

“The Literature of the Christian Left”

A truth too often overlooked is that radicalism in the United States originally emerged from forms of Christianity that far preceded Marxism. The roots of American radicalism are religious and moral rather than scientific or dialectical. Moreover, print culture, from the days of the early republic to our own era, has remained the primary site where religion and the political, where word and action, thought and deed, have met to impel the transformation of individuals and the social order. Antebellum abolitionists used the medium to appeal to religious sentiment and the ethical imperatives of the faith to condemn racism and advocate for the liberation of all Americans. Transcendentalist ministers and Christian socialists published small magazines like *The Harbinger*, *The Present*, the *Spirit of the Age*, and *The Dawn*, among others, to disseminate anticapitalist polemics that were predicated on liberal theology and intended to encourage reforms that would broaden social justice in the young nation. Union organizers and rank and file workers wrote in a prophetic, religious idiom to denounce economic inequality and to portray the early labor movement as a necessary step toward establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth. The turn of the century reforms that defined the Progressive Era were initiated by the prolific writing of Christian socialists and proponents of the Social Gospel who also founded institutions dedicated to social justice, such as William Ellery Channing’s Christian Union Church, the Religious Union of Associationists and its Church of Humanity, Bouck White’s The Church of the Social Revolution, William Dwight Porter Bliss’s Church of the Carpenter, and the Church Association for the Advancement of the Interests of Labor, to name but a few. These radical religious publications and organizations were integral to labor reform and to the Women’s Rights movement. Susan B. Anthony was among Channing’s congregants, “whose teaching,” Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote, “had a lasting spiritual influence upon” Anthony. Later, Dorothy Day would carry on this tradition with the Catholic Worker Movement. Later still, the historian William McLaughlin would argue that the upsurge of activism, spirituality, intentional communities, and moral recalibration in the 1960s, which contributed to the Civil Rights Movement and to the Sexual Revolution, constituted America’s Third Great Awakening. Today, while figures like Shane Claiborne and his brand of radical evangelicalism have rebooted the tradition of utopian practical Christianity for the new millennium, the power of the Christian left to initiate social change appears to be decidedly on the wane.

For this panel, in an effort to recover the role of religious radicalism in the social and political development of the nation, we seek presentations on any topic related to the history or literature of the Christian left in America. We also seek essays concerned with the present status of the Christian left and its ability or inability to be politically effective in America today.

Please submit 300-500 word abstracts to Kathryn Ludwig (kludwig@bsu.edu) by January 15. The subject of the email should be “Christian Left” and the proposal should include any A/V needs you will require.