is likely that a majority of American Christians still believe that "salvation" is possible only by faith in Jesus Christ (and for the most exclusionary and arrogant, only a particular version of faith in Jesus Christ).

A number of American Christians and Christian leaders in other parts of the world strongly oppose these exclusionary claims and urge religious tolerance. Such leaders have strong historical support. As early as the second century, Justin Martyr, who denounced Judaism as a false religion, nonetheless acknowledged that the "logos" made fully known in Jesus Christ was perceived and represented in certain non-Christian philosophers and especially among the Hebrew prophets. By the time of Thomas Aquinas, something like this position had been accepted as orthodox Christian belief. Thus, although Aquinas clearly believed that redemption comes only through Jesus Christ, he did not exclude others' being named "subordinate mediators" between God and humanity insofar as they prefigured Christ or those who—after the coming of

cont'd on page 3

## editor's notes

An Indian elephant sits on the dresser in my bedroom. It is brightly multi-colored, with bits of mirrors sewn among the embroidery. I'm not one for stuffed animals, and I would never have chosen this elephant, but I keep it because it was a gift from Dorothee Soelle and Jim Wallace, who, along with many other friends from the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee and the Religion and Socialism Commission, danced at my wedding more than two decades ago. The bedroom is also my home office, and the elephant is incongruous amid reference books, files, and stacks of political magazines.



Every time I look at it I remember Dorothee's comment to the effect that she thought we should have something that was fun and basically useless. I've made it my symbol for the need to lighten up as we go about our political work, to be open to the beauty around us even as we're weighed down by the misery we see everywhere. Dorothee was aware of that balance (see "Dorothee Soelle, Political Theologian *Par Excellence*," p. 6), and embodied it in her life and work (see "Remembering Dorothee," p. 9). Her death this past spring was a terrible loss to her family as well as to a political and religious community that stretched across continents. For a time in the 1970s and 1980s, when she taught at Union Theological Seminary, she played a large role in the Religion and Socialism Commission, writing often for this magazine, and we are pleased to reacquaint our readers with her contributions to political theology.

We went to Union Theological for more inspiration in this issue with Joseph Hough's call for a New Reformation. Hough has been rallying Protestant churches to retake the moral high ground in the fight for the poor and disenfranchised, to call into question the current administration's claim of "compassionate conservatism." Here, he extends perhaps an even greater challenge to Christians to call into question their ability to be heard in a pluralistic world while clinging to worldviews forged centuries ago.

Elsewhere in this issue, David O'Brien discusses John Cort's autobiography and the faith that informs our founding editor's hopeful energy; Jesse Leamon describes the founding of a Labor Church in Indianapolis; and an anonymous reader describes the peculiar tension of being in recovery with its emphasis on personal behavior and being a political activist with its emphasis on corporate behavior.

It's an eclectic mix, as are most issues of *Religious Socialism*. Many observers have noted that the most organized left in America is in faith communities. Because of U.S. pluralism, we are more ecumenical than groups of religious socialists in other countries. We occupy an interesting space on the U.S. and international left, and we want this magazine to take full advantage of that space with a wide range of articles.

Because of staff changes and the difficulty of putting out an all-volunteer publication, we were only able to publish three times in 2003. For the convenience of librarians and those who might wonder, ten years from now, whatever happened to No. 4, we're calling this issue Nos. 3 and 4. However, we will extend all subscriptions by one issue. But that won't stop us from asking you to renew now. We depend on our readers. We hope that in the new year you will **renew** your subscription,, **contribute** something extra, **give** a gift sub to a friend, and **write** for us or tell us of writers.

—Maxine Phillips



Religious Socialism  
536 W. 111 St. #37  
New York, NY 10025  
religioussocialism@socialist.org  
www.dsausa.org/rs

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### Editors

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Andrew Hammer  
Maxine Phillips

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UNION MADE  
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## A New Reformation

*cont'd from cover page*

God in Christ—shared in the ministry of reconciliation. Like Justin, Aquinas believed that the role of subordinate mediators was especially applicable to the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures. Even so, the knowledge of God available apart from God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ was not considered to be "true" knowledge of God, in that it was insufficient for the salvation of the human soul.

John Calvin named several sources for knowledge of God apart from Jesus Christ that could be available to all human beings, but he was clear that only in Jesus Christ could one gain "saving" knowledge of God. Martin Luther had similar views, though his later views on the Jews placed him close to the most arrogant and violent voices of our tradition.

The most influential of our twentieth-century theologians have not moved much beyond Aquinas and Calvin. While eschewing the worst of exclusionist rhetoric, they have conceded only that other faiths may be "lesser lights" (Karl Barth) or that representatives of other faiths can be saved because they are "Christians incognito" (Paul Tillich) or "anonymous Christians" (Karl Rahner). Generally, one could say that these theologians are quite "tolerant" of other traditions, especially as they are represented by the best of their faithful practitioners.

Although this broad tolerance avoids the worst of Christian exclusionist rhetoric, it still does not deal with the basic denial of the power of any religious tradition other than Christianity to inspire what Christians have called "saving faith." This more moderate posture does not label other religions as evil, and most Christians holding this view would denounce any violence in the name of their religion. On occasion, they will accord to certain representatives of other religions some "glimpse" of the true faith. Yet, in a pluralistic world, even this "tolerant" posture remains a problem. Tolerance is the prerogative of a dominant religion. For the non-Christian, it can be seen as arrogant, condescending, and insulting. The "tolerant" concession that there is some good in other religions remains a constant challenge to the Christian claim to be a peace-making people. Therefore, I believe that ultimately even the most tolerant exclusionist claim as the sole avenue to God's salvation runs counter to the spirit of the gospel of Jesus Christ. What is required in this time is a New Christian Reformation that moves us beyond tolerance toward genuine respect, or even reverence, for other great religious traditions.

How is this possible? How can Christians affirm the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as central while, at the same time, affirming the possibility of God's revelation to other faithful persons in different times and different places?

Christians need to re-interpret their own traditions. I begin with

my own. My father was a Southern Baptist minister all of his active adult life, so I was born into an exclusionist tradition. What theology we talked about was largely Calvinist, though Baptists clearly stand in the free-church traditions of the Reformation. I still affirm that tradition as my own, so I begin with Calvin, especially Calvin's doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty. Some have interpreted this only in terms of God's absolute power over the entire universe. I do not. Through the eyes of Karl Barth, a leading interpreter of Calvin, I see God's sovereignty manifested to us as God's absolute freedom to do and to be what God wills. Simply put, if God is sovereign over

all, then God is totally free, free even to come to human beings as a fellow human being. It is God's freedom that suggests the possibility of God making God's self known in Jesus Christ.

But there, according to Barth, God's freedom ends. For Barth, God is not finally free. God's self-revelation of hope for human salvation is limited to one tradition born at one time in one place in the world.

This is a curious ending for such a profound exposition of the divine freedom. If one follows the logic of God's freedom, should we not show some humility when making

claims about God's total activity of self-revelation in our own time and place? The most that Christians can claim in light of God's absolute freedom is that God's appearance in Jesus Christ is central and decisive for Christian faith and Christian hope for the future. We cannot claim to know all occasions of God's self-disclosure or God's manifold ways of redeeming the world.

A New Reformation will need to begin at the beginning. The foundation of Christian exclusionary claims was laid by the conflict between the Jewish followers of Jesus and other Jewish leaders during the first century C.E. What was at issue was the future of Israel, and the young Jesus movement found itself in conflict with a dominant rabbinic group. From the side of the rabbinic movement, after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., it was the Torah that now formed the basis for Jewish identity and mediated the continuing promise of God to redeem Israel. For the Jesus movement, the strongest of the Jewish apocalyptic movements, it was hope in the immanent return of a crucified and resurrected Jesus that was the future of God's promise for Israel. Both parties to the conflict were making strongly exclusionary claims. It is very important to remember that this was a conflict between Jewish worshippers of God.

### Mistaken Myths

By the end of the first century C.E., the new church had become predominately gentile, and that added further complications to the controversy. By and large, the new gentile converts were unaware that the exclusionary texts, particularly those in the Gospel of John, were the product of an internecine struggle over the future of Judaism, and that the rhetoric issuing from that conflict was directed by Jews in the Jesus movement toward their opponents who were also Jews. In the fledgling gen-

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**“Tolerance is the prerogative of a dominant religion. For the non-Christian, it can be seen as arrogant, condescending, and insulting.”**

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tile church that rhetoric was soon transformed into a totalizing anti-Jewish rhetoric, and the killing of Jesus by the Romans was re-attributed to all Jews. Thus was born the “Christ-killer” myth, a myth based on mistaken history and mistaken textual interpretation. By the end of the second century, anti-Judaism and the “Christ-killer” myth had become prominent in the teachings of all major leaders in the church. The horrendous subsequent history of Christian treatment of the Jews is well known. Many Christian groups, both Catholic and Protestant, have begun to insist that, in light of that history, our traditional exclusionary claim to God’s salvation is subject to serious theological and moral questioning. Indeed, if the exclusionary position on redemption is based on textual misinterpretations and a historical mistake, we must now reject the mistaken history and textual interpretation that gave it birth. The Jews did not kill Jesus, and the covenant that God made with the Jews for their salvation was *never abrogated*.

But the awful effects of the Christian exclusionary claim to salvation have not been confined to the persecution and killing of Jews. We have mounted deadly crusades against Muslims, and Christians have killed other Christians in internecine wars of religion. Until this murderous and arrogant history is faced with a genuine spirit of repentance; until Christians confess that their exclusionary theology has led Christian groups, church leaders, and churches as a whole to unspeakable sins against other Christians, other religions, and against God; there can be no possibility for the church to be an unequivocal force for peace and justice in a pluralistic age. This is why a New Reformation is essential.

A second element in a New Reformation is the recognition that religion is a social construction. *Faith is distinct from religion*. Faith is a response to the vision of the transcendent one or the vision of a transforming way. For the Christian, faith is a response of trustful obedience to God. It is inspired by the self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ, and that self-disclosure is, as H. Richard Niebuhr put it, the “special occasion” of human history “that illuminates everything else in our history.” Such faith is belief in the promise of human fulfillment and salvation. It is trust in God to redeem the world in every way.

The response of faith to revelation gives rise to religion. When we try to explain our faith or prescribe the practices of faith, we create religion. We have only the linguistic and conceptual tools available that are culturally and socially specific to us. Even words such as “salvation,” “redemption,” and “promise” carry their own set of culturally mediated meanings. Religion, therefore, is comparable to other inspiring and inspired activities of human creativity such as our greatest art and music. It is capable of being expressed only in the beliefs and

practices that are conceivable at a particular place and time.

Like all cultural manifestations, religion changes over time. Christians have come to understand the growing variety of religious expressions of faith as a sign

of vitality, as established churches adapt to new and different cultural settings. Even the clash of these expressions has given rise to reform of old religious belief and practices and has given birth to new and exciting religious practices and beliefs within world Christianity. A new Christian theology of religion begins with the assumption that the possibility of even greater vitality stands before us in the form of religious pluralism.

Another element in a New Reformation will be the development of a deeper understanding of religious traditions other than our own. We can hardly evaluate the potential power of another religious tradition if we know nothing about it, and extensive literature is available for us to read and to teach in our churches. There are

also exemplary practitioners of religion whom we should engage personally in an effort to understand their practices. Such encounters have been a major stimulus for my own move toward a new Christian Reformation.

There is yet another step to be taken toward a new Christian Reformation, and here I have been deeply influenced by three important leaders in the discussion of Christianity and religious pluralism. Two of them are my former colleagues at Claremont Graduate University, John B. Cobb, Jr., and John Hick. The third is Harvard religion professor Diana Eck. Like most Christian theologians, these three believe that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is central and decisive for their own Christian faith. But all of them strongly affirm that other religious traditions point to some ultimate reality that is beyond human selves and communities, that are genuine responses to divine revelation. These visions of transcendent reality and the resulting religious practices are as different as human cultures are. But they offer genuine transforming (saving) faith to those who are believers and who practice faithfully the best of their traditions.

## Rejuvenating Christianity

A new Christian Reformation must go even further than mutual recognition of the “saving” power (in their own terms) of other religions. Cobb, for example, believes that the incorporation of insights and practices from other traditions enriches Christian faith and practice. The result could well be a more vital Christian belief and practice.

This does not imply that all religions are equal *for me*. I am a committed Christian, but I am a Christian who strongly be-

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**“Until Christians confess that their exclusionary theology has led Christian groups, church leaders, and churches as a whole to unspeakable sins against other Christians, other religions, and against God, there can be no possibility for the church to be an unequivocal force for peace and justice in a pluralistic age.”**

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believes that God is working everywhere in exciting ways that I do not yet even know to redeem the world. I believe that there is ample evidence in the world's religions that God's work is effective, that people have been and are being transformed, and that their religious practices include compassion, justice, and peace. Wherever there is peace and movement toward peace—wherever there is justice and movement toward justice, the spirit of God is present and working. God is fully at work to redeem the world wherever there are faithful practitioners of religious traditions who live with compassion toward other people, who live responsibly toward the world, and who enhance the human community. And I believe that the testimony of the saints from other traditions is true. They have embraced the One or the Way of redemption and spiritual

fulfillment, and bear that testimony. It is not my responsibility to convert them. My responsibility is to listen with genuine respect and anticipation that I have much to learn from others who seek the way of spiritual fulfillment in their own traditions. With that in mind, I am also responsible to share what I have seen in Jesus Christ, a presence of the spirit of God who loves the world and its people and who is at work to bring to all of the whole creation a manifest vision of love, hope, peace, and fulfillment.

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*Joseph Hough, Jr., is president of Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Another version of this article appeared in Union Seminary Quarterly Review, v. 56, 2002, No. 3-4.*

## A Letter to our Readers

Our last issue reported that *RS* was in need of help from comrades in order to continue in the way we have all become accustomed. I'm happy to say in this issue that help has arrived, after a frank and constructive meeting of our Commission's Executive Committee. The *RS* you will see over the coming months will be a more collective effort, involving the labor of some familiar faces who have come together to help our modest publication carry on. John Cort, who seems to have a boundless supply of energy, has agreed to share the editing duties throughout the year, as well as the mailing. Maxine Phillips has agreed to take on the responsibility of production of the issues themselves. I have been freed from my graphic and layout work in order to focus on writing for the publication.



And we want to express our thanks to those readers who responded to our call with articles and ideas for the future.

The year 2004 is going to be one of the most important in American political history. One can argue that the current administration is the most regressive in that history, and in fact, DSA Vice-Chair Harold Meyerson pointed out a few months ago in the *Washington Post* that although political historians have spilled a lot of ink attempting to find the perfect past analogue to the Bush administration, the most accurate comparison would be to the administration of Jefferson Davis. We're in trouble, folks, if you didn't already realize how very serious it is.

Many of us on the left have been bemoaning the attacks by Republicans on all of the gains of the Clinton years; more of us have mourned the loss of all the remnants of the Great Society. But what we all have now come to understand is that the continuation of this regime means the destruction of everything accomplished by the Roosevelt administration. Social security, public schools and utilities, national parks, and any federal regulation of anything not related to law enforcement and national security. . . all are now on the chopping block. We're in trouble, and you had better grab onto any even remotely pos-

sible coalition partner where you live, to work for the change of this regime.

Bob Dylan wrote, "you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows." By the same token, no one need be a political scientist to observe that although previous years brought all kinds of flirtations with third party candidacies, no matter who was in the White House, this year almost no one on the left with a modicum of sanity and genuine concern for the working class is suggesting that quixotic and self-absorbed option. We're in trouble, and if there ever was a time for the left to form a united front against a common enemy in this country, it is now.

It's not because beating Bush will mean that his replacement will usher in a new dawn of American progressivism. Barring a miracle, the Congress will remain Republican. But any king has his court, and the end of King George II means the end of Halliburton, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Negroponte, and all the rest of the cronies who are where they are because he's in the throne.

Yet we religious types are supposed to believe in miracles, and one particular one comes to mind. Two thousand years ago, the Maccabees raised an army against and defeated a much larger and more powerful Assyrian army that had hijacked their temple for their own purposes, and had set about defiling all the things they held sacred. Forget the eight day flame for a moment — this larger story is at the heart of the holiday of Hanukkah, which Jews commemorate by the singing of the song *Ma'oz Tzur* (Rock of Ages). One of the English translations of this song contains the following phrase:

*Yours the message cheering, That the time is nearing, Which will see all men free, Tyrants disappearing.*

What a miracle it would be if by the end of next year, we could at least see our own tyrants disappearing.

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*Andrew Hammer is a co-editor of Religious Socialism.*

# Dorothee Soelle: Political Theologian *Par Excellence*

NORM FARAMELLI

On April 27, Dorothee Soelle died at the age of 73. With her passing, the world lost a gifted theologian political activist, poet, and spiritual leader who championed the cause of democratic socialism built upon religious foundations. Soelle was a German by birth, but her outlook was that of a world citizen. From 1975 to 1987 she was visiting professor of theology at Union Seminary in New York City and was involved in many progressive movements in the United States, including Democratic Socialists of America and one of its predecessor organizations, the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee. Soelle left us a great legacy that we can celebrate, even as we are diminished by her death.



## Political Theologian

Soelle must first be understood in the context of the political theology that emerged in Europe in the sixties and seventies, a movement that grew in parallel to the Liberation Theology movements in North and Latin America. Political theology in Europe was deeply influenced by the events of World War II (and particularly the Holocaust).

Three of the major figures in political theology were Jurgen Moltmann, Johannes Metz, and Dorothee Soelle. All three grew up in Nazi Germany. Metz (a Roman Catholic) and Moltmann (a Lutheran) were both drafted into the German army toward the end of World War II, at the ages of 16 and 18, respectively; experienced the horrors of war; and ended as prisoners of war. Soelle was a teenager during the war, and although she did not serve in the military, she lived with the disasters of World War II and with the legacy of the Nazi regime. For all three, the horrors of war, the significance of Auschwitz, and the depths of human suffering shaped their theologies. That is, the struggle for peace and justice, rooted in human suffering, formed the basis for political theology. Soelle, like Moltmann, was a Lutheran, deeply influenced by Luther's emphasis on the incarnation and the "theology of the cross."

Soelle's first major works were in this area were *Political Theology* (1974) and *Suffering* (1975). Political theology, like Latin American and black liberation theologies, is rooted in *praxis*; that is, the theologian is engaged socially and politically in the issues that s/he addresses. S/he engages in social action and then reflects upon that activity. By that definition, Soelle was a political theologian *par excellence*. She truly understood the meaning of *praxis* and lived it. In addition, she sought ways to integrate the work of Latin American liberation theologians

with European political theology, as seen in her *Stations of the Cross: A Latin American Pilgrimage* (1993).

## Democratic Socialist, Political Activist

Despite the prominence she gained in academia, Soelle was never content with being solely an academic theologian or, for that matter, with simply being a political theologian. For instance, she made significant contributions in feminist and ecological theology. In addition, Soelle was a vocal and visible antiwar and political activist in the seventies and eighties. She was deeply moved by the horrors of the Vietnam War, and was a fervent critic of American imperialism and the consumerist culture—especially a "culture of death" that she believed manifested itself in the endless arms race and the corresponding neglect of the poor. In the two books she wrote in 1983 (*On War and Love* and *The Arms Race Kills Even Without War*) Soelle recognized and named the folly of endless military spending and the corresponding depletion of funding for the poor.

Soelle was deeply influenced by Marxist social analysis, but never accepted Marx's views on religion. She was committed to a socio-economic analysis that uncovered the inherent contradictions in contemporary economies and identified the agents of change to develop economic alternatives. She saw the alienation of workers from both the product and the meaning of their work. In 1978, she set forth her views on democratic socialism in *Beyond Mere Dialogue: On Being Christian and Socialist*. In this work, Soelle addresses sin and alienation, cross and class struggle, and resurrection and liberation.

In *To Work and To Love: A Theology of Creation* (written with Shirley Cloyes in 1984), Soelle said that the book emerged "out of my own struggle to agree with God and to learn to praise creation." The book was "an attempt to affirm our being created and becoming creators, being liberated and becoming agents of liberation, being loved and becoming lovers."

## Integrating Feminist and Ecological Theology

Soelle was deeply critical of a consumer mentality that paid little attention to the natural order, other than to see it as a source of natural resources to be exploited exclusively for human use. As her career developed, she increasingly directed her efforts to ecological and feminist concerns. (In 1994 she wrote the narrative to *Great Women in the Bible in Art and Literature*.) She saw the connections between gender and ecology. That is, gender inequality and environmental destruction are all part of the same mind-set. But Soelle had a knack for integrating these issues, as if they formed a unified web. In 1984 she wrote *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian*

*Feminist Identity*, in which she brought together issues of religion and life, politics and personal identity, feminism and liberation theology. She consistently noted that it is the same dehumanizing elements that combine to oppress both men and women.

In addition to integrating feminist and ecological thinking, Soelle consistently warned of the false splits between mind and body, the personal and the social, and the spiritual and the political. In this regard, her work is more biblical than that of most academic theologians, who compartmentalize and are comfortable making these sharp distinctions. For Soelle, those dichotomies are distortions of the gospel message. This integration was greatly assisted by her own involvement in social/economic/political issues. For her, theology was not a head trip. It is to Soelle's work as spiritual mentor in a political context that we now turn.

## Spiritual Foundations

One of Soelle's latest works (written in collaboration with Louise Schottroff) was *Jesus of Nazareth*. (2002). In this work, one can see Christian theologians grappling with the serious problems of anti-Semitism. The book was written to address "centuries of Christian Anti-Judaism." This theme was one of the pillars of political theology that played a significant role throughout Soelle's life.

But Soelle also served as spiritual mentor to many and fostered a resistance theology. This theme did not suddenly emerge in her later years. The connection between spirituality and political resistance permeated all of her works.

In 1977, Soelle wrote *Revolutionary Patience* (which contained her poem "The Long March," in the accompanying box). Waiting for God is an essential part of being engaged in political action. In one her most insightful works *On Earth as In Heaven: A Liberation Spirituality of Sharing* (1993), Soelle addresses the poor and dispossessed, social vision, biblical roots and social transformation. One chapter in this book is "must reading" for all religious socialists — "Moses, Jesus and Marx: Utopians in Search of Justice." Soelle warns us not to celebrate the apparent triumph of democratic capitalism over other economic alternatives until we find adequate ways to address the issues of the poor. In the last paragraph she writes,

If we allow the dream that the hungry will be satisfied to be prohibited, then we have separated ourselves from God, or in any case the God of the Bible. . . . There is something ineradicable about faith, hope and love. One may criticize the anthropology of previous socialism for being too optimistic. However, the cynical anthropology of real existing capitalism is unbearable for the spiritually gifted. Present reality is not everything! A transcendence stirs within us that cannot be satisfied. Even an economically stable capitalism will not succeed in smothering that stirring. For God wants to believe in us, to hope in us, and to become one with us in love.

Three more of Soelle's works are particularly worth noting: (1) *Window of Vulnerability: A Political Spirituality* (1990) utilizes the works of feminist and third-world liberation theo-

## Excerpts from THE LONG MARCH

(from Dorothee Soelle's *Revolutionary Patience*, Orbis Books, 1977)

Perhaps we pictured things too simply  
way back when we set out  
on the long march through the desert  
to find better ways to live with each other

O lord we thought let us become  
instruments of your peace  
but what followed was  
tiresome conflict with authorities  
who want order not peace  
the daily struggle for small victories  
and the terrible sense of being abandoned  
then the instruments of peace  
became disruptive and tiresome obstacles  
to harmonious accord

Many have known all along  
that nothing can be done from within the church  
who can live on manna year after year  
if he sees no point in what he's doing

Many are fed up and wish they were back in egypt  
where tithes flowed like milk and honey  
and the churches were filled and the hymns rang out  
loud and clear because everybody knew them

How much longer is this march to last  
what does that mean forty years  
is it only our generation that will be squandered  
or the next one too and what for  
can the goal justify a whole lifetime  
of work and conferences  
will we ever get beyond numbness  
nothing but sand and stones no human beings  
who will stick with us in our work  
help us speak clearly and openly

We receive little help from below  
are seldom understood by our peers  
and those above fall back on the old trick  
of deeming any substantive question  
a breach of discipline  
that's how they assert their authority maintain order  
and keep away from the pulpit  
the crude speech of the common people

The desert through which we wander  
restless fearful  
impotent confused

O lord make us instruments of your peace  
instruments of conflict not harmony  
instruments of truth not obfuscation  
instruments of happiness not stupefaction

Let's see if that can't be done

gies. Soelle critiques Western culture, which she views as suicidal with its militarism and environmental destruction. She rejects our current personal and corporate preoccupation with security and envisions a new culture of vulnerability—grounded in faith as resistance, a faith that is “saturated with a deep love of life.”

(2) In *Creative Disobedience* (1995), Soelle shows how German obedience to the will of the Nazis led to the destruction of six million Jews. She also notes how the church’s desire for unquestioning subservience has led many who claim to be Christian to participate in the oppression of others. She also shows how women’s obedience to men throughout history has caused numerous experiences of conflict, powerlessness, and misery.

(3) In one of her later works, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (2001), Soelle claims that this book is an expression of working for justice in a world steeped in consumerism, economic inequalities, ecological destruction, and global chaos. Soelle’s own dedication was formed out a need to hold together various issues in unity as resistance against the machine of death and destruction. Soelle shows how the work of Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., challenge us to a practice of nonviolence as a means of celebrating the unity of all living beings. Soelle notes “to be aware of the ‘silent cry’ in our world means to become one with it.” In the introduction, she writes, “My questioning is focused on social reality. This means that for the sake of what is within, I seek to erase the distinction between a mystical *internal* and a political *external*.”

In the final section, Soelle speaks of “Mysticism Is Resistance.” She makes a powerful case for the inextricable linkage between mysticism and political action. In our age, says Soelle, mysticism “still names our poverty and reminds us still of the power in us that holds together and heals. Religion still speaks of the sanctity of life for all that we can locate in love.”

For her, linking the personal to the social, and the spiritual and religious foundations with political action was central to the work of all religious socialists.

### Focus On Justice

I want to conclude this tribute to Soelle with a reference to an address she made in the political night prayer at St. Katherine’s Church in Hamburg, Germany, one week after the 9/11 attack in 2001. Soelle said,

We live in a cycle of violence and are caught in it. Our prison is the best furnished in world history. Still we are captive in the cycle of violence producing counter-violence. Terror demands counter-terror raising the first terror to another level. Is there no freedom any more to break through the circle? Must we remain spectators when violence increases daily and threatens the lives of the majority of people, fellow-creatures and our mother earth?

She ends the address with this statement:

Rebelling for peace means today “Rebelling for justice.” Justice is the basic condition for peace. In 1983 I was in Vancouver for the World Council of Churches World Assembly. People from the South called our attention to the sequence. Justice and peace belong together but justice comes first.

Globalization from above is a barbaric system of impoverishment of the majority of humankind and destruction of the earth.

We need a different economic globalization from below in the interest of the earth and the interest of the poorest.

Rest in peace Dorothee Soelle. You have graced us with your presence and your multiple gifts. You have reminded us that religious socialism contains two essential components—spirituality and political engagement. Even as we mourn your loss, we rejoice in the great legacy that you left us.

---

*Norman Faramelli is an Episcopal priest and longtime member of the DSA Religion and Socialism Executive Committee. He teaches Social Ethics at Boston University and serves as a consultant to religious institutions.*

## MAJOR WORKS OF DOROTHEE SOELLE IN ENGLISH

2002 *Jesus of Nazareth* (with Luise Schottroff), Westminster John Knox Press

2001 *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, Fortress Press

1999 *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian*

1995 *Creative Disobedience*, Pilgrim Press

1995 *Theology for Skeptics*, Fortress Press

1994 *Great Women of the Bible in Art and Literature*, Eerdmans

1993 *On Earth as in Heaven: A Liberation Spirituality of Sharing*, Fortress Press

1993 *Stations of the Cross: A Latin American Pilgrimage*, Fortress Press

1990 *Window of Vulnerability: A Political Spirituality*, Fortress Press

1990 *Thinking About God*, Trinity Press International (London)

1986 *Hope for Faith: A Conversation with C.F. Beyers*, World Council of Churches Publications, (Geneva)

1985 *Not Just Yes and Amen: Christians with a Cause* (with Fulbert Steffensky), Fortress Press

1984 *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity*, Westminster Press

1984 *To Work and to Love: A Theology of Creation* (with Shirley Cloyes), Fortress Press

1983 *On War and Love*, Orbis Press

1983 *The Arms Race Kills Even Without War*, Fortress Press

1982 *Beyond Mere Obedience*, Pilgrim Press

1981 *Choosing Life*, Fortress Press  
 1978 *Death by Bread Alone: Texts and Reflections on Religious Experience*, Fortress Press  
 1978 *Beyond Mere Dialogue: On Being Christian and Socialist*, Earl Lectures, American Christians Toward Socialism

1977 *Revolutionary Patience*, Orbis Press  
 1975 *Suffering*, Fortress Press  
 1974 *Political Theology*, Fortress Press  
 1967 *Christ the Representative: Essay on Theology After the Death of God.*, Fortress Press.

# Remembering Dorothee Soelle

BY JIM WALLACE

I think that I first became aware of Dorothee in the summer of 1976. I was in Goettingen, Germany, to do research, having left the Max Planck Institute for Flow Research there the year before to take a faculty position at the University of Maryland. I was struggling to free myself from the theological constraints of my evangelical youth, and I saw a television program about this engaging woman referred to as “die Rote Dorothee” — the red Dorothee. I was taken by her quiet, thoughtful, yet radical way of talking about the Christian faith and its political implications. When I got back to Washington and found out that she was spending each spring semester in New York at Union Theological Seminary, I wrote to her. By that time I had gotten involved with one of DSA’s predecessor organizations, the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee and its Religion and Socialism Commission. I told her about these activities and suggested that we get together sometime when I came to Manhattan. To my surprise, she replied that she would be happy to meet with me. During the following year, I read several of her books, including *Political Theology*, *Atheistically Believing in God*, and *Fantasy and Obedience*. The latter I found particularly freeing.

By the spring of 1978 some other religious socialists and I had planned a public event in Washington for which Dorothee agreed to be the speaker. So I met her for the first time that year in late April, 25 years to the weekend before she died. She seemed so small and vulnerable as she got off the plane. After her lecture that evening we talked about theology and literature (her dissertation was called “Realization – A Study of the Relationship between Theology and Literature after the Enlightenment”). I told her



about a book of Faulkner’s correspondence that I was reading and discovered that she shared my love for his stories and novels. The next day we visited the Sojourners Community and the Hirshorn sculpture garden, and on Sunday she preached at my Methodist church in Georgetown. By the end of the weekend we were at the beginning of an intense friendship. Some weeks later I wrote a little poem about her visit.

I thought I knew her through her books  
 that rang and gnawed within me,  
 speaking of Jesus who is, of God who is  
 and isn’t, who could happen  
 of Chile, Hue’ and of morning.

I thought I knew her as she slipped  
 from that Eastern shuttle passage  
 unrecognized,  
 small, I thought, almost fragile  
 (oh was I to learn!)  
 and I encapsulated her in professorial prison garb.

I thought I knew her as she stood  
 the erudite professor  
 speaking on the platform of Aristotle and aesthetics  
 and I? I basked before my friends in her reflected sunlight.

I didn’t know her until she sat  
 girl-like on my couch and smiled  
 with those shy eyes betraying no fragility  
 and we talked of different things  
 of friends and foes and even  
 of William Faulkner.

I began to know her when she wrote  
 and called me Amigo and even later  
 tongue in cheek, Professor  
 and from these heights of high philosophy  
 she challenged me to solve  
 the mystery by summing up five numbers.

We saw a lot of each other in the next five years. I often visited her in New York or she would visit me in Washington. She was a woman of extraordinary moral passion and creative power, which she brought to bear in her theological work and in her political organizing. Some of her best writing, I think, is

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her poetry. Unfortunately, only the first of her six books of poetry has been translated into English. To illustrate her gift, I want to translate a poem that she wrote transforming an experience I once told her about on the phone:

As Jacob lost his little brown leather book with the addresses and telephone numbers of the past ten years

As Jacob for four hours long searched high and low he thought about the woman in the gospel who lost her coin without which she didn't know how she could go on

He was shocked by the irritation and concentration with which he searched when he remembered that the story about the coin is a parable for the Kingdom of God that we should seek with at least as much effort as for a lost notebook.  
(Learning to Fly 24)

In the week after Dorothee first visited me in Washington she wrote,

I had wanted to show you the magnolias on Broadway and go with you to the old jeweler on 123st who will repair my bracelet out of sympathy don't I speak German?

What is beautiful lives quickly here perhaps we won't have time

for the short New York springtime when we listen to the refugees who must be freed from their stories but who can't be freed from their fear


The students have given me a cross someone murdered in Chile had worn it now it is with me for a while

I had wanted to show you the magnolias in bloom between the railway tracks and would have gone with you to friends who live for a while with the refugee

I believe less and less in happiness that only belongs to two and more and more in that short shared happiness in the stories that emerge out of the cellars and camps the magnolia blossoms on the railway tracks.  
(Learning to Fly 17)

On a lovely spring day late last April I said good-bye to Dorothee at a cemetery in Hamburg next to a military installation where she often staged protests. I found a few fallen magnolia petals to leave on her grave. I miss her greatly. But as she would recall about Joe Hill in talking with me about the meaning of the resurrection, she is "alive as you and me."

*Jim Wallace is a former co-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.**

Yes, I want to join the Democratic Socialists. Enclosed are my dues (includes a subscription to *Democratic Left*) of:

- \$50 (sustainer)
- \$35 (regular)
- \$15 (low income/student)

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY/STATE/ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE \_\_\_\_\_

E-MAIL \_\_\_\_\_

UNION/SCHOOL/ORGANIZATION \_\_\_\_\_

Send to:

**DSA**  
 180 Varick St., 12th floor  
 New York, NY 10014  
 212-727-8610  
 212-727-8616 (fax)  
 e-mail: [dsa@dsausa.org](mailto:dsa@dsausa.org)  
 web: [www.dsausa.org](http://www.dsausa.org)

# New Light Through Old Windows: The Labor Church Yesterday and Today

JESSE LEAMON

An ancient motto of the Benedictine order states, *Orare est labore, laborare est orare* (To work is to pray, to pray is to work). The first paid employment I put my hand to was bussing tables at a Howard Johnson's restaurant. Somewhere between the castaway string potatoes, fried clams, and coleslaw I found God. If you don't think a person can find God in food then think for a moment about any potluck you ever attended—the food, the labor and the Lord were a triumvirate. When the church gathers for a meal, the feasting is the fulfillment, but it is labor that made the meal. Someone planted the food, tended the food, inspected the food, picked the food, hauled the food, purchased the food, prepared the food, and cleaned away the remains when the meal was finished. In one church meal we have the AFL-CIO joined with the Spirit, the Ag-industry, the farm laborers, the United Food and Commercial Workers, the longshoremen, the longshorewomen, the Teamsters, the sanitation workers.



The Indianapolis Labor Church (ILC) literally grew from anti-Second Iraq War protests in Indianapolis. We have close ties with the Indianapolis Peace and Justice Center and worship at the local AFSCME building, and our members include members of Veterans for Peace, Jobs with Justice, and various left political groups. ILC works from the ethic "an injury to one is an injury to all" and finds inspiration in the history of socialism, including the great socialist thinker Jesus of Nazareth.

We worship in a pastoral, not silent, Quaker tradition. The Midwestern Wesleyan Quaker services include two hymns, a three-point sermon, a period of "open worship" where anyone can speak, and a poem at the end.

For music we have to rely on a boom box and hymnals donated by another congregation. Hymns are traditional Christian with occasional Billy Bragg and Anne Feeney interludes. My daughter's oboe sheet-music stand was recently replaced by a home-made wooden pulpit. My wife is doing the children's story and we're passing a can for an offering plate, or better yet, maybe we'll start using a Kucinich 2004 baseball cap for subtle candidate endorsement that flies under the Federal 501(c)(3) tax-exempt radar!

We are trying to keep it simple. I don't want to scare off the people who are strongly resistant (and in many cases rightly so) to Christianity. That is the hardest part of our beginning, because for some people the Labor Church is too religious and for others it isn't religious enough. We're very much on the cusp between the sacred and the secular.

One key difference between the ILC and other "faith/labor coalitions" is that we're trying to actually have a "labor church" instead of a "labor and church coalition." The "labor and church coalitions" do good work, but too often the commitment begins and ends with a Labor Day sermon on "Jesus the Carpenter." We need that, but we can't build up the house of labor by preaching a Jesus-the-Carpenter sermon once a Labor Day.

A great benefit of faith/labor coalitions is bringing in churches for leverage to assist a union drive. Workers at Brylane (the New York based catalog firm) won a union drive with this tactic in Indianapolis. They just skipped the election and went straight for community pressure and card check. They got the recognition. How can you have a "fair election" for a union after the company has terrorized the voters? Can you get a free and fair election after a dictator has terrorized the public? After Florida, there shouldn't be any illusions about the use of intimidation at the ballot box. The right wing does it every day of the year in union drives. Why not national campaigns?

ILC hopes to minister to union families 365 days a year and to develop pro-labor congregations from the roots up, so people can grow up with moral principles that are pro-solidarity. A "campaign" is a poor way to discover organized labor. What does the campaign say to someone who has no background in labor? It conveys the message that "Unions are hostile, and ask you to put your family income on the line for what?" People need to discover the left in a softer environment, and in an environment where they can hear a message of progress continuously.

Our mission is to *create a culture of solidarity*. The problem with labor is not that it doesn't run good campaigns. The problem with labor is that campaigns are not enough. We have to conquer the culture. It's a culture war, and if the left loses the churches, the schools, the institutions, then it has *lost*. Period. We have to find ways to institutionalize our gains. We protested the war a lot in Indianapolis, but what happens when the protest is over? We vented our spleens, blew off a lot of hot air, and have the used picket signs to show for it. Protests aren't institutions. Protests aren't cultures.

Somewhere in my theological studies I read that Jesus died to "take away the curse." I wondered, "If Jesus died to abolish the curse, why is the curse so much with us?" Didn't Jesus venerate the lilies of the field that do not toil? Then I read about John Trevor and the nineteenth-century British Labor Churches.

## Labor Church Movement

The labor church movement grew out of the social chaos of the European Industrial revolution, springing from the same soil that gave rise to the Salvation Army. John Trevor, a former

Unitarian minister, founded the Labor Church with the first service in Manchester in October 1891. A movement began to grow as labor churches were established in many industrial cities including Leeds, London, and Birmingham.

Inspired by Christian socialism, Trevor and his followers believed that the labor movement was instrumental in achieving God's Kingdom on earth. Many British religious leaders advocated socialism in the cause of labor (**Editor's note:** See chapter eight of John Cort's *Christian Socialism* for an expanded discussion of Christian socialism in England). When the Independent Labor Party was formed in Bradford, Trevor organized a church service for the event. It was estimated that more than 5,000 people attended the service. Trevor began publishing a monthly magazine, *The Labor Prophet*, in January 1892. It was replaced by the quarterly *Labor Church Record*. The motto "God is our King" later changed to "Let labor be the basis of civil society." After Trevor fell ill, the Labor Church union dissolved, some became "socialist churches," some died, and still others were reorganized.

As I learned about the Labor Church movement, it occurred to me that Trevor's notion of the "Kingdom of God" was much broader than contemporary Christianity's in either its Protestant or Catholic variants. A thorough examination of Trevor's Labor Church theology has never been written, but we might call it "Edenic Restoration Theology." Unlike Protestants who believed in returning to the Early Church as a model of restoration, or the Catholic Counter-Reformers who believed in purifying but preserving the existing order, Trevor believed that a return to Christ was an experiential state in which the wall between the sacred and the secular became translucent. The Kingdom of God for Trevor was a spiritual state in which divinity is seen in the fields and the work of the shepherds, where God is experienced in the material world and the material world experienced in God, where eternity and the temporal grain of time are one.

But "experiential religion" in the Labor Church sense is closer to the Quaker or Unitarian than the Pentecostal or Charismatic understanding because Trevor saw the Kingdom of God in social terms, not individualistic ones. He was part of the "socialist Sunday school" movement, and the idea of lopping off the "socio-political" from Christian concern and endeavor would

have been to him entirely preposterous. If Christ had no politics, then he was no prophet, because the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures were very critical about the social issues of their day, including condemning the ruling classes who defended the existing social order of economic exploitation and oppression.



When Christ said, "Come unto me you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest, for my burden is light" he was speaking as one un-cursed, as one who had found God in and through the practical economic and political struggles of daily life. The struggle for Christian socialism is the struggle to abolish the curse not just "legally and figuratively" but "literally and actually." It is the struggle to re-create that Edenic quality in everyday life where working in the garden was the joy of living not the misery of existence. It is the struggle to abolish the curse not just for

me and mine, but for you and yours.

## In the Garden

As part of my spiritual journey I have become a gardener. I recently planted 60 boxwoods in my back yard in the form of an angel (really more of a butterfly). I call my garden "Three Angels Garden" after my three children and the verse from the Book of Revelation that speaks of the three angels' message announcing the day of God's judgment. God's judgment falls upon the race because of its economic and social injustice, but is redeemed when our hands and hearts become the channels of divine benevolence. I sit often in the morning drinking my coffee and watching the cardinals, goldfinches and humming birds (squirrels, cardinals, wrens, and woodpeckers in winter) outside my window in their search for food, their only time clock the limitations of finitude that come with the rising and falling of the day. All the work that I put into creating my garden I can now enjoy as the just and right fruit of my labor.

The window through which I watch the birds outside is an old one, but the light that shines through the window in the morning is new. How very much like my old window are the social institutions within which we move and have our daily being. They grow old and stained by the historical and dated choices and decisions of humanity, so much that the Light of God shines but dimly. Call it reformation, call it restoration, call it revolution, but sometimes in the course of events we must wipe away

the grime if we are to see the new light through the old window. This is a generational choice that none can avoid; it is part of the dialectic of existence, which is part and parcel of all faith, whether sacred or secular.

What Trevor accomplished in the Labor Church was the merger of the scientific and utopian strands of socialism into something catalytic. He wiped away the grime of time and let some new light through the communitarian portal. Wherever socialism has advanced it has done so with just this combination of planning and passion, form and vibrancy, light and substance. We can no more divorce the utopian from the scientific than we can divorce the left brain from the right, the female from the male. All gardens involve the aesthetic of planning and passion, of science and utopia, of flower and iron.

## Fertile Ground in Indiana

Indiana is an ideal place to renew the Labor Church experiment because it has a long history of "utopian religion," from Robert Owen's Harmonist experiment in New Harmony to the Mennonite communities in New Berne. As the inspiring statesman Victor Gollancz declared, "There is really only one method of re-educating people, namely the example that one lives

oneself." We can preach socialism but how much better to live it, as those early Hoosiers tried so to do.

The Polish Marxist Leszek Kolakowski said that both the priest and the jester are needed by balanced kings, just as every castle is surrounded by a wild field. If we are ever to survive as a species we need to imbibe the lessons of both the priest and the jester, the castle and the field. Authentic humanism depends on our ability to do just this. We are a long way from the Garden of Eden, from St. Benedict's wish that our labor be a prayer instead of a curse. But there is nothing in the nature of things that prevents our work being a blessing except the inauthentic, exploitative, and suicidal lifestyle that we create for ourselves. A better world is possible. This is the birthing and beckoning light of God's Spirit shining through the darkening pane of our common and all too violent life together.

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*Jesse Leamon is founder of the Indianapolis Labor Church, pastor of Greenfield Friends Meeting in Greenfield, Indiana, and is in process of becoming recorded as minister with the Western Yearly Meeting of Friends. He works for Century Maintenance Supplies.*

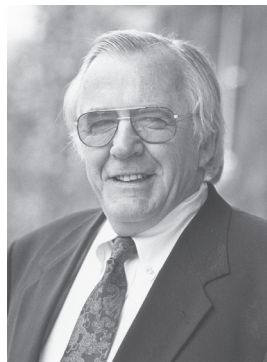


## A Life of Contagious Enthusiasm

David O'Brien

*Dreadful Conversions:  
The Making of a Catholic Socialist*  
by John C. Cort  
Fordham University Press, 2003

John C. Cort, comrade of democratic socialists, colleague of genuine democratic activists, and friend of the editors and readers of *Religious Socialism*, waited until he was 90 years old to publish his autobiography. But anyone who has known John Cort for more than a few minutes knows parts of this story. Old friends have heard almost all of it. Yet it is one of those stories worth hearing often, and deserving to be retold for years to come. Ammon



David O'Brien

Hennacy, another long-lived Catholic (in his own way) radical, probably had some great arguments with Cort, but he was a kindred spirit. Hennacy once wrote a book about activists and, thinking of himself, called it *The One Man Revolution*. Cort could easily have done the same. He has a genius for friendship and generously spreads credit to a host of mentors and co-workers, but he has always followed his own drummer. Cort was and remains an independent spirit, superbly self-confident, courageous, transparently sincere, and contagious in his almost innocent enthusiasm for the democratic experiment. With Thoreau and Debs, William Lloyd Garrison and Mother Jones, Cort is an American who knows instinctively that self-government brings personal responsibilities, to "vote with your whole self," to become, as best one can, "a one man revolution."

Cort came from a middle-class family filled with preachers and teachers. Raised on Long Island, he recalls that his father spoke often of "responsibility" and "obligation" and once described John and his brothers as "great hulking boys who don't want to do anything but have fun and sit around on their backsides." He need not have worried about John sitting around, but he had the fun part exactly right. A sweet singing voice and, one suspects, that engaging presence that set him apart and is still so striking, won him scholarships first to choir school, then to an elite prep school, then to Harvard. There, medieval studies led him to Catholic traditions and eventually Catholic faith, his first "dreadful conversion." After hearing Dorothy Day speak, he joined the Catholic Worker movement in New York. His explanation for that impulsive decision was that Dorothy "seems to be getting a whole lot of fun out of life, and I would like to get some of that for myself."

This may have been testimony unique in Catholic Worker annals.

Cort served soup and slept with bedbugs, but he could not keep still while Catholic Worker co-founder Peter Maurin held forth on Catholic personalism and agrarianism. Before long Cort broke with Catholic Worker orthodoxy and leaped with characteristic enthusiasm into the labor movement. Although he joined a group of young labor activists, he remained all his life a critical fellow-traveler of the Catholic Worker movement, and he retained an almost reverential affection for Dorothy Day.

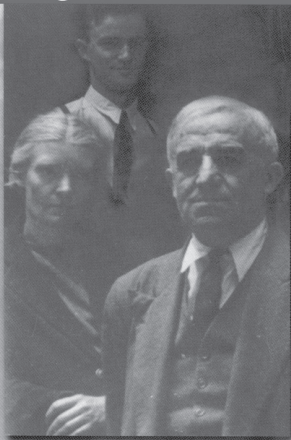
Cort worked with and later for the Newspaper Guild, but his major commitment was to the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU). One purpose of the autobiography is to set the written record straight on this group. For years Cort has been making their case against historians, left wing ideologues and labor leaders with flawed memories. First, he argues, the ACTU was influential far beyond its numbers, in several New York locals, in Detroit and in the C.I.O. Second, the ACTU campaigned for democracy in the unions, and fought, with rare courage, both gangsters and Stalinists. And finally, ACTU veterans need not apologize for their anti-communism, which was always an integral part of their complete commitment to union democracy and labor empowerment. Cort is deeply committed to organized labor, and these are fascinating stories interlaced with wise commentary.

Later chapters tell of Cort's work staffing the Newspaper Guild in Boston, serving in the Peace Corps in the Philippines, heading up the state antipoverty agency in Massachusetts, and writing the history of Christian socialism. Along the way he ran for the Boston City Council (and perhaps had an election stolen from him). He stood with the city's African Americans during the great Boston busing crisis, moved with his family to Roxbury, seemed to attend thousands of meetings, and, though he won very few battles, he appears all along to have had a wonderful time.

Even Cort's eight-year struggle with tuberculosis, before and during World War II, most of it spent in hospitals, is recounted around stories of labor work, new connections to Catholic activism in Europe, and his long and in the end suc-

## DREADFUL CONVERSIONS

The Making of a Catholic Socialist



JOHN C. CORT

cessful courtship. He and his wife, Helen Hays Cort, have ten children, and family stories keep all these social justice struggles anchored to the multiple complications of daily life. Colleagues who recall Cort's frequent debates with feminists, particularly on the abortion question, will nod knowingly when they read his account of "The Meeting," a moment in Cort family history when his children wrested power from the family patriarch. He regrets to this day that he did not deliver what he tells us was a long repressed argument, from history, philosophy and common sense, in favor of paternal leadership of the household.

The second of Cort's "Dreadful Conversions" refers to his decision to join the movement for democratic socialism. This is the one place he mentions my name, in connection with an unpersuasive talk of mine that preceded his conversion. He waxes eloquent about Michael Harrington and about European branches of the socialist

movement, but he offers no explanation of the movement's decline. Cort's basic argument, made for so many years, is that democracy must inform our economic as well as our political life. If it doesn't, democracy becomes a sham. The evidence for Cort is clear in recent American history.

Still, success or failure has little to do with the life and times of John Cort. Perhaps that is because his Catholicism added a deep historical confidence to his American instincts for human dignity, personal liberty, and social equality. His combination of keen intelligence and almost unquestioned hopefulness leads him to believe that, in God's good time, liberty and justice, freedom and solidarity, will come together in a new world, a beloved community. Given that assurance, why should one worry overmuch about short-run defeats? Like Ammon Hennacy, one should read the daily papers "to find out what the bastards are up to today" and then, after a good cup of coffee, take the bus to city hall or to the union local and get to work. So we can read John Cort's life story and dream of Jimmy Higgins and Joe Hill. Politics remains the art of the possible, the impossible just takes a little longer. May we be blessed

with many John Cortes in the years to come.

### Note to readers

*As a special to readers of Religious Socialism, John Cort has made available copies of Dreadful Conversions for \$20 each, which includes shipping and handling. This is a third off list price. Write directly to John Cort, 1 Maolis Road, Nahant, MA 01908.*

*David O'Brien is Loyola Professor of Roman Catholic Studies at the College of the Holy Cross and a contributing editor of Religious Socialism.*

# witness

## Recovering—Slash—Activist

ANONYMOUS

Some people today might describe themselves as “recovering activists,” i.e., “I used to be an activist but I got over it.” This condition is also known as Compassion Fatigue, as in “I am sick and tired of being compassionate, and I won’t do it anymore.” They’re the people described by Cornel West as forgetting that they’re in a marathon, not a sprint.

In contrast, I am an activist who is also recovering—from a thirty-five drinking “career” that ended in alcohol addiction. I’m a “recovering-slash-activist,” not a “recovering activist.” I find that this leads to inner tensions that can be invigorating as well as enervating.

I belong to the Democratic Socialists of America and to its Commission on Religion and Socialism. A good deal of our literature rightly denigrates people concerned only with their own spiritual condition. Twelve Step programs have occasionally been spoken of with contempt.

I also go to a lot of meetings of recovering people. Although there is less bigotry against activists than one might expect, there’s a constant undercurrent of “Work on yourself, not the world’s problems.” In general, I agree: if I don’t work at filling my spiritual abyss, I’ll be of no use to anyone; I can focus effectively on small things (today; me) but am a bit fragile to focus on immensities (eternity; the world and all its problems).

Nevertheless, I am a recovering-slash-activist. My Twelve Step Program tells me to “get out of myself,” “carry the message to others,” and “practice these principles in all [my] affairs.” I cannot be concerned *only* with myself.

Thomas Merton once said that it was less important to reconcile opposites than to hold on to both of them at the same time. And that’s what I’m trying to do these days.

Conservatives—the type of people who consider me a pinko, and say “Democratic Socialist” is an oxymoron—are fond of the phrase “saving the world, one person at a time.” And this pinko DemSoc is pretty much doing that. At the local community center I have a weekly appointment to sit at the desk, hand out sandwiches, and point out the coffee pot.

Because many of the homeless people who pass by the desk also know me from recovery meetings (I am the least anonymous alcoholic in my part of town), I do a lot of informal substance abuse talking as a community activist. It’s “talking,” not “counseling,” which requires certification and licensing, and I’m just one (recovering) drunk talking to another (perhaps actively addicted) drunk. Right place at the right time; right mes-

sage for the right people.

That is, as an activist I find it easy and useful to be a recovering alcoholic. But it’s difficult and counterproductive to be a community activist at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

One of the AA traditions is that the group has no opinion on outside issues. Dwell on politics or religion at a meeting and someone will mutter “outside issue; talk about drinking or recovery.” This is a key part of our mission—we don’t want Republicans in Recovery to drive off Democratic Drunks, or vice versa.

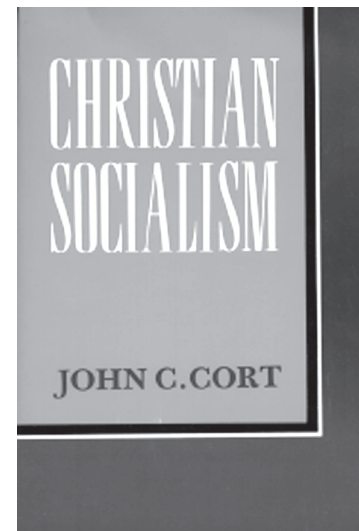
And so I feel a tension—and ignore it, as I do so many of my feelings—as I hold on to the opposites of personal recovery and community activism. And it’s important that I hold on to both.

The great Rabbi Hillel asked, two millennia ago, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am for myself alone, then what am I?”

This recovering—slash—activist agrees completely with this ancient Jewish wisdom. I believe that the key spiritual concern of our day is the connection of activity and stillness, of individual and community.

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