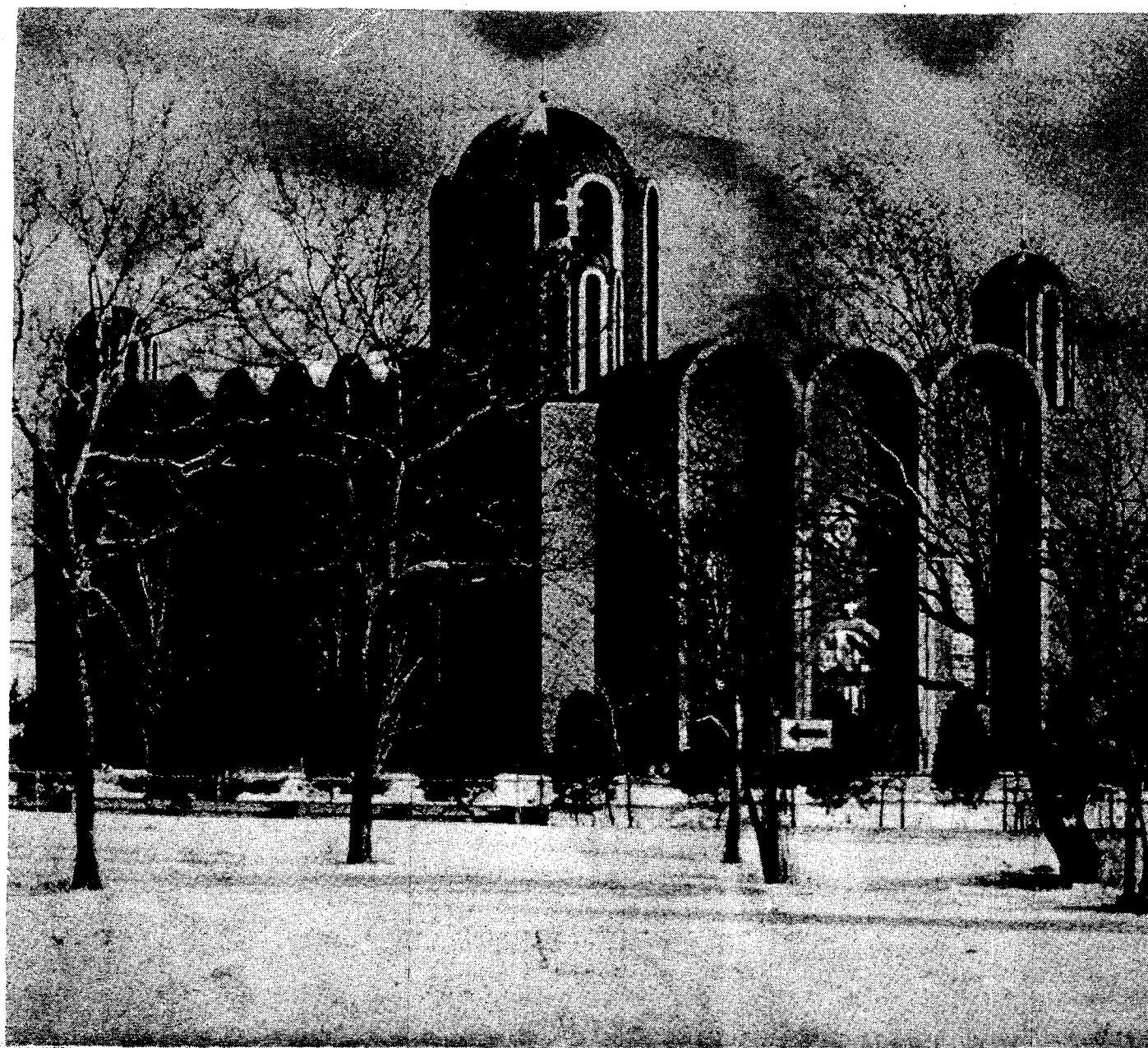


Christians for socialism



Do the teachings of Christ point to socialism?

Photo by Jane Melnick

By Judy MacLean
Staff Writer

"Religion," Karl Marx once said, "is the opiate of the people." Mainstream religious leaders since Marx have had far less flattering things to say about socialism. So at first glance American Christians Toward Socialism (ACTS) seems an unlikely group. And it seems even more unlikely that it is part of a world-wide network known as Christians for Socialism, whose purpose is changing Christianity into a revolutionary force.

The movement began in Chile, where there had been a tradition of socially-oriented church involvement in the government under the Christian Democratic administration of Eduardo Frei. When Salvador Allende's Marxist-led coalition was elected, the response of the church hierarchy was opposition. But many priests and nuns who ministered to poor and working people had learned through reform work that only a socialist society could really help their parishioners. These clergy joined with other Catholic activists and formed Christians for Socialism, which actively supported Allende's government and publicly tried to persuade the

Catholic church to do likewise.

When Allende's government was overthrown by military coup, over a hundred members of the group were thrown in prison, many to face torture and death. Others escaped and are working with Christian Socialist groups that have sprung up in many countries in this hemisphere as well as Europe and Asia.

ACTS is, as Joseph Holland of Washington D.C.'s Center for Concern describes it, "small, weak and humble." But he thinks "it's ringing a lot of bells for people."

► Remain legitimate Christians.

Like its counterparts in other countries, ACTS does not stand outside of various Christian churches. Members remain in the churches, struggling to make them forces for revolutionary change.

In Spain, Christians for Socialism called upon the Catholic church to confess its sins during the period of fascist dictatorship under Franco.

In the U.S., says Kathleen Schultz, national executive secretary of the group, ACTS will try to get churches to repent of the past and establish a new kind of

revolutionary practice. Once ACTS establishes a presence, they intend to struggle against being marginalized by the hierarchy here," she says.

According to ACTS, ideological forces—like religion and mass media—play an even stronger role in keeping working people in support of the status quo. If religion can become a force for revolution, a powerful tool of the ruling class will be gone.

"We challenge the interclassism of the church," says Schultz. Christian love, she says, has been used to defend the idea that, for example, "Detroit's unemployed and Henry Ford and Max Fisher can sit down and have a good time. This obscures class differences in the name of peace, charity, gospel and faith."

► Is God a Marxist?

Most ACTS chapters run study groups, have educational events or celebrations that involve people in religious study from a Marxist viewpoint. "Is God a Marxist?" was the title of a recent Bay Area workshop. Many of their larger counterparts in other countries do the same. Christian socialists in Italy run over 16,000 Bible study groups.

"When I first heard that," says Kathleen Schultz, "I thought, my God, what are political Christians doing trying to mobilize people with Bible study? But the political situation there makes the difference, the interpretation of scripture is radicalizing."

Like their counterparts elsewhere, members of ACTS don't form a separate party, but join other parties and organizations. That makes the situation somewhat more difficult in the U.S. than in countries like Italy where Christians for Socialism thrives in the context of a well-organized left.

"It's unclear where people's and workers' movements and left organizations are at this time," says Schultz. "There's no clear strategy for the left as a whole—

not even an instrumentality for finding that."

► A new theology.

The Christian socialist movement has its own theologians and theology—a theory of liberation, they call it. German-born theologian Dorothy Solle describes how Christianity, practiced right, leads to Marxism: If you love your neighbor and pay attention to your own experiences, "you want to understand the cause of your neighbor's misery, and to bring about changes. The person who is genuinely compassionate will eventually hit granite—the structures of property and society, the injustice inherent in the class system. When such a new phase has been reached, it is high time to read Karl Marx."

This new theology holds that Christianity has been robbed of its revolutionary message by too long an association with the capitalist class. Theologians of liberation, like Solle or Chilean exile Gonzalo Arroyo, believe they are recapturing Christ's basic message and that Marxism provides a scientific method for putting the gospel into practice.

In this view, Christianity is actually a liberating and democratic belief system that is inherently socialist, but the proper interpretation of the scriptures hasn't been done because it would offend the powerful.

Liberation theology has its conservative critics. Catholic columnist Michael Novak calls it "a fad which should be resisted." His colleague Andrew Greeley calls liberation theologians "hate-filled people, shouting about guilt and calling for expiation."

Theologians of liberation believe there will be a need for religion under socialism. Just as Marx predicted about the state, they believe religion will only wither away as society approaches pure communism, when the community is truly functioning "from each according to his/her ability, to each according to his/her needs." Until then, the church will play a role, but it will be, according to Gonzalo Arroyo, "a poorer church deprived and divested of privilege, and also a church less institutionalized." Such a church would "incarnate new forms of Christian life which reject the alienating patterns of living the faith often present in capitalist societies."

► Many members in clergy.

Many ACTS members are clergy. In Iowa a group of Methodist ministers, mostly in small-town parishes, form a chapter. Do they preach socialism from the pulpit? Yes, and at least one has been demoted to a smaller, more rural parish for doing so. They also publish a sort of sermon service for other Methodist ministers. One, an Advent sermon, made a parallel between the need for repentance before the birth of Jesus with the need of the U.S. government to repent of its sins in the Third World.

Lee Cormie, a Chicago ACTS member and a theology teacher, says he began moving away from religion when religious answers to social problems seemed irrelevant. "And yet, my concern with social issues came out of my religious tradition. So Christians for Socialism has been a way to recover that tradition, to be more true to it," he said.

"The thing that attracted me," says Marcia Cormie, also of Chicago ACTS, "was that the people were not just working out a political analysis. They were also willing to reflect on the process that made them willing to engage in struggle."

"The three main elements, action, reflection and celebration, are all important. It's a group that takes celebration seriously, as something that keeps people going, so they don't give up when they get frustrated."

"And it's not like some left groups, trying to shove a message down people's throat," she continued. "It's a group of people working together to find ways to tap into people's religious tradition, and show that socialism does not contradict that tradition."



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