rs
religious socialism

THE JOURNAL FOR PEOPLE OF FAITH AND SOCIALISM

motivated [illegible] religious traditions, we believe that attitudes, prioritities, and institutions [illegible] be c[illegible] to reflect a just and democratic use of the universe's bounty; we believe [illegible] the value of [illegible] that contributes to the common good; and in the healing influence of [illegible]spect for th[illegible]ferences as well as the commonness of human experience.

Obamanon

ASSESSING THE POLITICS OF POSSIBILITY

volume 31, issue one, 2007-08

Inside...

Put the politics aside for a moment. Yes, that's what I said. Because if you look squarely at his positions and policy points, none of which are all that exciting for people with our politics, you will miss the hows and whys of what is probably the most energetic political movement in the United States since the 1960s. At least people from the 1960s have been telling me that in droves, and since I wasn't there, I have no choice but to believe them.

With an oddly clever mix of slogans and the closest thing to socialist realism Americans have ever seen in a major party political campaign, Illinois Senator Barack Obama has managed to whip up a frenzy of interest in his candidacy for the Presidency by using little more than two words that in and of themselves communicate nothing of the stuff that sets policy wonks' hearts aflutter, and even less of a specific program. Change and hope.

Crowds continue to assemble to hear Obama speak in numbers more closely associated with rock concerts than political events, and despite the attempts by both the Clinton machine and the GOP to smear him with everything from his middle name to the histrionics of his pastor, he has replaced the assumed inevitability of a second Clinton administration with what seemed almost impossible even five years ago; the election of the first non-white person to the presidency of the United States.

So what is going on here? How is it that people who have never been involved in politics, people who have been sickened by politics, and people who live and breathe politics are committing hours of time and millions of dollars to this rather unspecific campaign? *[Full disclosure: I am one of those who has been spending hours of time organizing events for Mr. Obama.]* And most important for the purposes of this publication, why should we be paying attention to it? Obama is clearly not one of us (i.e. a socialist).

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editor's notes

Guilt by association is one thing American socialists have an extensive amount of experience with. The idea that a person should be known by the company they keep or the people they know, rather than by their own ideas and actions, is an ancient concept, but it was burned into the political history of this nation during the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings of the late 1940s. Scores of good people were tarnished by the committee's paranoia, for having "associations" with people whose politics were suspect, even if in the end neither party was guilty of anything other than having a dissenting opinion. Sometimes the accused weren't even guilty of that. And that brings us to the matter of the media focus on Barack Obama's former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright.

Perhaps the greatest "error" made by Obama was not to have a connection to black liberation theology, but to have a connection to such a self-defeating practitioner of it. Surely there are other voices (our own Cornel West comes to mind) who are able to articulate the essential connections between the black experience and the call to social justice clearly stated in Biblical narrative, without alienating the audience who most needs to hear them (i.e. white Americans).

There is no way to deny that the speech of Rev. Wright is divisive, if not needlessly stereotypical in its manner and tone, against all comers. Forgetting for a moment that the entire issue of "Obama's pastor" is a shameless red herring, we do have to ask ourselves if Wright's perseverations on the forced "us and them" mentality of his youth, including referring to Italians as "garlic noses," is the language of a man of God. Defenders of his rhetoric will undoubtedly point to the prophetic tradition well-established along the centuries, of angry people saying important things in ways that were often if not largely inflammatory. But those people lived before the age of politically correct speech, a relatively recent but dramatic development in our social discourse that all sensitive people are supposed to adhere to and understand.

That the anger, the justifiable hurt and bitterness of African-American history remains unresolved is undeniable. That many of the unpleasant historic realities invoked by Wright against the United States government are factually accurate is undebatable. But the question we have to answer, particularly as religious socialists, is whether or not the solution to those real problems lies in a discourse that emphasizes the listing of grievances more than the forging of their remedies, and further, how can we possibly expect to find those remedies if the discourse is of a nature that shuts down dialogue between the parties involved?

We don't need reminders that angry people, black and white and all shades in-between, are out there fuming in our society for a variety of reasons that each finds legitimate. Neither Jeremiah Wright nor Lou Dobbs can lead us to the promised land, any more than could Louis Farrakhan or Ronald Reagan in another era, or Kwame Toure or George Wallace before them. What we are in need of *now* are constructive proposals, from people of faith as well as people of no faith, for how we can extricate ourselves from the madness our current government has wrought upon its own people as well as other people throughout the world. The challenge of that task transcends Rev. Wright and all points of view, pro and con (including this one), about his provocative sermons.

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536 W. 111 St. #37
New York, NY 10025

Editorial
29 Harris St.
Waltham, MA 02452
editor@religioussocialism.com

www.religioussocialism.com

Editor
Andrew Hammer

The Religion & Socialism Commission
Co-Chairs: Rod Ryon, Juanita Webster
Secretary: Maxine Phillips
Treasurer: Rev. Norm Faramelli

Executive Committee:
Rev. Judith Deutsch, Mark Finkel, Andrew Hammer, David Kandel, Steve Knight, Tharen Robson, Bryan Vosseler

Member, International League of Religious Socialists – ILRS (Socialist International)

***RS* Contributing Editors:**
Jack Clark, Rev. Judith Deutsch, Harvey Cox, Michael Eric Dyson, Rev. Marcia L. Dyson, Norm Faramelli, David O'Brien, Maxine Phillips, Cornel West

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letters

The last issue is another of the best; loaded with usefully provocative thinking. It motivates me to get in my renewal to Norman Faramelli. Thank you especially for printing the thoughts expressed by socialist religious teacher Agnivesh at the triennial congress of the International League of Religious Socialists. They speak to and for me.

As a Protestant evangelical, the "peace that passeth all understanding" was not to be mine until I began my personal search for truth. Throughout history, European and American socialists have been failures for not practicing honesty, forgiveness, and compassion, including for the outcast; the values that early Christian communities were urged to practice, and that are the roots of socialism. Swami Agnivesh is an imaginative and courageous teacher, getting us to think about words such as atheist and Marxists, which so frequently are misunderstood.

During a Vietnam anti-war demonstration, a Trotskyist was skeptical of religious people who participated with us. As a political as well as religious heretic, I pointed out to him that he must be religious because he worked on behalf of the laborer. Also, I asked him if he had read enough of Marx and Engels to realized that the quoted from the scriptures. Readers need to think about the implications in what Swami Agnivesh had to say.

Gordon Chapman
Yellow Springs, OH

Obamanon

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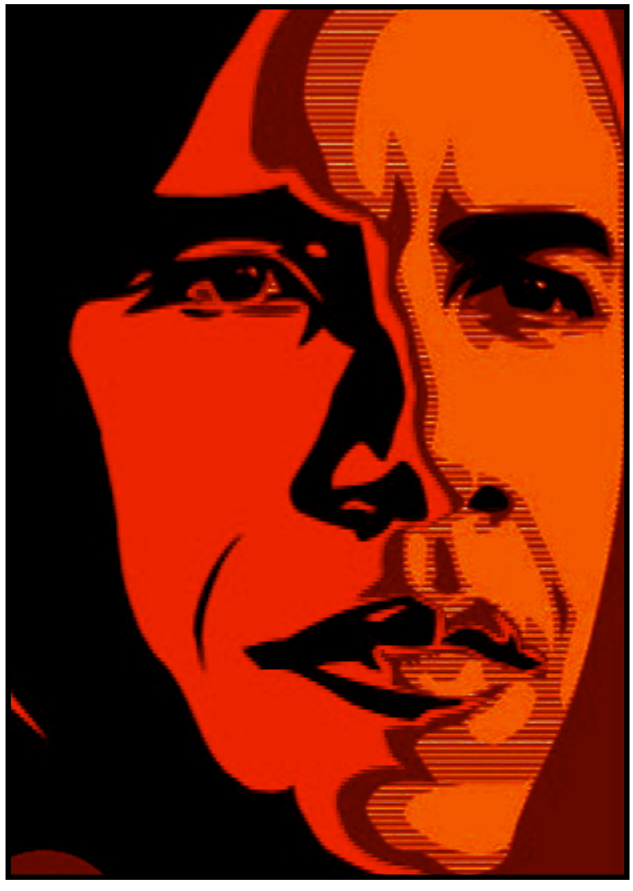
The Politics of Possibility

We all know, or should know the phrase "politics is the art of the possible." It's a phrase we use to console ourselves when we find ourselves taking positions that are less than what we want, based upon the reality of what we can expect to achieve. Socialists know it well, especially those of us who have managed to be elected to governments. Yet this is also—among many other things—the exact failure of the Clinton campaign to inspire voters in the same way. Because the other angle on that phrase is manifested when it is spoken by those who start out by *seeing no more than what they deem to be possible*.



Brand Clinton is marketed in terms of cold realities, by people who know how it is, how it has always been, and who have *experience* in power. Hillary wants you to vote for her because she and her husband and their friends know exactly what needs to be done. They have all the details sorted out. You do not. Beyond election day, your help is not needed, because she will gather her team of wizened experts to do it all for you and there is no question that you will be satisfied.

In fairness, in today's world there is something to be said for that degree of competence, efficiency and service... provided it were true. Luckily we have the record of the other Clinton to prove that it is not. After two years of him, some Democrats were so pleased that they were leaving the party, and then America chose the Contract With America. Then came inspiring things like "workfare" and the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Brand Clinton may promise to get your whites to be white as snow, but the reality was one of the biggest snow jobs ever foisted onto the Democratic Party.

Brand Obama is based upon single words which play off of each other. Change through hope. The hope of change. Herein lies everything and nothing all at once. It's remarkably zen, and after eight years of an illegally installed oil baron regime that doesn't even care if you think they know what they're doing, because they're going to do it anyway, all most people know is that they have no hope and desperately want change. Bingo.

But it's even more than that. While deftly failing to offer the degree of specific policy details that the Clintonistas base their existence upon, Obama has created something much more powerful with his strategy, in the style of the community organizer he once was, and of significant interest to American socialists. That thing is space. The space for others to create a movement which is challenged to define the parameters of his agenda.

I'm not arguing that reducing a political campaign to soundbites and slogans is a preferable development. That argument cannot be sold to an American socialist left that usually feels unfulfilled unless it is arguing over not just how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, but which angels agree or disagree with Albert and Hahnel's treatise on participatory economics and why.

Rather, I am observing that in a nation where anyone who says anything of substance about policies that might truly bring about genuine change is demonized within 24 hours of their saying it, saying the simplest of things seems not only to be the best way of avoiding that, but is actually working as well. Here we are not dealing with the Talmudic exegesis of Rabbi Eliezer, but with the gently profound maxims of Hillel.

People may not know exactly what they want from Obama, but they know they want something different than what they've had. And because he has gone about building a movement just as much as a campaign, people feel as if they are stakeholders in whatever is to come. They feel that their activity with the campaign

matters, that someone is listening, not just telling them what must be done. In other words, they feel that change is possible, and therefore that they are engaged in... the art of the possible. Not in that restrictive sense alluded to earlier, but in seeing possibilities before them. It's been a long time coming, and regardless of what we on the left may find lacking in it, we cannot argue that the Obama campaign is inspiring people to become politically involved in a way that we haven't been able to do for nearly a century.

The Politics of Symbolism

Much is made of Obama being the "first serious African-American candidate" for President. The way race has thus far been dealt with in the campaign is very interesting indeed. We have seen not only the veneer but the whole epidermis blown off of Bill Clinton's bizarre appellation as "the first black president." When things got tough in South Carolina, he showed himself for who he really was; yet another portly white man from the South who ridiculed black leadership in the name of helping African-Americans to see the "folly" of their choosing Obama. A dangerously familiar image, at once paternalistic and patronizing.

White America scratched its head and wondered what was so wrong about the "fairy tale" remark and the "Jesse Jackson" remark. After all, he was only stating a fact, right? Perhaps, but just not the one he thought he was stating. Black America at long last saw that Emperor Clinton was naked, nothing more than more of the same, and responded accordingly.

Yet Obama is not just an African-American candidate. While the media eagerly classifies him as such with all the grace of the one-drop rule, the mélange which comprises Obama in the most literal sense conveys to many the idea that his very being is a symbol of the unity through diversity that the world urgently needs. He is at least as white as he is black, with a half-Asian half-sister, and spent his formative years in a predominately Asian society. The result of this, at the risk of being far too saccharine, is that people from different races and cultures seem to be able to see something of themselves in Barack Obama. It's hard to think of another example of a candidate for head of state in any nation who has represented as many different cultures, and polls indicate that people in other nations are equally if not more aware of that than Americans themselves might be. The world overwhelmingly supports Obama, perhaps because unlike the current regime, they feel that he has at least a chance of understanding the world.

The Politics of.... Politics

Nevertheless, this is a socialist publication, and as stated before, when one comes right down to it, Barack Obama is not a radical in any aspect of his politics. Almost all of his policy proposals are decidedly centrist in form and content. His health care program is anemic for those of us who do know and understand—happily and longingly—what a socialized national health care system really is. Those of us looking for transformative proposals in terms of economic policy end up running into underwhelming dead ends that give us nothing to chew on. Returning to the 1960s analogy, albeit critically, Obama represents generality as an art form in the same enigmatic way that Robert Kennedy managed to represent something far larger than himself or what could possibly be expected of him. No one who is on the left should be deluded by the idea that he is a trojan horse for our interests. Despite the fact that his campaign has received unprecedented millions of dollars of donations from individual small donors, a cursory look at how it all began reveals a list of corporate backers no different than is expected with any other serious candidate for that office.

But this is where we must also be brutally honest with ourselves, and concede the usual fact of life for our own political movement: that anyone who would represent those interests, or at least a part of them, is likely to be utterly unelectable by the majority of the American people. When a candidate can still seriously be damaged at the polls depending on whether or not he or she wears a flag pin, the electorate is unfortunately not yet ready to give socialists even half the kind of substantive government we want, much less the type of democracy we think the nation needs.

Here again, as in previous years, we face that same quadrennial choice that often dampens our spirit: to choose the acceptable over the ideal, the art of the possible. But this time, there is a sense that this election will be transformative, perhaps not in all the ways that we would prefer, but in other important ways that help to redefine what this country is likely to be from this moment on. The possibility exists for a generational torch to be passed, to someone who at last looks like America, and who says he wants us to help him define his agenda. Considering the other options, we could do much worse than "change through hope," and the fleeting hope of some kind of genuine change.

Andrew Hammer is Editor of Religious Socialism. *The views expressed are his own; DSA has not endorsed a candidate in the 2008 race.*

Organizing The Faithful

Evangelical Christians and the Community

MIKE MILLER

For the past ten years, I've spent more than half my working hours with a small, influential and growing band of Evangelical, Pentecostal and Holiness Christians who have gathered under the umbrella of the highly decentralized Christians Supporting Community Organizing (CSCO). Many of my friends worry that I'm teaching the religious right how to more effectively pursue its agenda. Not a few funders have raised the same question.

What is a fallen away Jew from a radical labor movement family doing in this world? My initial interest was raised by the absence of these Christians from the faith-based community organizing work with which I've been engaged for many years, and their apparent capture by the religious right.

From a pure "people power" point of view, their numbers are important. I wanted to see if there was a way this large constituency might become involved in faith-based community building, including action on issues of economic and social justice and democratic participation; and to stretch a little further, whether they could be persuaded to work on these issues within community organizations which include Catholic churches (with whom these traditions are sometimes in conflict) and Protestant churches, Jewish synagogues and others who disagree with them on most of the "individual morality" issues. I found they are...and more.

About fifty million Americans call themselves Evangelical, Pentecostal or Holiness (EPH) Christians. While theologically "liberal" portions of mainline Protestantism have shrunk both in size and in the commitment of its believers, EPH churches are often vibrant and growing. So are caucuses of evangelicals within mainline Protestantism. These believers are in Anglo middle class and ethnic working class suburbs. Their storefronts are to be found in growing number in Latino, Black and Asian inner city neighborhoods. They are also a strong presence in Appalachia and the Appalachian diaspora. For them, faith isn't a Sunday morning only affair. It is not unusual for them to spend ten, fifteen or more hours a week in church and church-related activities. Many of them tithe—giving ten percent or more of their income to their church.

Denominations like the mostly-white Assemblies of God or mostly-African-American Church of God in Christ are larger in number in the United States than Episcopal, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ and Lutheran bodies. In Africa, Asia and Latin America they are growing rapidly. The intensity of their commitment is measured by what a Brazilian Catholic Bishop told me: "We are 80% of the believers in Brazil and the evangelicals are only 20%, but on any given Sunday except for Easter and Christmas, we are 20% of the people in the pews and they are 80%."

Adherents in this part of Christendom share these core beliefs: they have been "born again" and personally know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior; they have a high view of Scripture. The Pentecostals among them lay special emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, known to them experientially by speaking in tongues and other intense spiritual/emotional experiences. Their high view of Scripture makes them theologically "conservative." Liberal mainliners are likely to view Scripture as allegory, metaphor or myth, and to give tradition, experience and reason roughly equal weight to a high view of Scripture. As I was soon to learn, it is this "high view" of Scripture that calls EPH believers to become engaged with issues of justice, to stand against consumerism and to struggle to build meaningful communities in which interdependence rather than "me first" individualism is a central value.

In the 19th century, the spiritual forbears of EPH believers were at the center of social reform; they provided leadership and a base for abolition of slavery, child labor reform, women's suffrage, labor, temperance and other movements of the day. Late 19th/early 20th century Pentecostalism was interracial and had men and women in prominent leadership roles. In what has been called "The Great Reversal," many early 20th century believers came to identify the "social gospel" with secularism—though in fact its origins are in the same revival movements from which EPH traditions come.

The famous Scopes case "monkey trial," in which the merit of Charles Darwin was debated by Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan, is emblematic of what the faithful saw going on in modern society. In the face of a judicial affirmation of Darwinism, their strategy in defeat was to retreat and circle the wagons. Increasingly, faith became chiefly a spiritualized, ephemeral relationship to God. The best way to deal with a corrupt world was to withdraw from it and live as pure a life as possible. For believers, salvation began with conversation; the unconverted faced hell and damnation. But the world wouldn't leave believers alone. A relatively small number of them became engaged with the world during the civil rights, anti-war and poverty program period of the '60s. When issues like abortion increasingly confronted them, large numbers of them began to return to their roots—but with a very important modification: the structures of evil (like slavery or corporate exploitation) were not challenged; rather, the focus was almost entirely on individual sin.

Currently within these parts of the church there is a massive movement on the part of whites to apologize for past racial prejudice and discrimination and toward racial reconciliation. But there is little talk and no collective action to end redlining or predatory lending in inner city neighborhoods or to achieve health care coverage for all. It is through the conversion of lenders, the education of potential borrowers and the charity of health professions that these problems are to be addressed—assuming they are even seen as part of the Christian moral challenge.

Christians Supporting Community Organizing (CSCO) began with a feasibility study that asked the question, "Would you be interested in exploring faith-based (or 'congregation-based') community organizing as a vehicle for mission and community building in our parts of the church?" The group's national organizer, Denver-based Marilyn Stranske, has met with almost 500 individual leaders of these faith perspectives. Most had never heard of this kind of community organizing. But the concerns they expressed in the in-depth visits are precisely those addressed by community organizing: discrimination, poverty and growing pressure on the middle class and powerlessness to influence public decisions that affect their lives. Some grieved over the failure of EPH parts of the church to be effectively engaged in these issues. There was also concern about consumerism, "me first" individualism, exploitation of sexuality and how the church might combat these trends. While some were uninterested, and a few critical, the overwhelming response was positive. An invitation to attend a CSCO workshop was extended to those who expressed interest. By now, several hundred respected EPH leaders have participated in these or similar workshops.

Once they are exposed to it, people with a high view of Scripture must take seriously a biblically-based theology of "systems." In its workshops, that is precisely what CSCO presents. In this Biblical view, God has created economic, political and cultural/religious systems. While their forms vary, no society is without them. God's intent is that the economic system provides for the fair and equitable distribution of goods and services and acts as a steward of the earth's resources which are "owned" by God. Human societies are judged by how they perform as stewards and how they treat the poor. The greater the disparities of wealth and income in a nation, the less it fulfills God's intent.

Political systems are to provide order with justice. Cultural/religious systems are to provide meaning in people's lives, which, for Christians, means leading them to know God through His son, Jesus Christ. But there is a contest between the city of God and the city of Satan: systems become corrupted and go awry. When they do, according to CSCO's theologians, the economic system becomes one of exploitation, with the rich getting richer and the poor poorer. The political system becomes one of oppression, and its decisions favor those with wealth. Most debilitating, the cultural/religious system rationalizes it all. Instead of loving God and neighbor, people love to consume, to be part of the status race, to make idols of material things. In these times, prophets arise to call the systems to account and to challenge the people to return to their faith. But the prophets may be seduced. All armies are told, "God is on our side." "Prosperity theology" says that wealth is a sign of God's blessing. Those not seduced may be imprisoned or killed: Dietrich Bonhoffer, Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero. It is then left to the people to rise up in direct action against the "principalities and powers" and return the systems to their Godly intent. But the systems can penetrate deeply into the consciousness of everyone. The people themselves may be seduced and become complicitous in systemic evil. Groups seek more than their share of the resources available; they exclude some, stigmatize others and believe in the superiority of their group; they say "my country right or wrong." In this circumstance, God turns his head and lets the system as a whole destroy itself—as it did when the

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Race and Democracy
in Post-Katrina America

WHAT MEANETH BLACK SUFFERING?

OSAGYEFO UHURU SEKOU

A few months ago, while I was giving a tour of Lower Ninth Ward to a group of sociologists visiting New Orleans for a race, class, and gender conference, a dialogue incurred that revealed more in what was not said than what was said. One of my fellow tour guides, Abby Lublin, a New York City teacher who had spent a few months in New Orleans volunteering for the People's Organizing Committee, referred to human catastrophe in New Orleans as "genocide."

The collection of distinguished female academics and I engaged in a lively debate. We concluded that the word "genocide" pointed us in the right direction, but was insufficient to describe what had happened on August 29, 2005. (In fact, the use of the word genocide in reference to New Orleans may cheapen what is happening in Darfur.)

Post-Katrina New Orleans is shaped by a historical set of issues and by a present-day "unholy trinity" – of mass familial displacement, mass fiscal divestment, and mass physical devastation. After several months of living and working in New Orleans, I found lacking a discernable vision for the city and region – and am reminded of the question posed by W. E. B. DuBois a century ago: "What meaneth Black suffering?"

Historically, black folk have had to contend with hegemonic forces denying them both the means to make ends meet and what I would describe as "meaning making": the American empire alienated people of African descent from the possibility of making meaning for themselves. The genealogy of black folk in America is littered with examples of this kind of dizziness and absurdity. The images of folks stranded on rooftops and packed in the New Orleans Superdome are the latest and grossest of this history.

By situating post-Katrina New Orleans within the existential context of black life in America, this tragedy does maintain some uniqueness. New Orleans is a phenomenon. It is the birthplace of jazz—America's first original art form—and an extraordinary mix of cultures that is reflected in its food, architecture, skin tones, and social life. Yet it is also the site of her greatest disaster (both natural and human-made). In a word, New Orleans is tragicomic.

Today, her plight has disappeared from much of the public memory. And, following a six-month tour in her bosom, I have found that the struggle to rebuild the great city is tainted with an overriding burden of hopelessness and misunderstanding.

Our challenge today is to bring to bear an interdisciplinary analysis that affirms these historical realities: combining a nuanced vision of the present with an eye on a prophetic future.

Black Suffering and American Democracy

Three recently-published books help point us in a direction of this kind of approach: *After the Storm: Black Intellectuals Explore the Meaning of Hurricane Katrina* (The New Press, 2006); *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race and the State of the Nation* (South End

Press, 2007); and *There Is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina* (Routledge, 2006). While each anthology approaches the post-Katrina America and race from a different vantage point, they all contend with the meaning of black suffering within American democracy.

Before reading a word, each text calls up the angst of those tragic days in late August and September of 2005. All three covers bear gothic, Gordon Parks-style photographs—images that are nothing less than miserable grace their covers—immortalizing democracy's graphic elegy.

Those stark images lay the foundation for a series of sobering essays. The effects of the breached levees in 2005 are laid over a historical narrative of New Orleans, filled with endemic poverty and racism—to return New Orleans to its pre-Katrina state would be unjust. We are reminded in each text that fully one-quarter of African-American men and one-third of African-American women in New Orleans lived below the poverty line prior to Katrina. As Bruce Katz detailed in "Concentrated Poverty in New Orleans and Other American Cities" (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 8/4/06):

On the very day the levees broke, the Census Bureau released a report on poverty in the nation, finding that Orleans Parish had a poverty rate of 23.2 percent, seventh highest among 290 large U.S. counties. Yet the economic hardships were shared unequally. Although African-American residents made up 67 percent of the city's total population, they made up 84 percent of its population below the poverty line. And those poor African-American households were highly concentrated in 47 neighborhoods of extreme poverty —that is, neighborhoods where the poverty rate topped 40 percent.

Where was God?

These realities coalesced in real-time as the nation watched thousands of fellow citizens left to their own devices in the face of a Category Five hurricane. My search for meaning during several months in the Lower Ninth Ward led me to demand, as have others: Where was God? Why had not God intervened? It is a question of theodicy and democracy at once. How could a good god allow those whose existence was miserable before the storm be silent in such a moment of tragedy and need?

In his foreword to *After the Storm*, legal scholar Derrick Bell leaps to respond to my concern for god's absence. "How can we awaken that sense of humanity within us that some call God to address the needs of those whose plight is the fault of man, not God? Perhaps, as many theologians think, we should view God not as a superbeing somewhere up there who determines our fates and can, at will intervene in our lives."

After the Storm effectively contrasts these existential and theological questions with the human evidence of abandonment of responsibility. Blacks are not exempt: in his the book's introduction, Charles Ogletree highlights the Essence Festival, which annually attracts over 100,000 African Americans to the Superdome to sway to R&B and neo-soul artists. It is a harsh juxtaposition with the image of masses stranded for days in that same structure. Similarly, John Valery White problematizes Mayor Ray Nagin's symbolic political leadership and questions his commitment to poor blacks.

> MY FAITH WAS SHAKEN; MY VOCATION QUESTIONED; MY SENSE OF PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS SHATTERED; AND ANY MESSIANIC IMPULSE THAT I HAVE EVER POSSESSED RECEDED WITH THE FLOODWATERS.

Governmental neglect and malfeasance is, of course, at the heart of the discourse. David Troutt cites the history of urban ghettoization through public housing policy and construction in "Many Thousands Gone, Again."

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the new atheism

A MESSAGE TO RELIGIOUS SOCIALISTS

ROD RYON

What is the "new" atheism and should religious socialists be paying attention to it and if so how? A spate of books that affirm unbelief has topped best seller lists for a number of months and been widely reviewed in the elite press and some progressive journals. Avowed atheists, the authors partly argue against the proposition of God's existence and partly simply assume it. Unlike traditional atheist apologias, the targets are mostly religion and religious belief as if discrediting religion settles or makes irrelevant the "God" question. Religion hasn't just gone awry, the good or harmless kind replaced by the bad and dangerous. Religion itself is evil and religious belief of nearly any sort a generator of hatreds and a hazard to self and society.

How can such books be popular in the United States with its massive numbers of religiously affiliated? A generation ago an apologia for atheism could barely have made its way into print. Clearly, arguments made in the extreme resonate with a reading public made anxious by the religious right's influence in the United States and the seeming dynamism of Islamic jihadism abroad. But surveys and polls may exaggerate the numbers of believers and the religiously affiliated. Writing in *The Nation* (*"The New Atheists: Toward a Secular Humanism,"* 6/25/07), Ronald Aronson points to contradictions and the unreliability of nearly every measure of religious belief. He speculates that perhaps a quarter of Americans might be classified as non-believers—agnostics, atheists and "secular humanists."

We religious socialists might be tempted to dismiss the new atheism as both dead wrong and ironically irrelevant. Why be engaged since it doesn't focus on and consider seriously the "God question"? But Aronson has written a seminal essay, and he urges us, along with other believers and with liberals, to weigh in on the arguments and to consider making common cause with unbelievers.

In a culture and politics super-laden with religious imagery and language, unbelievers are outsiders even outcasts. Closeted often and "derided" and made "timid," they are "both warned against and ignored." They deserve empathy, and rights and respect for them ought to be affirmed, and together we should work to "widen the range" of the culture's "socially acceptable belief." Aronson envisions a broad "secular coalition" that will initiate dialogue and even mutual study among believers and unbelievers. Common ground will be opened up, discussion of religion and irreligion made more "nuanced," and "interesting" "perplexing," and "contradictory" ways believers and unbelievers alike live out their secular and religious lives spelled out. And of course the coalition will be strong enough to uphold separation or church and state and effect less not more political discussion of religion.

Aronson's issues could be quite low on the list of priorities of religious socialists. After all, we as well as unbelievers, live in sub-cultures as well as a culture and have to navigate within multiple religiously diverse communities. The need to know when and when not and to whom and whom not to engage in "God talk" is just "part of the terrain." (For a different taste of "socially accepted" belief/unbelief, of induced timidity and being "ignored" and dismissed, sit, as I do, at the *RS* table at the Left Forum/Socialist Scholars Conference each year. One gets a look or condescending, teasing remark (usually without hostility) that says, "Now, why are you people here?" Socialists + scholars together = atheists, 100%. It's fun though to tease right back. "You know what Chesterton said about people who won't believe in God, don't you?" A puzzled look and then, "No." "People who won't believe in God will believe in anything!") But, yes, of course. Respect for articulated unbelief as well as belief and rights for all.

So media driven and sound bite laden is our political discourse that it is hard to imagine the serious dialogue or study recommended by Aronson influencing it. But what about the largely secular political groups and causes within which we religious socialists function?

Are their numbers ever kept small and their work stymied by a mutual uneasiness of believers and unbelievers together? Here as well as among journalists and opinion makers, commonalities as well as differences could be uncovered and talked over. For starters, this internal dialogue ought to make a distinction long lost with pollsters, nearly every secular and some religious writers, and the public generally—the difference between "believe in" and "believe that." The former means trust and faith, the latter adherence to an intellectual proposition, and within religion and irreligion it is very possible to do the latter but not the former and arguably vice versa. Theologies of much religion (and unbelief also?) long leave room for the skeptic. Within Christianity, one thinks of St. Thomas the Doubter, and the great creeds that affirm "I believe 'in.'" Making distinctions indeed opens up he common ground. The late William Sloane Coffin used to say good conversation began when an atheist avowed, "I don't believe in God," and he responded, "Well, what kind of God don't you believe in?"

Within our broader political community, a statement of the Deity's existence more avoids articulating one's trust or values than discloses them. Not so, words of what is believed "in." In this dialogue, if it is to be useful as well as respectful, perhaps unbelievers especially need to articulate their "trusts" or "faiths," as theistic religious socialists and other believers may well suspect the truth of Chesterton's remark.

While he focuses on a narrow political agenda, Aronson also implicitly challenges religious socialists to affirm our commitment to the vision of democratic socialism. Capitalism fetters us, not just as alienated workers, exploited minorities, imperialism's victims, but as believers. Most obviously, It does so by theft of our time—robbing us of the eight hours "for what we will" as remembered in the old labor chant. The "belief in" of religious socialists, as well as other believers, frequently calls one to be observant, that is make use of one's time to think, meditate, pray, do Sabbath, set aside our Fridays/other times, and to listen and learn, exclaim and sing, celebrate and feast. And we mostly act out "belief in" within community which takes up even more of our time. And so, yes, dialogue with our unbelieving comrades if it is helpful, but in the meantime our shared political work against exploitive capitalism should go forward.

Rod Ryon is Co-Chair of Religious Socialists.

Evangelicals

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Jews were exiled into Babylon, as it collapsed in the Roman Empire and, more recently, as it fell in the Soviet Union.

As I sat in the workshops, listening to this presentation by CSCO's principal theologian, Dr. Robert Linthicum, and as I watched the reactions of "theologically conservative" Christian leaders, I was amazed. Linthicum was not "proof-texting" (the practice of picking what you want from the Bible to prove a point of view you had to begin with). In most of his sessions, small groups engaged in exegesis of Biblical passages. General sessions were highly interactive. Questions were invited. When the day was done, participants were convinced. What I was especially struck by was the radical ("radical" meaning going to the root) nature of Biblical prescription and analysis as presented by Linthicum.

In some of the workshops, it was then my job to present the theory and practice of community organizing. "If you listen to the people in your pews, what are they concerned about? What are the pressures on their lives?," I asked. The list was unsurprising: inadequate income, lack of affordable housing, no health care coverage, failing public schools, no child care or after-school programs for young people, crime and drugs, fear about the moral state of the nation and how it is affecting their children and a general sense of powerlessness to do anything about any of them. Every community organizer is familiar with the list. Ask people about the things that are pressing them in their daily lives, and these concerns arise again and again. As them what troubles of their daily lives they would come to a meeting to address, and it is these concerns—not the agenda of the religious right. For example, community organizers I know who work in Catholic parishes where they face the hostility of religious right Catholics say they have little difficulty "out organizing" the conservatives. The reason is simple: community organizing addresses what people care most about. To provide quick exposure to community organizing's strategy and tactics, we role-played confrontations with public decision makers. Workshop participants began to see the possibilities of such community organizing for themselves, their churches and their neighbors.

Using the method of action and reflection, as workshop leaders we integrated faith with action in the

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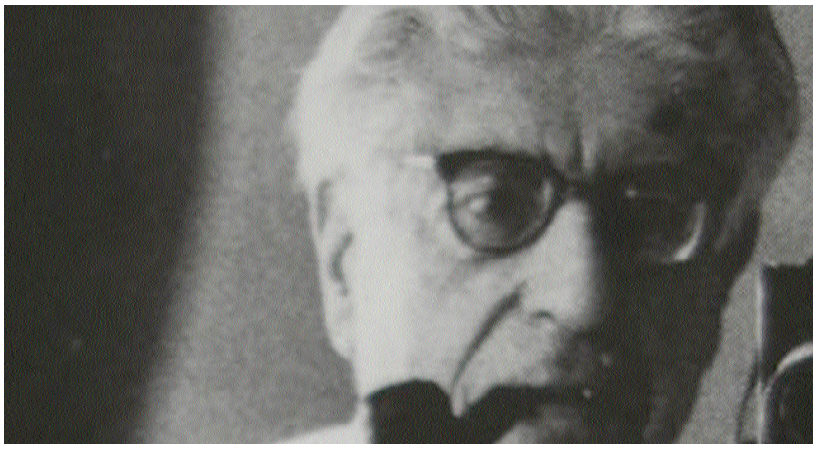
ERNST BLOCH: A GLARING OMISSION IN *SPE SALVI*?



JOSEPH MASHECK

Virginia Woolf once wrote to a friend that she was happy to hear the friend's baby was to be baptized a Catholic because that meant that the child would likely learn kindness of heart. On that reckoning, one may already have wondered, now and again, Well, is this pope Catholic? Now it seems that intellectual generosity doesn't seem to be Benedict's strong suit either, at least in respect to his recent encyclical on the subject of hope, "Spe Salvi."

I might explain that, unlike many across the political spectrum who, though self-identified as Catholics by family or ethnic ties, like to play oedipal hostility onto church, papacy or pope, I happen to be an orthodox and observant Catholic on the political left whose faith extends with deep commitment to (which is not to say without criticism of) the institutional church—much as I would go as far as I could to defend an operational socialist party, reserving the same right to criticize its leadership if and when I thought it went wrong.

It is certainly a fine peacemaking thing that in "Spe Salvi" Pope Benedict XVI cites the Frankfurt School Marxist thinkers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno—the latter actually half Catholic by parentage and in fact known by his Italian mother's name, though this is almost never remarked when cultural generalizations about the Frankfurt School are made. Christians of the left might better follow the example of our Jewish brothers and sisters and not hide their religious heritage, with its often good ethical light, under a political bushel.

Yet I find someone else only thereby all the more oddly missing from "Spe Salvi,'"namely, Ernst Bloch, who was very much an academic star of the left at Tübingen during the pope's purportedly disgruntled stint teaching thrology there, from 1966 to 1969, when Bloch was his wildly famous colleague in philosophy. I do not know if the students he is now said, by contented well-off young blogging conservatives, to have hated for their radical enthusiasm, had as yet spray-painted a university sign to read "Ernst Bloch University of Tübingen"—following, by no means iconoclastically, the German tradition of honorifically personalizing university names, as at Berlin (Humboldt) and Frankfurt (Goethe), not to mention Manchester (Victoria).

But even apart from his legendarily inspiring teaching, Bloch was famous as the author of a treatise of 1,657 pages, *The Principle of Hope* (1959), one of the greatest texts of the Marxist-humanist philosophical tradition. That very different Catholic Tübingener, the Catholic theologian Hans Küng—with whom Cardinal Ratzinger was famously at odds—once favorably likened the Jewish Bloch to the Catholic Romano Guardini, saying that, notwithstanding his atheism, Bloch "awaited death . . . with great curiosity and with death a peut-être: not only decay but, perhaps, redemption out of decay—something quite different" (*Art and the Question of Meaning*, 1980). Nevertheless, the name of this man who inspired so many to hope against even Stalinist odds, does not occur in the encyclical devoted precisely to that.

I have only read a few hefty chunks of *The Principle of Hope*, but enough to appreciate how Bloch as an outsider to religious faith quite understood, without falling into cynicism, more of what concerns us insiders than some "institutional" types might be comfortable with. A section labeled "The Bible and the Kingdom of Neighborly Love," for instance, will not let Christians fall back so handily on the kingdom of God as conveniently "within" ourselves. And it is with an amazing deference that Bloch challenges the business-as-usual sense of "My kingdom is not of this world," which he takes as interpolated by John as a legal loophole for Christians under Roman law: for any pie-

in-the-sky notion of heaven that serves to substitute for a transformed here-and-now, can only affront "the manifest courage and the dignity of the founder of Christianity" (translated by N. Plaice, S. Plaice and P. Knight).

Much as one might rather not say so, it is difficult to imagine that not citing Bloch in such a Blochian document addressed to the faithful of the whole world, and in which the Marxists Horkheimer and Adorno are indeed happily cited, could not have involved then Professor Ratzinger's personal view of Professor Bloch (with or without Küng). But in an age of too much second-guessing and type-casting on all political fronts, it would have been reassuring if the pope, in showing himself capable of acknowledging that the truth is no less divine for coming by way of Marxist humanism, could also have shown that it is too important, too sacred, to compromise, so publicly at that, to bad personal feeling.

It does trouble me that many of my socialist brothers and sisters would say that my very caring about the omission of Bloch is merely evidence of a "hopeless" Christian socialist utopianism, as the cynical conservatives, ironically enough, would happily agree. In this deep already, I will only add that possibly the slighting of Bloch might be rectified before long. For one of the interesting things about "Spe Salvi" is how this encyclical could conceivably turn out to be part of a larger project of Benedict's as yet less publicized critical view of the excesses of globalizing free-market capitalism. If so, one has to hope that that gets through to the U.S. church more effectively than John Paul's last heartfelt but sadly futile pleas for Americans to oppose the war on Iraq. Yes, one can hope.

Joseph Masheck is a professor of art history at Hofstra Univeristy.

Evangelicals

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world, and, in so doing, enriched the meaning of faith.

Something equally important happened. I had discovered in much of my "on the ground" organizing work that many mainline Protestant and Catholic churches paid relatively little attention to the task of integrating life with faith and faith with life—and connecting both to a biblically-based theology. The power of religious belief, the source of values for the vast majority of Americans, was not tapped.

Often clergy lacked the tools to make deep connections between their church's teachings and the lives of the people in the pews. Those connections are exactly what Linthicum and other CSCO leaders help people make. And when people are exposed to their teaching, there is tremendous energy in the results. The basic message is clear: the Bible not only permits, but demands, individual and group action on behalf of justice and community.

Linthicum and other CSCO members are now being asked to present their biblical and historical material to local community organizations. Organizer friends and colleagues rave about the teaching and testify to the power of its impact on their mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy and lay leaders. I think the reason for this impact is simple.

The problems of our time are social, economic and political. But they are also profoundly spiritual. If this spiritual dimension remains untouched, people are not likely to be deeply moved to act. In its work, CSCO is tapping the spiritual, the search for meaning beyond that offered in the twenty minutes of advertising that punctuate every hour-long TV show. CSCO theologians and leaders are making a direct connection between the spiritual and what goes on in everyday life. There is power for good here.

It just may be that this band of Evangelical, Pentecostal and Holiness Christians will provide the moral compass for which Americans are desperately looking. The compass points to what Martin Luther King called "the beloved community," and is a guide that leads us to act against social, political and economic injustices, as well as a map to identify the abuses of power by corporate and government decision makers. Ironically, among these people who are so different from me I have found what I knew in my days on the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: a band of sisters and brothers in a circle of trust committed to building the more humane, just and democratic society for which we all hope.

Mike Miller is Executive Director of the San Francisco-based ORGANIZE! Training Center, and served as a consultant with CSCO from 1993 - 1999.

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And writing from a hotel room in Canada, from which she watched the devastation unfold, Sheryl Cashin reconsiders the role of urban organizations in light of Kanye West's infamous proclamation, "George Bush doesn't care about black people."

Race or class?

Conversely, Adolph Reed lambastes the focus on race. In his terse essay, "The Real Divide," Reed incisively highlights the role of class. He rejects race as the primary tool of analysis for two reasons: first, "the language of race and racism is too imprecise to describe effectively even how patterns of injustice and inequality are racialized in a post-Jim Crow world." Second, Reed argues that many liberals gravitate to the language of racism not simply because it makes them feel righteous but also because is doesn't carry any political warrant beyond exhorting people not to be racist.

Reed contends that use of race obscures class and does not recognize a fundamental crisis in the political economy. Racism, for Reed, "can be a one-word description and explanation of patterns of unequal distribution of income and wealth, services and opportunities, police brutality, a stockbrokers inability to get a cab, neighborhood dislocation and gentrification, poverty, unfair criticism of black or Latino athletes, or being denied admission to a boutique. Because the category is so porous, it doesn't explain anything. Indeed, it is an alternative to explanation."

Yet race must be addressed as we consider the phenomena of New Orleans. Focusing on the descriptions of a black man carrying a bag as a "looter" and a white couple as having "found" food, Cheryl I. Harris and Devon W. Carbado investigate the role of racial logic in articulating the activities of stranded residents in the flood's immediate aftermath. "Loot or Find? Fact or Frame" strives to unmask the colorblind discourse surrounding race in the American media. Michael Eric Dyson skillfully categorizes the forms of migration experienced by black folk and situates Katrina in that context. Clement Alexander Price methodologically discusses the Galveston, Texas flood of 1900, finding poor blacks to be peculiarly vulnerable to natural disasters.

These essays and others counter Reed's claim of race being inappropriate to describe this current crisis. His claim obscures the blackness of suffering in late modernity. Where Reed is correct is in saying that race and class need to engage in a more intimate dialogue —and within that conversation we also need to include gender.

Gender, Age, and Neoliberalism

In There Is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster, that linkage is made most evident in an essay by co-editor Chester Hartman and social policy analyst Avis Jones-DeWeever. In "Abandoned Before the Storms," the co-authors illustrate with wonkish precision the dismal unemployment and poverty rates for African-American women. "In fact, of the 43 states with sample sizes large enough to provide a reliable measure of African-American women's earnings, Louisiana ranked worst in the nation with full-time annual earnings of only $19,400."

POWER, NOT THE NEEDS OF THE WOMAN ON THE BAGGAGE MOVER OR THE 45-YEAR-OLD ON WORKERS' COMP, DRIVES THE IDEOLOGY OF DECLINES.

Margaret Morganroth Gullette's chapter, "Katrina and the Politics of Later Life," provide a unique argument. "Ageism," she theorizes, "at the level of feelings is a peculiar privilege, compelling but ominous." Ageism has this in common with racism or sexism: it forbids thinking "we can ever be them."

People over 50 died in far greater numbers in the storm's aftermath. These unwarranted deaths are linked to an ideology of decline, writes Gulette. "Ageism is wrapped up in neoliberal state policy on behalf of postindustrial capital. Power, not the needs of the woman on the baggage mover or the 45-year-old on workers' comp, drives the ideology of declines." Our national state, like others, is "promoting and funding market solutions" in a "race to the bottom" to see "how much and how fast social expenditures may be reduced in order to transfer more national wealth to the corporate sector." This is a global effort, she maintains. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are "at the forefront of attempts to foster a political climate conducive to reducing the state welfare of old age."

The insertions of ageism and gender to the Katrina discourse speak to the level of nuance needed to

understand what has been unmasked about American "democracy"—and the global economy. Filled with graphs and numbers, *There Is No Such Thing* provides insights on the role of financial institutions alongside grassroots organizing, medical needs, pre and post-public education crisis and the public housing. The book's most important element is that it puts forth a strong set of policies – ones that would not rebuild New Orleans, but create a deeper democracy.

Women Ignored

What Lies Beneath offers a chorus of indigenous voices. Like a jazz band, steeped in improvisation, the work is the most heartfelt and wise of the three. Edited by the South End Press collective, the book is both dramatic and elegant.

The personal struggles for survival are absent from the other pair of anthologies. This collection poignantly retells several of these stories. Charmine Neville, of the famous musical family, painfully recounts being raped. She then describes how, despite such a violation, she continued—like Harriet Tubman—to go back and get those who had been left behind. In her simply titled essay, "How We Survived the Flood," she recalls:

> *There was a group of us, there were about 24 of us, and we kept going back and forth and rescuing whoever we could get and bringing them to the French Quarter because we heard there were phones in the French Quarter, and that there wasn't any water. And they were right, there were phones but we couldn't get through to anyone. I found some police officers. I told them that a lot of us women had been raped down there by guys, not from the neighborhood where we were, they were helping us to save people.*

The question of violence during Katrina and its aftermath is a problematic, layered one. In "To Render Ourselves Visible," the radical feminist collective INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence editors problematize the topic by looking both at how some survivors were criminalized as well as the silence by organizers and analysts on the question of sexual violence against women and children. This leads them to declare:

Instead of figuring out strategies to take people's experiences of sexual violence seriously, the strategy was to bring the media's attention back to the "real" problems of institutional poverty, police violence, and the failure of government response. Sexual violence (along with its victims and perpetrators) is, again, rendered invisible in the name of ending racism.

With a broad lens of critique, the INCITE! authors also point to how outside organizations and individuals ignored local leadership – and how women of color from New Orleans have organized themselves in response. Throughout the anthology, women's and other voices from New Orleans are lifted up; not as a footnote, but rather a powerful testimony to the endurance of the poor, and those who are their chosen representatives. The stories of community groups – like

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Common Ground, the People's Hurricane Relief Fund, and the Black Women's Health Project – are told by the organizers themselves.

What Lies Beneath also succeeds by evoking the tales of suffering through different forms of writing. The poetic pen of Kalamu ya Salaam and Suheir Hammad lend beauty to the pain of this experience. Jared Sexton's stirring essay, "The Obscurity of Black Suffering," illustrates the invisibility of poor black folk both inside and outside of the black community. Sexton's notion of obscurity sits at the center of my own sense of emptiness concerning New Orleans.

Faith After The Storm

In what I believe will be recorded as my generation's "Montgomery," I cried every day. While the Interfaith Worker Justice Center that I went to New Orleans to open is up and running, staffed with interns, I still feel defeated. Perhaps, it is because New Orleans taught me what I did not know. My faith was shaken; my vocation questioned; my sense of professional success shattered; and any messianic impulse that I have ever possessed receded with the floodwaters.

While I have fully lost faith in the capacity of national African-American leadership and the white progressive establishment to answer DuBois's question, I have gained a deeper appreciation of the work of everyday folk to change their lot. Like faith itself, the local organizers of New Orleans are the substance of what I hoped for and the evidence of what I could not see.

I, like the many authors of these three collections, am struggling with my own meaning in the face of black suffering at the beginning of the 21st century. I thank whatever gods there may be for these anthologies and organizers because I now know a little more.

Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou is currently serving as a senior community minister at Judson Memorial Church in New York City. He spent six months in New Orleans organizing the city's Interfaith Worker Justice Center. This article originally appeared in Fellowship.

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