

## CHRISTIAN SOCIALISM IN AMERICA

---

JOHN SPARGO  
Yonkers N. Y.

---

The most remarkable recent development of socialism in America is the phase of the movement represented by the Christian Socialist Fellowship. Almost every country in the world has its Christian-socialist movement, but only in the United States is there a perfectly harmonious and intimate relation between it and the regular socialist political party.

England is the classic home of so-called Christian socialism. Little more is implied by the term, in England, than a philanthropic attitude toward the poor and the oppressed. Among the members of the various Christian-socialistic organizations there are many earnest and sincere men and women who accept the full political programme without reserve and loyally support it. But most of the members do not. They content themselves with preaching an ethical propaganda of human brotherhood, and, on the practical side, with reform movements, such as co-operative trading, anti-sweating crusades, relief colonies for the unemployed, and the promotion of the use of leadless-glaze pottery—all very commendable works, but not fundamentally related to socialism as that term is rightly understood.

To one familiar with the writings of Frederic Denison Maurice, the founder of English Christian socialism, it is evident enough that he was not in sympathy with the great fundamental changes contemplated by the socialist of today. His desire was to "christianize socialism," by which he could not have meant more than to supplant socialism by Christianity. The spirit of Maurice largely prevails in the Christian-socialist movement today, and to find prominent Christian socialists opposing the socialist candidates at election time, and supporting anti-socialists, is not unusual.

The Christian-socialistic movement of Germany—the movement started and led by the Protestants, Pastor Todt, and the late

Dr. Stöcker—has long been the subject of merciless criticism by those who denied its right to be considered either Christian or socialist. On its economic side, at least, Pastor Todt's work was originally quite in harmony with the Marxian socialist theory, but the aggressive "atheism" of the leaders of the social-Democratic party developed in him a sort of mania. Starting out to convert the social democrats from this cardinal error, he and his friends became more and more concerned with fighting the socialists upon the religious issue than with supporting them upon the economic issue. For many years the *Mucker-Socialismus* of the Christian socialists has taken the form of bitter opposition to the social-democratic party. It has stood for the reactionary policy of strengthening the monarchical power, to make the sovereign absolute and independent of parliament, and for that most detestable of propagandas, at once repulsive to Christian and socialist ethics, anti-Semitism. It is easy to understand the intense, immeasurable hatred and contempt of the average German socialist for this kind of Christian socialism, and the spread of that hatred and contempt to other lands.

In the United States we have, happily, never had Christian socialism of the German, Todt-Stöcker brand. We have always had a few Christian socialists of the Kingsley-Maurice type, mostly confining their activities to the Protestant Episcopal church, and never coming into contact with the actual socialist movement. But the Christian Socialist Fellowship represents neither of these types. It is concerned only with the carrying of the doctrines of socialism as taught by the socialist party to the Christian church. It has thus a very close relation to the political socialist movement.

When one reflects that the socialist movement in America was for many years, and until very recent times, almost exclusively composed of Germans, and that the German influence, while rapidly declining, is still quite an important factor in the movement, it will be easy to understand the consternation with which the formation of the Christian Socialist Fellowship, by active members of the socialist party, was viewed. Here, indeed, was treason to the cause! That some of the most prominent and

active members of the socialist party should warmly support the fellowship was incomprehensible.

Equally strange was the fact that the Christian socialists did not begin a propaganda to christianize the socialists, but confined themselves to doing socialist propaganda among the Christians—not the propaganda of a diluted socialism, but the same straight, uncompromising socialism for which the socialist party stood. Filled with hatred and distrust of Christian socialism, many went to the lectures and meetings arranged by the fellowship, expecting to detect the cloven hoof of their devil. They were dumbfounded to discover that, except for some devotional exercises, and the use of a somewhat strange theological jargon, the meetings were just like those arranged by the party. Often there were the same speakers—prominent socialists of undoubted integrity, not Christians, often, indeed, Jews! The burden of the speeches was the same: men were urged to support the socialist party; the “class struggle” was clearly enunciated; sometimes the red flag was much in evidence. Christian ministers preached openly in support of the socialist party, and urged their hearers to vote for Mr. Debs, the socialist-party candidate!

Here was a miracle: an inexplicable thing. The socialists of Europe heard of it and read about it and were staggered by the new phenomenon. Professor Ragaz, a theological professor of Zurich, himself a socialist, declares that there was intense astonishment on the part of the social democrats of Europe at the socialist orthodoxy displayed at the Christian-socialist conferences held in various American cities. They could not understand the union of Christian belief with the most uncompromising adherence to the Marxian philosophy. “How can that sort of regular party doctrine come from Christians?” they asked. One of the most prominent social democrats in Freiburg, Germany, exclaimed with amazement: “Why, good straight party members, who have worked for socialism for years, have left here to go to America, and we hear after a while that he or she actually goes to church, and one has even joined a church. What kind of a church, and what kind of a socialist movement have you got over there, anyhow?”

In fact the fellowship is not a Christian-socialist organization

at all. The name is a misnomer, and, in the opinion of many of its members, should be changed. "Fellowship of Socialist Christians" would be much more nearly descriptive of the aims and spirit of the organization, but not entirely so. For there are Jews among its membership, and even agnostics and atheists. The object of the organization is to "permeate churches and other religious institutions with the social message of Jesus"—by which socialism is understood. All who agree with the necessity of that are welcome to membership.

The position of the fellowship has been clearly and unequivocally stated in a "Declaration of Principles," adopted at the national convention last June. This statement, written by a prominent socialist writer active in the socialist party, sets forth that the fellowship "does not stand for a socialism that is distinctively Christian;" that it has no connection with, or relation to, the so-called Christian-socialist movement in Europe which antagonizes the socialist parties; that it stands for uncompromising socialism as represented by the great international socialist movement and by the socialist party of the United States; that its aim is "not to christianize socialism," but simply to spread a knowledge of, and belief in, socialism among people of religious belief and affiliation.

In this spirit, the fellowship has held meetings all over the United States. Many of its most active members are equally active in the socialist party itself. Just prior to the last election, some two hundred ministers, all in actual charge of parishes, and representing all the leading Protestant sects, signed a manifesto pledging themselves to the socialist cause, and it is said that upward of two thousand other ministers have signified their general sympathy and support.

Whatever one's views of socialism may be, it cannot be gainsaid that this development of socialism in America is a most remarkable phenomenon. Will the union of socialism and Christianity continue, or will a split inevitably occur upon the religious issue? Time alone can answer that question with certainty, but it must be said that there are fewer signs of such a split today than at any time in the history of the movement. Rash, incautious, tactless men on either side may provoke a

division at any time, but with a continuance of the broad, wise tolerance which has hitherto prevailed upon both sides the permanence of the union would seem to be secured.

The fact is that socialism has entered upon a new phase, both in Europe and this country. Modern socialism had its roots in the scientific renaissance which began with Darwin, and it naturally and inevitably partook of the resultant rationalism. It was inevitably drawn into the phase of the long warfare of science and theology which the new theories provoked. Just as a belief in the new theories of evolution was, for a long time, regarded, on both sides of the controversy, as being synonymous with atheism, so belief in socialism, for a long time, was held by friends and foes alike as being synonymous with atheism. It is a far cry from Liebknecht's statement in 1875, that no one is worthy of the name of a socialist "who does not consecrate himself to the spread of atheism," and the wild diatribes of Bebel in the same period, to the declaration of the German social-democratic party, in the Erfurt *Programm*, in 1891, that religious belief is a private matter, and to Bebel's action in advising the wide circulation of Pastor Kutter's book, *They Must!*—an exhortation to Christians to support the social democracy *because* they are Christians.

The tide of crude materialism which was at its height in the late sixties and early seventies of the nineteenth century has receded, largely because its battles against equally crude dogmas have won. Christianity has thrown off the shackles of dogma, to a large extent, and returned to its primal social ideals. On the other hand, the blind faith of the early rationalism, with its bitter intolerance, has been modified. When a bishop of the Protestant Episcopal church in America can carry the red card of membership in the socialist party, and when, as at the last convention in Chicago, delegates to the national convention of the socialist party, as loyal Catholics, without any shame or apology to any of their comrades, can go directly from mass to the work of shaping the policy of the socialist party, it is obvious that we are in the presence of a new socialism of a quality and temper undreamed of by Marx and Engels.