

Avoiding the doctrinaire as well as the doctrine error

Christian Socialism

By John Cort
Orbis Press, 402 pp., \$19.95

By Paul Buhle

THOUGH THE MAMMON-WORSHIPERS may cry, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" wrote socialistic American labor leader George McNeill in 1890, the true rebel would never accept the permanence of capitalistic materialism. No matter how dark the night ahead, "the new Pentecost will come, when every man shall have according to his needs." These are old thoughts, of course—at least two thousand

years old. Repeatedly, they seem to disappear into the rock-solid conservatism of organized churches, and the optimism of secular radical forces. Just as repeatedly, they turn up again, most recently as Liberation Theology.

Although we often fail to recog-

RELIGION

nize the religious elements in our own radical traditions, they have persisted and sometimes taken leading roles. Religious-communitarian colonies launched socialism in the New World. Abolitionism, women's rights and early labor reform efforts

transformed biblical watchwords into political action.

The earliest scholarly classic of U.S. socialism, *The Ancient Lowly*, by First International member C. Osborne Ward, devoted nearly a thousand pages to proving that Christianity had begun as a workers' movement against empire, and even in defeat raised the prospect of eventual collective triumph over the evil principle of empire. Jewish radicals described Marx as a Moses leading the children from the pharaoh's land of capitalism.

Christians in the Debs-led Socialist Party emphasized the struggles against war and for black rights. In

the decades since, they (aided by a large handful of liberal rabbis) have intermittently served in the front ranks of peace, civil rights, anti-imperialist and even feminist efforts, often self-consciously playing second fiddle to a largely anti-religious left.

Informed and informal: Well and good, but what is the real relation between the terms "Christian" and "socialism"? John Cort says in advance that he can't claim to be definitive. The subtitle reads, "An Informal History." But he means to explore the subject with a wide compass, offering the reader insights into the range of evidence available.

Cort himself deserves defining first. He is a jolly dogmatist. An activist from his youth in the Catholic Worker Movement, Cort has been a radical of a most unique sort. On the social side, he upbraids capitalism's evil effects upon the human body and spirit. On the spiritual side, he is the pope's man, a died-in-the-wool theological conservative with all the accompanying implications. Once, some decades ago, he worked closely with the Association of Catholic Trade Unions, which allied itself promiscuously with the various anti-communist forces inside the labor movement, a strategy with catastrophic effects.

Recently, as editor of the Democratic Socialists of America's quarterly religious newsletter, he has stirred up a hornet's nest of controversy with his opposition to women's ordination and his resistance to a gay Christianity. But Cort cannot be accused of hypocrisy. He has not only worked hard with his pen to offer a vision of a more cooperative future, but has given his boundless personal energies to aid the poor directly.

Hidden histories: *Christian Socialism* has Cort's own weak and strong points. It is, for starters, more Catholic than catholic. He passes rather swiftly over religious rebels from the church, be they early com-

munitarian Gnostics, Radical Reformation Protestants or Latin American syncretists (weavers of new doctrine from Catholic and indigenous sources).

He therefore not only sees ambiguous—and arguably conservative—figures such as St. Paul and Thomas Aquinas in the most favorable light, he fails to grasp the theological-philosophical significance of revolt itself, the periodic attempt to effect true Christianity (or, later, socialism) through uprooting the corrupt and despotic "Whore of Babylon" depicted by the rebels.

Cort seems strangely unaware of, or indifferent toward, the recent scholarly attention to the hidden history of religious-radical mysticism (prominently on display in, among other places, the leftish *Gnosis* magazine), so loyal is he to the Thomist mainstream. In short, very different books on the same subject have been written with no less commitment or erudition.

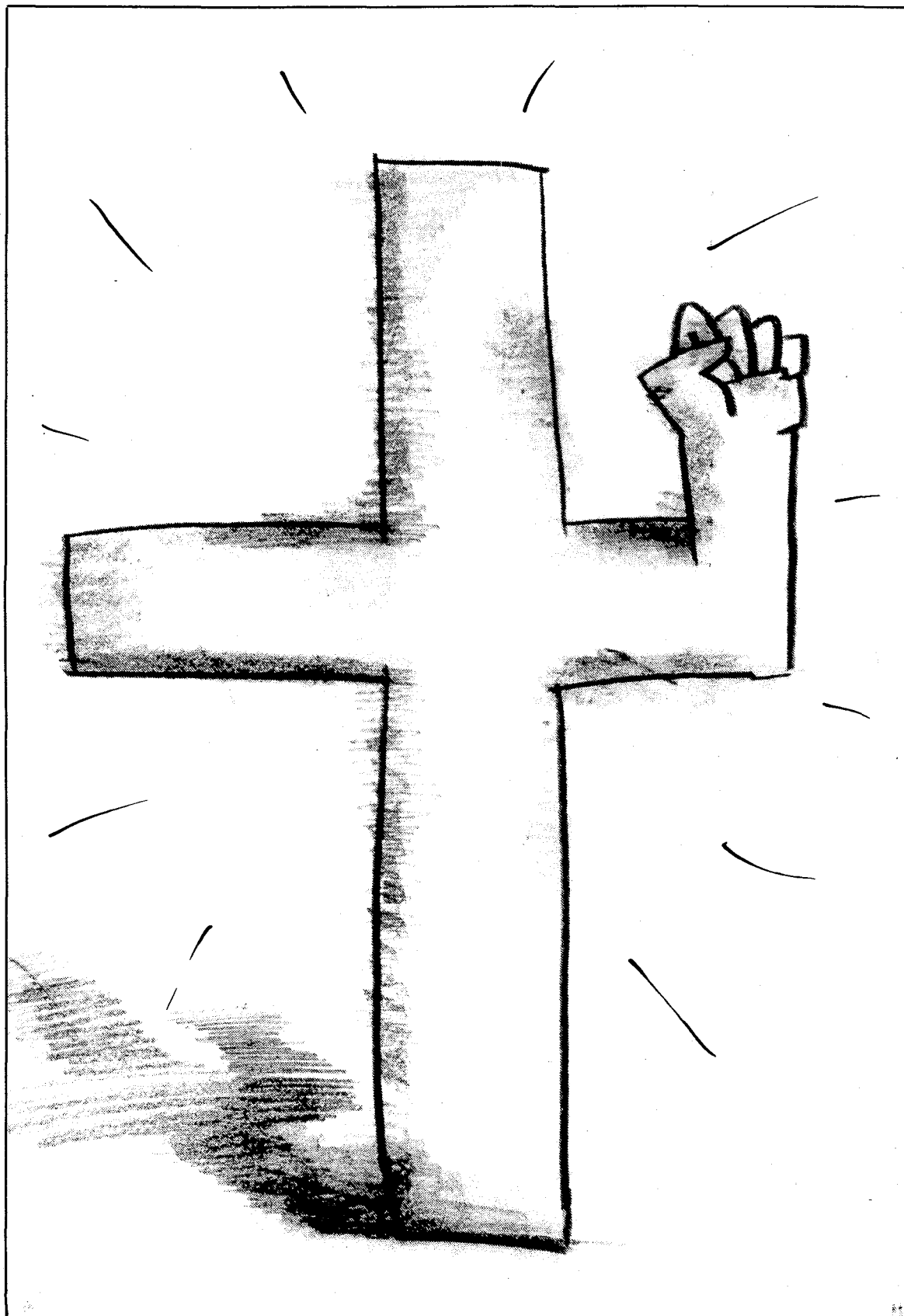
But Cort still covers a lot of political-religious territory. His commentaries on the struggles by church fathers themselves against conservatism, and on the various religion-touched pioneers of modern socialism against the cruel industrial capitalism, are powerful and fascinating. He often writes, oddly but eloquently, as if carrying on a personal disputation with intellectuals centuries dead, describing and discussing the merits of their particular religious and social arguments. One cannot quite be sure of Cort's choices, historically or intellectually. But his directness lends a welcome tone of anti-pomposity to *Christian Socialism*.

Cort ends up more or less where he began, urgently preaching the case of the suffering billions, almost as urgently warning against a merely materialistic solution to their suffering. Like the pontiff (whose recent Encyclical asks: "How can one justify the fact that huge sums of money, which could and should be used for increasing the development of peoples, are instead utilized for the enrichment of individuals or groups, or assigned to the increase of stock-piles of weapons?"), Cort is anxious that Liberation Theologians may at times be more Marxist than Christian.

He is searching, not for a "middle way" between capitalism or communism or between medieval church tyranny and modern apathy, but a *different* way, a "vocation" that is at once "earthly and transcendent." Whether he finds it in real life or not, he has applied this spirit to *Christian Socialism*. Readers will want to pick up the book, argue mentally, even slam it down and then start up again later. When they do, they'll find the pugnacious Cort ready to tussle—non-violently, of course.

Paul Buhle has written widely (and wildly) on religion and radicalism.

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New Voices: Student Political Activism in the '80s and '90s

By Tony Vellela
South End Press, 279 pp., \$11.00

By William E. Cain

TONY VELLELA'S VALUABLE BOOK convincingly demonstrates the vitality of student activism in the '80s and outlines a range of student-led movements and issues likely to figure prominently in the '90s. *New Voices* is not, Vellela concedes, "a work of history or sociology or political analysis." It is, rather, a detailed field report based on a host of interviews with students and faculty at colleges and universities nationwide between November 1986 and July 1987.

Vellela begins by briefly reviewing the central policy questions—divestment, Central America, CIA recruitment, women's and minority rights, academic decision-making—around which students in the '80s have mobilized. He then outlines some of the strategies, including civil disobedience, teach-ins and fund raising, that students have pursued—often in the face of fierce opposition from administrators and amused skepticism from the media.

Later chapters, buttressed by cogent excerpts from Vellela's interviews, examine more closely the forms of student protest that focus on divestment, U.S. Central America policy, campaigns for equal rights and efforts to dispute the academy's manifold connections to the war machine. Vellela pays close attention to specific organizations and networks that students have developed and lists resources and popular tactics.

Not fade away: Vellela emphasizes that student activism "never went away" after the '60s ended, and indeed has shown a vigorous, combative life in recent years as students rose to challenge the cruelties of Reaganism at home and abroad. The evidence of campus protest that Vellela musters is especially useful because, as he points out, the media have consistently portrayed campuses as "quiet" and "tranquil," or else, when they have reported divestment rallies or sit-ins against CIA recruitment, have tended to label them as mere "throwbacks to the '60s."

If one were to listen exclusively to mass-media reporters and pundits, Vellela stresses, one would conclude that students are oblivious to the world around them and venture forth only in small numbers on rare occasions for ill-conceived reenactments of '60s-style happenings. As a slight but revealing instance of the media's habitual screening of contemporary protests through '60s vocabulary, Vellela recalls that Amy Carter, arrested at the University of Massachusetts and put on trial for resisting the CIA, was described by NBC as "living in a commune," as though she were a free-love hippy.

In part such daft comments are the by-product of sloppy journalism;



Enrollment still strong in Protest-101

(in fact Amy Carter shared housing with other people—which is perfectly common and quite respectable). But they promote the notion that today's politicized students are doing something outdated and, unaccountably estranged from the more sensible '80s, are seeking to recapture an ambience that fortunately disappeared long ago.

Cutting edge: Vellela also confronts the hard facts that afflict student activists. Students not only have sought to resist racism, sexism and homophobia in the culture as a whole, but have also tried, not always successfully, to engage these issues within their own movements and groups. As the National Student Convention held at Rutgers in February 1988 made clear, students are still in the process of defining equitable, sensitive modes of exercising authority. They are also painfully laboring to form coalitions that will give a fair hearing to all voices and that will not end up locating blacks, women and gays and lesbians on the margins.

Vellela properly takes a highly affirmative, yet somewhat qualified, slant on student activism in the '80s and its prospects for the '90s. But the overall situation is, I think, even more complicated and double-edged than he suggests. To be sure, as Vellela testifies, students have launched many potent forays against Reaganism. Yet many students voted for Reagan and are now loyal to George Bush, have indicated that "material well-being" is their top priority in life and have rapidly shifted from liberal arts to engineering and other subjects that presumably guarantee quick financial success. Reaganism has radicalized many students but has also won numerous converts for its new gospel of wealth.

Most students are not, I suspect,

particularly happy converts to Reagan's preaching, nor are they intrinsically selfish and self-absorbed. But they are fearful, burdened by an ideology and economics of scarcity. They are keenly conscious of the possibility that they might not survive the tough competition for well-paying (if not necessarily satisfying) jobs. And this colors their sense of the political risks they can afford to take while in school.

Economic pressures: Higher education is, of course, a daunting investment for most people. Students often must work long hours to help pay their way, and, with outright grants and scholarships now mostly

Vellela confronts the hard economic and political facts that afflict student organizers.

replaced by loans, students and their parents frequently borrow hefty sums of money that must eventually be repaid at exorbitant rates of interest.

The scary cost of college, along with the specter of inflation, recession, unemployment and underemployment, worries students from the moment they start to sketch their college plans. This is one of the reasons why the "career center," as the *New York Times* recently reported, is the first thing that parents and students investigate when they visit college campuses. Families fall into debt as soon as freshman year begins, and that debt only deepens for those students who go on to graduate or professional school. Debt and the limited number of rewarding jobs crucially affect a student's choices and badly narrow

and distort his or her sense of what might be explored, done and dared while in school and afterward.

Racism, sexism, homophobia, organizational confusion and uncertainty, an ever-changing leadership (as graduation takes its toll), the weakness of the Democratic Party and the absence of a third-party alternative—these are some of the pressing difficulties that students confront as they continue to wage their fight against militarism and injustice.

But if a large-scale student move-

ment is to emerge, then perhaps it will need first to address the economics of higher education and its place within the general American political economy. Student activists and their supporters must energize other students (and parents) to protest against the drastic cuts in aid to higher education and lead them to understand the personal, intellectual and social costs—and denied opportunities—that result from the strain of paying the bills. ■

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NOTEBOOK

Refugees of a Hidden War: The Aftermath of Counterinsurgency in Guatemala

By Beatriz Manz
SUNY Press, 288 pp., \$17.95

Beatriz Manz and her team of field researchers spent more than a year studying the experiences and living conditions of the largely rural Indian population displaced from their traditional homelands by the Guatemalan military's counterinsurgency campaigns of the early '80s. As many as one million people (out of Guatemala's 8 million) were uprooted and forced to seek refuge from the army's massacres—either by hiding out in the wilderness or in a shantytown in the capital, or by fleeing to a nearby country. Of the more than 200,000 estimated to have left the country, 46,000 remain in refugee camps on the Mexican side of the border, and the occupants of these camps together with the internal refugees resettled into three northern highland villages are the focus of Manz' study.

Her account of life in these Guatemalan villages reveals in

microscopic fashion how little difference a civilian president has made in the daily life of the country's Indian population. Having disrupted the traditional forms of community life (the people's relationship to the land, their means of earning a living, their housing patterns, long-established civil-religious hierarchies), the military has implanted itself as a pervasive element within Indian communities that had previously enjoyed a large measure of autonomy. It has restructured their daily routines with such new institutions as obligatory "civilian patrols" and "community labor," "model villages" and the military oversight of all local civilian authority. This militarization of everyday life has brought in its train an atmosphere of fear and distrust undermining social bonds and precipitated a breakdown in traditional norms of millennial cultures.

Manz' work is a valuable reminder of the gulf that separates instant democracies like Guatemala's from governments devoted to improving the living conditions of ordinary people.

—Larry Garner