

Article

Left-Wing Christians at Berkeley: Between the Theology of Liberation and Marxist Theories

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Abstract: The 1960s were marked by profound political and cultural transformation and Berkeley was one of most deeply involved institutions. Though much has been written about the students' movement, no research has stopped to consider the experience of the Berkeley Free Church, the subsequent publication of the journal *Radical Religion* and the constitution of the American Christians toward Socialism movement. The young people who were the key figures in this experience are an emblem of the Christians of the times, open as they were to ecumenical exchange and attentive to the problems of the poor and the socially excluded. The international and national context led them to progressively assume more radical positions, to use Marxism as a method for interpreting society's "contradictions" and to seek a political dialogue with the world of the Left. This path of theoretical and political quest concluded in the 1980s, when a new wave of conservatism put an end to any hope of radically transforming Western societies.

Keywords: Berkeley Revolt; American Christians toward Socialism; Radical Religion journal; Berkeley Free Church; Christianity and Marxism



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1. Introduction

The 1960s were a turbulent decade and the transformations the World System experienced during that period were profound (Wallerstein 1989, pp. 431–49). Changes in the organization of production, the affirmation of the consumer society and processes of decolonization contributed to a global rebellion that involved Berkeley and Tokyo, affecting Berlin, Paris, Prague and Rome. It consisted of a radically anti-institutional movement that assumed different forms, objectives and styles in its different contexts.

In the United States the turning point came with the election of Kennedy, the spread of militancy amongst the African American population and thanks to exemplary practices coming from the Latin American countries. The protest movements in the USA often assumed a religious connotation (Isserman and Kazin 2000; Hamilton 2002): key figures were Martin Luther King but also the young people in the "peace movement", including Daniel and Philip Berrigan, William Sloan Coffin and Robert McAfee Brown. The Episcopal Church sided with civil rights and pacifist groups (against the war in Vietnam), and was marked by an ecumenical emphasis (Curran 2006, pp. 215–17; Curran 1987, pp. 81–85) that went hand in hand with the new developments emerging in the Catholic Church after the election of John XXIII as to the Papacy (Massa 2010, pp. 146–54).

However, the impetus of Vatican II waned as large numbers of priests, laymen and laywomen eventually left the church, and Vatican II's reforms of doctrine, liturgy and cultural style split Catholics into warring factions as never before. Hugh McLeod argues that in the wake of Vatican II, Catholics and Protestants moved together, but "as the divisions between the Christian churches were narrowing, the divisions within each of the churches were deepening". It was a time of intense conflict between conservatives, moderates and radicals in both the Roman Catholic Church as well as many of the Protestant groups (McLeod 2007, p. 2; Ernst 2001, pp. 31–52; Danielson et al. 2018); it occurred in the various national contexts, as well as amongst believers in the Bay Area.

It was at the beginning of the upsurge of radical Christian activism that the Graduate Theological Union (GTU)—joining Protestant and Catholic seminaries—was founded in Berkeley in 1962.¹ Its aim was to promote ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and to support graduate theological education. The GTU stood as an attempt to overcome boundaries and divisions between believers and it was no coincidence that significant religious and political experiences arose amongst the young people who frequented it.

2. The Berkeley Free Church

The first 10 min of Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Zabriskie Point* were shot—in January 1969—on the premises of the Berkeley Free Church (on 2200 Parker Street) and many of those present in fact were activists in this group (Dellenbach 1969, pp. 2, 7; Eskridge 2013, pp. 94–98, 262–63; Draper 1965; Rorabaugh 1989), proving just how important Berkeley was in the protests that were going on at the time and more so what an important role the BFC played in the counterculture of the United States. *Zabriskie Point*, it should be noted, also included footage of Black Panther activists, notably Kathleen Cleaver, the movie thus constituting a brilliant snapshot of a movement in full gestation.

The leader of the BFC was Richard York, whose trajectory developed in a way that was emblematic in the United States at the time. Born into a Presbyterian family with Republican sympathies, the young man soon distanced himself from his parents' positions. Writing in 1959, York vehemently expressed his ethical and Christian impulse, but also his civil commitment as a conscientious objector: "I should like to begin with a brief statement on my convictions as a conscientious objector. I base them on the two authorities for my religious thinking: the Bible and the Calvinistic branch of the Protestant Church".²

In the early 1960s this commitment led him to support the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) organization, with whom he shared a radical position close to the New Left: thus, he took part in battles for civil rights, against authoritarianism in the university environment³ and against the Vietnam war, opposed by young people both for idealistic reasons (as an expression of American imperialism) but also because of the obligatory military service (Wells 1999, p. 757; Barringer 2011, p. 55; Heineman 1993).

In 1966 protests against the war became more radical, and in the Bay Area, already the scene of widespread activism sparked off by Mario Savio's *Free Speech* (Heineman 2001, pp. 106–16; Cohen and Zelnik 2002), the students guided by the SDS chased away the Navy officials whose task it was to recruit young people. The religious world was in ferment and at Berkeley too, there were many initiatives amongst Christians to promote peace and against US involvement in the conflict in Indo-China. Then, in March 1967, at a meeting of Episcopalians held at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, a document was approved proclaiming: "war is incompatible with the teaching and example of our Lord Jesus Christ".⁴

At that time, York was in close contact with Robert Scheer, who in 1962, as a student at Berkeley, along with David Horowitz, Maurice Zeitlin, Phil Roos and Sol Stern, founded *Root and Branch: A Radical Quarterly*, one of the campus's first New Left journals; subsequently they shared their battles and intentions with Cesar Chavez, leader of the National Farm Workers Association⁵ an organization that promoted strikes in 1965 to support the claims of Filipino farm workers. Chavez welcomed contributions from numerous ethnic and racial groups and co-operated with Martin Luther King's civil rights movement. In the Bay Area, under the guidance of Huey Newton, the anti-racism battle took on decidedly radical features, as is well known, and Oakland found itself at the center of violent protests.

The BFC experience began in June 1967: it was more similar to a charity organization although supported predominately by Christians (including the Presbyterian Episcopal, Methodist, Baptist, Congregational, Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches), as well as by several traders on Telegraph Avenue, concerned about the ghetto that was forming in the South Campus area. Many hippies were gathering at Berkeley and were in need of support: accommodation, telephones, food and social services. The BFC's aim was "to provide counsel for members of the youth sub-culture".⁶

The sponsors identified Richard York, 28 and a recent graduate of the GTU, soon to be ordained in the Episcopal Church, as the Director. York could rely on a staff of three people. Social services were the responsibility of Glee Bishop and Anthony Nugent, the latter a friend of York's from his seminary days and a co-director and co-pastor (who remained up until 1970). A key figure and supporter of the initiative was York's wife, Joy, partly because their home—where they lived with their children—also functioned as the group's headquarters.⁷ In a letter to the Rev. Wayne Walker urging him to set a limit to his generosity, York answered: "The hospitality of the Christian home for the poor and homeless is one of the important things this ministry is trying to foster".⁸

The theologian the group referred to for guidance was John Pairman Brown, a Professor of York's and Nugent's.⁹ A Bible scholar and researcher into ancient Greece and Palestine (Brown 1962, 1969, 1995–2001, 2000, 2003), and involved in the ecumenical movement, Brown was in favor of the grass-roots experiences of underground churches. Most importantly, he was in contact with Malcolm Boyd, an Episcopal priest, active in the Civil Rights Movement, and shared with him his activism in the movement against the Vietnam war. Brown had been in Hanoi in September 1967, at the invitation of the communist authorities, in acknowledgement of his commitment to peace.

The BFC's vocation was not limited to social assistance but—as can be read in a typewritten document—was "a community of people who are turned off by exploitation and turned on by love. The Free Church is a hip church, trying to make it with the radical non-exploitation and non-violence of Jesus. It is free because it is a community that grooves with Jesus, proclaims and celebrates the Liberation of people to be human, to dig each other and the world, without destroying or exploiting either" (Carvalhaes 2018, pp. 667–76).¹⁰

The political connotation of the Free Church experience was upheld in particular by Brown, who emphasized that believers should commit to creating a better world. In particular it pointed the finger at colonialism and post-colonial wars, such as the war in Vietnam, the exploitation—political, economic and military—by the West of the "non-technological world", the "urban ghetto in America, primarily Negro", the progressive degradation of the biological environment, and the threat of nuclear war.¹¹ This Christian rebellion was inspired by Jesus, because he was a "Liberator and he inaugurated the lifestyle of non-exploitation and non-violence that leads to liberated life in the now".¹² In his book *The Liberation Zone. A Christian Guide to Resistance*, Brown also launched "Revolutionary nonviolence" as a "third way", although it was explained that: "this doesn't mean being outside the struggles of the Viet Cong or the Black Panthers" (Brown 2003, pp. 8–9).

At Berkeley the atmosphere was growing more and more tense, partly because of the demonstrations organized in 1968 by the students in support of the young people in France who were launching an impressive protest movement. Governor Ronald Reagan vehemently criticized the "Campus disorders" and many Free Church sponsors, particularly traders, decided to cut off their donations. A new element of tension arose in the first few months of 1969, when the "street people"—with the support of the BFC—occupied a piece of land belonging to the university in order to transform it into a park and were removed by the police.¹³

The watershed came in 1970 when, as pointed out by Harlan Douglas Anthony Stelmach, it became obvious that there were two different visions within the Free Church: one tended more towards a vocation for social assistance, the other towards the construction of an alternative church. York in particular devoted close attention to the Black Panther movement and supported radical political positions, while Nugent proved to have greater affinity with the hippy culture. Stelmach sums up the different perspectives as follows: "York was Director of the Free Church, an Episcopal priest and hierarchically oriented. Nugent was a 'free form' militant and more collectively oriented".¹⁴ This culminated in Anthony Nugent resigning and in the foundation of the separate Submarine Church.¹⁵ A period of crisis had begun for the Free Church, partly because it was not clear whether the perspective was to be that of an "alternative church" or a "political service agency". Thus, at the end of 1971 Brown, too, resigned and York continued as the only remaining

member of staff. In September 1972, York took a sabbatical, and the Free Church ceased to exist. A leaflet signed the Free Church Collective explained the reasons for the end of this Christian experiment: “The last two many services which the Free Church rendered to Berkeley’s South Campus community have been absorbed by agencies which we had helped to spawn, such as the Free Clinic or the Emergency Food Project”. The document envisaged “new priorities”, to be established and developed in response to the radical shift in the political and social climate of the country.¹⁶

3. The Journal *Radical Religion*

The experience of the Free Church regrouped into the Radical Religion Collective (from 1974 named the Community for Religious Research and Education, CRRE), which, in winter 1973, began publishing a quarterly journal, *Radical Religion*. The journal took its name from an earlier journal with the same title, which had been published in the 1930s and edited by Reinhold Niebuhr when he was involved in the group Fellowship of Socialist Christians.¹⁷ Richard L. York became a member of the Collective, and most of the staff of the journal were students at the GTU, either in doctoral programs or in one of the various seminaries. Stelmach was a particularly important figure in this new editorial venture.¹⁸

The promoters of the project wished to make the journal’s political objectives quite clear right from the beginning: “*Radical Religion* was conceived to fill a gap and meet the demands of a new situation on the left, and in particular within the religious left”.¹⁹ This theoretical journal arose because there was no publication in the United States that placed the religious world in relation to revolutionary processes from an ecumenical point of view. *Radical Religion*—we read in the first issue of the journal—was committed to a socialist perspective and to a Marxist interpretation of the contradictions of contemporary society. Specifically: “Marxism has been used by Christians for putting faith and ideals into practice. This has happened historically in at least three different ways. First, without accepting philosophical components which contradicted their theology, Christians often employed Marxism as a tool for the analysis of society. Second, many Christians have found in Marxism a new authority and have used themes within Christianity to support a Marxist view of the world. Third, some have felt there to be almost a complete correspondence between Christianity and Marxism both philosophically and as the vision of the future”.²⁰

The journal did not wish to choose between the three hypotheses and so different feelings marked the attitude to Marxism held by the intellectuals who wrote for *Radical Religion*. What united believers was the conviction that religious belief and practice was not politically and economically always reactionary, and that—as Friedrich Engels and Karl Kautsky had already emphasized (Kautsky 1902)—in the past particular religious groups and individuals had played a creative role in human affairs as a progressive force. In the 1970s political and religious revolutionary movements also existed, above all in some Latin American experiences.²¹

The journal took an interest in Latin America, afflicted by problems of poverty and backwardness. In the South America, mostly Catholic, where Spanish culture had merged with the lively indigenous tradition, a fruitful exchange had begun between Christianity and Marxism, resulting in the elaboration of the Theology of Liberation (predated by Father Laurence Bright, Dominican and author in 1966 of the book *Christians and world freedom*). Additionally, 1968 had also been the year of the Medellín Conference, during which the Latin American episcopates—following a radical reading of the *Populorum progressio*—had identified inequality, poverty and injustice as the problems the Church must tackle.

Radical Religion took an interest in the figure of Paulo Freire—the subject of an article by James F. Conway²²—because the Brazilian pedagogue was a “one bridge-figure between Christianity and Marxism in Latin America”. His book *Pedagogia do Oprimido* (Freire 1970) combined Marxist methodology, critical consciousness and a dialectic analysis of reality with a concern for the underclasses who were illiterate and apolitical. Freire’s action-reflection-praxis methodology, intrinsically Marxist, constituted the methodology of Liberation Theology.²³ Camilo Torres, the guerrilla-priest killed in 1966 by the Colombian

army, also attracted attention. In the journal Michael Mckale emphasized that “a new theology is taking shape”, and that new theology, which understood “the Gospel as a call for liberation from oppression and injustice, and for a life lived in freedom and community”, had sprung “from below” in “the liberation struggles of people in Asia, America and Latin America”. Mckale went on: “we believe that participation in the struggle of people for liberation is essential and must be expressed in the form of solidarity”.²⁴

Rick Edwards stressed the importance of the Christians for Socialism (Richard 1975; Donoso Loero 1975) experience in Chile in 1971 and recalled Fidel Castro’s visit to Santiago at the end of that year, when he “declared in a dialogue with several hundred Chilean members of Christians for Socialism that Marxists now regard revolutionary Christians as ‘strategic allies’ in the Latin American struggle”. Most importantly, Edwards emphasized that the situation in South America was different to that in the United States: in the USA the Leftist Christian vanguard were the Black, Puerto Rican, and Chicano clergy and laity who had organized in their own communities. Edwards hoped for organization and coordination of all the groups of U.S. Leftist Christians scattered over the national territory: the journal *Radical Religion* was meant to act as a disseminator of Left Christian thinking in the theological academic world.²⁵

There was constant interest in Latin American events in the pages of the journal, but it had become clear from the start that the feelings and interests of the U.S. Left-wing Christians also regarded the claims for equal rights amongst women and black people as important. The second issue of *Radical Religion* concentrated on “Feminism & Religion” and emphasized that in the 1960s “women with a religious or theological orientation are turning the light of female experience and feminist perspective into religion”. The articles in the special issue examined some of the ways in which the church and culture have been oppressive to women; others presented possibilities for re-examining human heritage through feminist lenses and thus revitalizing it, making it workable.²⁶ Sheila Collins, in her article “A Feminist reading of History”, did not fail to accuse “the Judeo-Christian religious system” of being at the bottom of the culture and prejudices that had discriminated against women in society.²⁷ The article by Sally Gearhart, “The Lesbian & God-the-Father”, was even more radical, arguing that “traditional Christian teaching was antithetical to any liberation ideology”. Gearhart concluded: “so, as a woman, as a lesbian, I invite you not to attempt reform of the church. I invite you either to destroy it or to desert it. Personal integrity allows no other alternative”.²⁸

What the journal envisaged was not only women’s liberation but also a “historical turning point:” a new connection between Christianity, socialism and feminism. This was what Sheila Collins dealt with in another article, arguing that “class antagonism generated by capitalist production is the chief contradiction”, and hoping for “a new intersection between feminism and socialism” that could be one of the most fertile grounds for developing a theory and practice to transform the conditions engendered “by advanced capitalism in the industrialized world”. Thus, “feminism brings to socialist praxis and liberation theology a concern for the transformation of everyday life, without which no movement for human social change can hope to be successful”.²⁹

Additionally, what was also evident in the pages of *Radical Religion* was the interest in the relations among African Americans, religion and liberation³⁰ and the persuasion that not until racial discrimination had been overcome, would it be possible to obtain any radical reform of society,³¹ as had been clearly emphasized by theologians such as Gayraud S. Wilmore (Wilmore 1972), and James Cone (Cone 1975). The journal also published a document drawn up by the Christians for Socialism of Puerto Rico, in which they declared their “choice of national independence and socialism as a means for the creation of the appropriate historical conditions for achieving a society of freedom”. (Pinn 2012, pp. 453–70),³² Racial discrimination did not regard the black population alone, but also the First People: Nichail McKale interviewed Vine Deloria, Director of the National Congress of American Indians,³³ who referred to the need for a theology that would make the most of differences

and take into account different cultural circumstances, in the belief that differences should not be considered negative values (Murray 2007).³⁴

In the 1970s the American religious world also paid great attention to political and social issues. In an article entitled “Radical Evangelicalism”, referring to the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association) conference that was held in Chicago in November 1973 and at which the more radical currents of evangelicalism had proved to be the majority, Sharon Gallagher wrote in the pages of *Radical Religion*: “There are several reasons to hope for the continued growth of evangelical social concern and of radical evangelicalism. First, for people who claim the Bible is authoritative there is a basis for confrontation with the radicalism of its message. Secondly, the Church, unlike most movements, has always transcended divisions of class, race and sex. So, there is potential for a real movement of the people”.³⁵ In 1975 came the publication of a special issue on the “Implications of a class approach to the Bible”. In the *Introduction* it was explained that the focus was “a social reading of the Bible”; it meant that communities could only be understood as structures under tension, involved in a constant struggle between established patterns that had become closed, and new more open patterns.³⁶

Marxism was used to interpret society and the relations between economic systems and the Church. Henry Morrison—a member of the Episcopal Peace Fellowship and contributor to the Jesuit peace education program in the Pacific Northwest, *Pacem in terris*—wrote: “As the contemporary crisis of capitalism deepens, the growing conflicts in capitalist society are inevitably reflected within the church”. In the Episcopal Church, a sentiment had emerged which was “anti-imperialist and socialist and seeking an alliance, either organizationally or at least ideologically, with Marxism”. Morrison also hoped for the organization of Christians on the Left from various American cities and believed that it was the job of *Radical Religion* to set out the theory for the project.³⁷

4. American Christians for Socialism

The experience of the Christians for Socialism takes its place in the long history of the relations between Christianity and Marxism which—widely analyzed—began in the second half of the nineteenth century and is marked by moments of exchange and of conflict (Lidtke 1966, pp. 250–73; Prüfer 2002; Pasture 2005, pp. 9–48; Tranvouez 2011; Dittrich 2014; Saresella 2015, pp. 585–607; Brewitt-Taylor 2018): the most fruitful time for dialogue came during the 1960s and 1970s when, following the changes that the communist world was undergoing, interest in the ideas of Karl Barth (1922), and the new climate introduced into the Catholic Church by Vatican II, the said dialogue assumed theoretical connotations and political implications (Barrau 1998; Pelletier 2002; Corrin 2013; Horn 2015; Saresella 2016, pp. 46–68). The first group of Christians for Socialism came into being in Chile during the presidency of Salvador Allende: from 14 to 16 April 1971 in Santiago at a meeting of 80 priests who worked in poor neighborhoods and declared their proximity to the Theology of Liberation (Burdick and Hewitt 2000). The group was soon joined by other priests and lay people and on 1 September the Secretariat of Priests of Christians for Socialism was formed, immediately setting itself the objective of widening the experience to other Christians in Latin America. The Chilean CPS groups elaborated certain basic points: acknowledgement of the class struggle as the element for interpreting the Latin American situation and the use of Marxism as a tool of analysis and criticism; the fight against the use of Christianity by the ruling classes as a justification for their social dominance; the convergence between the radical nature of their faith and radical political commitment (Ramos-Regidor 1977, pp. 20–21; Sorge 1974, pp. 111–30; Guzmán 1975). The first meeting of Latin American Christians for Socialism (with the presence of Argentinians, Peruvians, Colombians and Mexicans) took place in Santiago in April 1972; however, the CPS also spread rapidly to other parts of the world. They took root in Europe: in Spain, where they began publishing the coordination bulletin *Cristianos por el socialismo*,³⁸ in Portugal where they were initially clandestine—as in Spain—because of the dictatorship, but later key figures in transforming society;³⁹ in France, where they met

for the first time in Grenoble in November 1975; in Belgium, where the most important group—founded in April 1975—was located in Louvain; in Germany, with particularly strong roots in Frankfurt.⁴⁰ A similar group also came into being in Canada, taking the name of Politisés chrétiens; the theologian referred to in this particular experience was Gregory Baum (Baum 1990, pp. 7–28). At Quebec City, from 6 to 13 April 1975, the first international conference of the CPS⁴¹ took place with representatives of all the experiences from around the world taking part.⁴²

In the USA the movement took the name of American Christians toward Socialism (ACTS) and was founded at a meeting held in Washington at the beginning of May 1974. Unlike the Latin American experiences, in the United States the ACTS did include not only Catholics but many members belonged to the variegated world of Protestantism; they bore witness to the ecumenical spirit that marked the religious world at the time. Kathleen Schultz was National Executive Secretary and amongst the leaders were: Joe Holland, Joe Eldridge, Trish Ahern, Marge Schuler, Tom Quigley and Rick Edwards. The founding meeting was also attended by some believers from the Bay Area, including John Boonstra, Harlan Stelmach, Bruce Taylor, Mike McKale, Richard York and Tony Nugent.⁴³ Militants involved in struggles for social justice, against the war in Vietnam and in grass-roots communities all converged together with the group. They were mostly white, middle-class intellectuals.

During the founding meeting of the movement close attention to the religious experiences of the South American continent emerged distinctly and, in a letter dated 2 October 1974, Boonstra explained that: “the Bay Area group reached substantial agreement on the Santiago document” even though “there was consensus and anxiety to get this larger group together and begin discussing the implications of the document in a North America context”.⁴⁴

The sentiments of the Christians in North America led to a focus on the issue of civil rights, although there were many points they shared with the various different political and religious experiences in other continents: the left-wing Christians agreed with the adoption of a Marxist economic and political and thus critical analysis of society and a long-term commitment to the struggle for socialism. Most importantly, the ACTS stressed: “Marxism was understood as a tool of analysis, as a method of social change”. These Christians were convinced that capitalism was antithetical to Christianity and that the basic values of Christian faith, expressed in the Bible and tradition, were undermined and destroyed by capitalism.⁴⁵

The ACTS spread to various American cities: Chicago, Detroit; Madison and New York; even into Iowa. It was significant that they also spread to Northern California, with five subgroups, including San Francisco, Berkeley, Oakland, Palo Alto and San Joaquin Valley.⁴⁶ The ACTS in the Bay Area were thus an important component of the national network, always informed of the issues at hand and called upon with regard to the choices to be made; in particular they were informed of the outcome of the meeting held in Paris on 15 September 1974⁴⁷ to organize the aforementioned conference in Canada, whilst four representatives of the Bay Area took part in the international conference in Quebec in 1975. The Canadian meeting gave a nationwide impulse to the ACTS and encouraged new action and reflections amongst Californian militants as well.

In May 1975 the Bay Area groups drew up a document in which they reflected on the specific nature of the relationship between Christians and socialism in North America and argued the need to attain a socialist society through non-violent methods. The pacifist choice did not mean abandoning political struggle: the ACTS hoped for campaigns of denunciation and protest against American imperialism, agitation, strikes and attention to economic issues, minority issues and the anti-racist struggles of the Black Community, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and Native Americans, the anti-sexist struggles of the women’s movement, and institution-related struggles in schools, universities and churches.⁴⁸

The Berkeley ACTS, too, in a document published in *Radical Religion*, believed that the “rediscovery of the Christian gospel as a prophetic and redemptive force for liberation from

physical, social, economic, political, cultural and spiritual bondage” was an opportunity to move “toward a new and human socialist society”. They also spoke of racism, “a form of structural discrimination based upon the power of whites to define their color as normative, all other groups being viewed as ‘atypical’ and ‘inferior’”.⁴⁹ In 1979 the journal devoted a “Special Issue” to “Christians for Socialism USA”. In it an “anonymous author” wondered: “Why were we in Viet Nam? Why had Blacks rioted in our city, and in Oakland above all? Why were the Latin American countries so poor?” The conclusion was that “only socialism and Marxism seem to be providing answers that my former liberal thinking could not provide”.⁵⁰

5. Toward Which Socialism?

What becomes evident, on analyzing the positions assumed by the BFC group, the ACTS and the articles published by *Radical Religion*, is that the attention to Marxism underwent a change over the years: from general interest, it progressively moved towards a more sophisticated analysis, the fruit of reading and reflection. The turning point came halfway through the 1970s, when the experience of Christians for Socialism spread, and the journal started to assume a key role in the network of the American religious Left, opening up to an exchange of views with the culture of the international New Left.

In an article in 1976 Henry Morrison joined the debate going on between Marxist intellectuals and Christians on the relationship between Humanism and Marxism. He wrote: “Both the Marxist and the Christian models of the ends of human existence show surprising congruence: the fulfilment of each person in the fulfilment of all people. Whether the science and ethic of Marxism and the symbolism of Christianity can converge in a common endeavor toward the liberation and fulfilment of each in all is the burning question of our age”. Morrison stressed that in many parts of the world Marxists and progressive Christians were converging and even collaborating in a transcending praxis that pertaining to the reflections of the Frenchman Roger Garaudy (Bourg 2007, pp. 270–72).⁵¹ Morrison, however, declared that he was not quite convinced of the fact that, according to Garaudy, the differences between Marxism and Christianity could be easily overcome: “Marxist philosophy rejects the possibility of transcendence. Christians cannot assent to this philosophy without sacrificing the affirmation of God which is essential to their outlook”. Morrison believed that Marxism coincided with atheism and, most importantly, that there was no need to rely on that political theory in order to transform society, because Christianity implicitly brought with it the prospect of radical change.⁵²

Denys Turner was of a different opinion and, in his article “Marxism and Christian Praxis”, argued that: “Christianity was compatible with Marxism”, indeed, Christians could be Marxists precisely because of their Christianity. Christians must accept that “Christian commitment was a private matter separable at all fundamentally from one’s commitment to a historical, empirical institution”. He concluded: “to retain my orthodoxy as a Christian, to remain in revolutionary continuity with the Church of Christ I must be Marxist”.⁵³

Turner, English philosopher and theologian, author in 1968 of *On the Philosophy of Karl Marx*, (Turner 1968) in 1983 issued *Marxism and Christianity* (Oxford, Blackwell) (Turner 1983) an important contribution to the ongoing Christian–Marxist dialogue. The fulcrum of his reasoning was of how Marx’s particular arguments concerning the dehumanization of labor induced by the capitalist system resonated more closely with Christian social theory. The capitalist economic system treated people as things, alienated people from their potential, and encouraged people to seek selfishly, which was obviously not the way to the beloved “loving society” which Jesus and the churches symbolize. Thus, Turner argued that there was a natural affinity between authentic Christianity and Marxism because the later was an indictment of the conditions which prevent the actualization of the loving community of the former. This interpretation of the relationship between Christianity and Marxism was shared by many intellectuals, including the famous Terry Eagleton, author in 1966 of *The New Left Church* (Corrin 2018; Eagleton 1966, 2011).

What proved decisive for the journal was the criticism of the Soviet model, considered to be “socialism degenerated” because it denied the individual’s right to decide his or her own destiny. The journal stated that it could not accept a form of socialism that overstepped its limits and attempted to take away the individual’s right to the religious motivation of life or the right to publicly express these motivations and convictions, regardless of what is one’s religious faith. This was “false socialism” and it did not promote the “human dignity proclaimed by the faith”.⁵⁴

Radical Religion was in search of a new sort of Marxism, that would overcome the limits of the Soviet model, which in 1956 had become evident to the whole world; it thus turned to the experiences of Western critical thought and in particular to the “Cultural Marxists” of the Frankfurt School, a reference point for the theorists of the New Left. The journal acknowledged the ability of Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse to provide a thorough analysis of the advanced capitalist world and its contradictions.⁵⁵ Michael McKale wrote that the historical significance of the Frankfurt School was to have understood that Capitalism was no longer just an economic system or a mode of production, but a way of life and a mode of human relationships.⁵⁶ In fact the journal was in contact with the Canadian Catholic theologian—of German origin—Gregory Baum, who supported the need to move beyond orthodox Marxist theory, recovering the critical spirit of the Frankfurt School, and believed that in the reflections of the German thinkers it was possible to identify elements for setting up a dialogue with the Christian world.⁵⁷

Radical Religion also showed interest in Antonio Gramsci, to whom Henry Mottu devoted a long article. The author focused on how the Italian Marxist, “in a much more original fashion than Lenin, saw in Marxism a global philosophy which he called ‘the philosophy of praxis’ understood as a “movement of intellectual and moral reform”. Gramsci’s was “a philosophy which was also politics and a form of politics which was also a philosophy”. The phenomenon of religion must be included in this analysis or one would neglect “an important aspect of the life of the masses and would be unfaithful to the whole scope of the program”.⁵⁸

The journal also gave proof of close attention to the elaborations going on in the Marxist world in America, evident in its review of Harry Braverman’s book *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, issued in 1974 by Monthly Review Press (Braverman 1974), in which the Marxist author developed Marx’s writings on the impact of capitalist industrial growth on the labor process, with specific regard to the growth of oligopolistic industries and giant corporations.⁵⁹ Interest was also aroused by the publication of Harry Samuel Magdoff’s *Imperialism; from the Colonial Age to the Present*, also by Monthly Review Press, in 1978. Magdoff, who in 1969 had published the highly successful book *The Age of Imperialism*, had been co-editing the journal *Monthly Review* with Paul Sweezy⁶⁰ since 1971.

These impulses from western Marxism added to the elaborations that had been emerging in Latin America since the end of the 1960s. Particularly worthy of note are the positive judgements of *Radical Religion*, both concerning the Theology of Liberation, and the Cuban communist experience. In a review of Ernesto Cardenal’s book, *In Cuba* (Cardenal 1974), Boonstra complained that most literary accounts of life in Cuba came to US citizens via teams of journalist accompanying various US government officials invited on fact-finding trips to Cuba. This had led to a distorted view of reality on the Caribbean island, which Cardenal’s book had finally managed to unmask.⁶¹

However, it was mainly Nicaragua where a happy medium had been obtained between Christianity and socialism following the 1979 revolution. *Radical Religion* published an article by Steve Unruhe in which he emphasized that the Sandinista revolution was a Christian one: “it was impossible to differentiate between ‘the Church’ and support for the revolution, because the Sandinistas are often the same people who sit in the pews on Sunday mornings, who sing in the choirs, who attend catechism and Bible study groups, and who were seminary students”. The article concluded: “The uniting of the Church with the Sandinista revolution, each helping shape the other, has perhaps opened a new era in Latin America”.⁶² Indeed, many Catholic Marxists travelled to the Central-American

country in the belief that a Christian society could be created there, amongst them the Italian leader of Christians for Socialism, Giulio Girardi (Saresella 2018, pp. 525–49).

At the end of the 1970s the international climate changed. In 1978 John Paul II became Pope and his pontificate was marked by strong polemics against communism. Lee Cormie, the Canadian theologian and a contributor to *Radical Religion* did not fail to stress the “confusion and conflict” caused by the new direction of the pontificate, as well as the polemics over liberation theology and its use of Marxist analysis at the conference of Latin American Catholic Bishops at Puebla⁶³. In 1980 Reagan won the U.S. presidential elections, with the support of a section of the American religious world that wished to return to the traditional values of Christian morality (Winner 2009, pp. 181–98). In a letter to the board of editors of *Radical Religion* Boonstra admitted that the “Religious New Right played a key role in the Reagan victory”. Additionally, he added: “The Religious New Right is contributing to the creation of a climate of intolerance that threatens basic constitutional rights”.⁶⁴

Radical Religion thus decided to devote two special issues to the U.S. conservative religious world to try and understand the profound transformation that the country’s religious and political culture was undergoing. In 1981 the special issue⁶⁵ “Religious New Right. Part 1” was published, but the second issue, already planned and ready with its index of contributors, never came out, because the journal closed due to the economic difficulties it had accumulated (Rolsky 2021, p. 171).⁶⁶ Appeals were launched for new subscriptions but times had changed and soon the energies of the ACTS, too, dwindled. The international movement of Christians for Socialism was never officially closed but it lost momentum and then gradually died out because of the change in the international climate.

6. Conclusions

The present essay reveals a significant local, religious and political situation at the heart of the protests of the 1960s and 1970s. In particular, there emerged the intention of a group of men and women to tackle the issues and challenges that were agitating various parts of the globe in those same years. The believers at Berkeley were attentive to what was going on in Latin America, took an interest in the Theology of Liberation and at the same time were open to reflections arising in Europe and the United States in the area of Marxism, in search—after the 1956 crisis—of a new theoretical model. A distinct internationalism and corresponding radicalization would be noted especially from 1968 onwards.

The outcomes of this quest were not always clear and unequivocal, but they did give proof of the leaning towards an ideal, which was to be destroyed by the conservative backlash in the 1980s. For a long time, the radical reform movements remained an important and visible undercurrent, and the lessons of these experiences remained long after the movement itself had subsided. It appears to be no coincidence that in November 1999 in Seattle—once again on the West Coast—50,000 people came out onto the streets to protest against the third World Trade Organization conference, giving rise to the “no-global” movement, which was to spread to Latin America and Europe. The experience harbored various different humors and was more of a mass movement rather than an outcome of efforts by a small elite, but it still consisted of believers (Protestants and Catholics) and people from the Left, with the ambition of creating a world that would listen to the needs of the world’s poorest.

It is important to underline that most authors appearing in *Radical Religion* remained solidly cultural Marxists and now hold University posts and write articles and books about the lesson they learned, thus deepening both their critique and their practice. So not only are there latent forces willing to boil up in movements such as “anti-globalization”, “occupy Wall Street” or the “Me-Too”, but a sustained and explicit cultural teaching that continues to be presented in a robust manner.

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Notes

- 1 See <https://www.gtu.edu/about/history>, (Accessed on 13 September 2019).
- 2 Richard L. York, "Typewritten document", 17 November 1959. Berkeley Free Church Collection, GTU 89-5-016, The Graduate Theological Union Archives, Berkeley, CA, box 1, 1959-1967, f. 3.
- 3 "Typewritten document", BFC Collection, GTU 89-5-016, The GTU Archives, box 1, 1959-1967, f. 1.
- 4 See the monographic issue "The Berkeley Student Today", *California Monteley*, Dick Erickson ed., February 1966: 5. See also "65 More Draft Objectors Arrested", *Oakland Tribune*, 18 October 1967: 1; Mike and Jim Carberry, "23 Injured, 26 Arrested in Newest Induction Center Demonstration", *Berkeley Daily Gazette*, 21 October 1967: 1.
- 5 Letter from Chavez to York, September 1966, BFC Collection, GTU 89-5-016, GTU Archives, box 1, 1959-1967, f. 21.
- 6 "Typewritten document" by Rev. Wayne Walker (Business Administrator Presbyterian Church, Berkeley), 20 June 1967, in BFC Collection, GTU 89-5-016, GTU Archives, box 1, 1959-1967, f. 30.
- 7 "Typewritten document" with guidelines for guests on the rules of the 'Free Church House', s.d., in BFC Collection, GTU 89-5-016, GTU Archives, box 1, 1959-1967, f. 30.
- 8 Letter from York to Walker, 22 August 1967, in BFC Collection, GTU 89-5-016, GTU Archives, box 1, 1959-1967, f. 30.
- 9 Before becoming a Minister of the Free Church, Rev. Brown had been Professor of Christian Ethics and the New Testament at the Church Divinity School of Pacific but his contract had not been renewed because of the position he assumed on peace and civil rights ("John Pairman Brown dropped at CDSP", *The Witness* 30 March 1967: 1-2).
- 10 "Typewritten document" by the Free Church, s.d. BFC Collection, GTU 89-5-016, GTU Archives, Berkeley, CA, box 1, 1959-1967, f. 40.
- 11 Typewritten document by Brown, "A Call to Covenant", Berkeley, Aug., 5, 1967. BFC Collection, GTU 89-5-016, GTU Archives, box 1, 1959-1967, f. 25.
- 12 Sermon by Brown "In the Middle of Things". 20 December 1967. BFC Collection, GTU 89-5-016, GTU Archives, box 1, 1959-1967, f. 26.
- 13 The episodes are described in the graduation thesis: Harlan Douglas Anthony Stelmach, *Berkeley Free Church and Radical Church Movement (1967-1972)*, presented to the Faculty of the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, 15 May 1977.
- 14 Harlan Douglas Anthony Stelmach, *Berkeley Free Church and Radical Church Movement (1967-1972)*, 66.
- 15 It was an affiliate of the National Council of Churches (Presbyterian church above all) spawned by a group of radical seminarians who were very much critical of "Liberals".
- 16 Leaflet "The Berkeley Free Church", 1973. *Radical Religion: A Quarterly Journal of Critical Opinion*, Graduate Theological Union Archives, Berkeley, CA; Radical Religion Working Files (1973-1984); box-folder 1: 17.
- 17 "Introduction", *Radical Religion* 1 (Winter 1973): 3-5.
- 18 Throughout the life of the journal, the membership of the Collective changed. Each issue prints the names of the people who formed the Collective as well as those who contributed to or in other ways helped with that issue. Those who were part of the Radical Religion Collective in 1975 were: Betsy Brenneman, John Boonstra, Molly Dougherty, Norman K. Gottwald, Jeanne Gross, Michael McKale, Richard York, Paul Rohrdanz, Harlan Stelmach, Bruce Taylor, Alan Tobey and Ellen K. Wondra.
- 19 Leaflet. "Why a new journal"? *Radical Religion*, 1973, GTU Archives, Radical Religion Working Files (1973-1984); box-folder 1: 17. 20 February 1974: RR has 800 subscriptions; 400 bookstore sales. It also receives 500 dollars from the United Methodist Church.
- 20 "Introduction", *Radical Religion*, 1, (Winter 1973): 3-5. The issue was prepared by the following people working collectively: Edith Black, Donald Heinz, Linda Moyer, James Soderberg, Harlan Stelmach, Bruce Taylor. Richard York and Tony Nugent were also part of the group.
- 21 Typewritten document, *Radical Religion*, undated, in Radical Religion Graduate Theological Union Archives, GTU, Radical Religion Working Files (1973-1984); box-folder 1: 28.
- 22 Conway, who served for four years as Catholic chaplain at the University of Berkeley, later moving to Latin America. He authored the book *Marx and Jesus*.
- 23 James Conway, "Toward New Models for Christian Radicals", *Radical Religion* 1 (Winter 1973): 26-29.
- 24 Michael Mckale, "Introduction", *Radical Religion* 4 (1976): 3.
- 25 Rick Edwards, "Uniting Christians of the Left". *Radical Religion* 1 (Winter 1973): 36-40. Edwards had also published "Camilo/Cuba/Religion. An Interview with Sergio Martinez", *Radical Religion* 1 (1975): 54-56.
- 26 "Introduction". *Radical Religion*, 1, (29 April 1974): 3.

- 27 Sheila Collins, "A Feminist reading of History". *Radical Religion* 2 (29 April 1974): 12–17.
- 28 Sally Gearhart, "The Lesbian & God-the-Father", *Radical Religion* 2 (29 April 1974): 19–21.
- 29 Sheila Collins, "Historical Turning Point: Feminism and Socialism", *Radical Religion* 2 (29 March 1977): 5–11.
- 30 Wilson J. Moses, "Black Christians and the Doctrine of Resistance", *Radical Religion* 1 (1976): 41–46.
- 31 Archie Jr. Smith, "Black Reflection on the Study of the New Religious Consciousness", *Radical Religion* 1 (1978): 31–36.
- 32 "Christians for Socialism in Puerto Rico: a document", *Radical Religion*, 1, (1976): 47–51.
- 33 Deloria graduated in the Lutheran School of Theology in Rock Island, Illinois.
- 34 Michael McKale, "From Reservation to Global Society: American Culture, Liberation and the Native American. An interview to Vine Deloria", *Radical Religion* 4 (4 March 1976): 49–58.
- 35 Sharon Gallagher, "Radical Evangelicalism", *Radical Religion* 3–4 (24 September 1976): 61–65. See Eskridge, *God's Forever*, 97–98, 262.
- 36 Radical Religion Collective, "Introduction", *Radical Religion* 2–3 (1975): 2–6.
- 37 Henry Morrison, "Organization and strategy for Socialist Christians", *Radical Religion*, 1, (1975): 22–27.
- 38 Some issues of the bulletin are to be found in: Fondo Giulio Girardi, Fondazione Basso (Rome, Italy), busta 29 (temporary catalogue).
- 39 "Cristiani per il socialismo in Portogallo", *Idoc internazionale* November 18/19, 15/30, 1974: 34–39; "Costituiti in Portogallo o Cristiani per il socialismo", *Com Nuovi Tempi* I (20 October 1974): 3, 1; "Cristiani in un contesto di classe", *Com Nuovi Tempi* I (20 ottobre 1974): 3, 11.
- 40 "Troisième réunion du comité européen de Chrétiens pour le socialisme", Fondo Giulio Girardi, Fondazione Basso (Rome, Italy), busta 29 (temporary catalogue).
- 41 *Chrétiens pour le socialisme. Rencontre internationale chrétiens pour le socialisme: document de travail*. Quebec:1975, Fondo Giulio Girardi, Fondazione Basso (Roma), busta 29 (temporary catalogue).
- 42 Benny Lauret, "Chrétiens pour le socialisme. Pas question de construire une église de gauche", *Témoignage Chrétien*, 1, (15 Janvier 1976): 19–20.
- 43 The list of people attending the meeting is in Radical Religion, GTU Archives, series 6. Americans Towards Christian Socialism ACTS, Bay Area Group Files, box-folder 7: 39.
- 44 Letter from John Boonstra to Marge Schuler, 12 October 1974; in *Radical Religion: A Quarterly Journal of Critical Opinion*, GTU Archives, Berkeley, CA; series 6. Americans Towards Christian Socialism ACTS, Bay Area Group Files, box-folder 7: 39.
- 45 "Christians for socialism in the United States", *Radical Religion* 1 (1976): 52–54.
- 46 Gregory Caldwell, Katheleen Schultz and Duane Shank, "Introduction", *Radical Religion* 3–4 (1979): 3–6.
- 47 Letter from Hernan Leemrijse to 'dear friends' (member of ACTS of the Bay Area), Paris 26 September 1974, in *Radical Religion*, GTU Archives, Berkeley, CA; series 6. Americans Towards Christian Socialism ACTS, Bay Area Group Files, box-folder 7:39.
- 48 Provisional working document of Bay Area Group Toward Organizing, May 1975, in *Radical Religion*, GTU Archives, Berkeley, CA; series 6. Americans Towards Christian Socialism ACTS, Bay Area Group Files, box-folder 7:39.
- 49 The Berkeley sub-group of ACTS, "Christians for Socialism in the United States", *Radical Religion* 1 (October 1976), pp. 52–54.
- 50 "Why I am Christian and Marxist", *Radical Religion* 3–4 (2 November 1979): 33–36.
- 51 The philosopher Garaudy, who had authored the book *L'Eglise, le communisme et les chretiens* as early as 1949, was a member of the political office of the French Communist Party.
- 52 Henry Morrison, "Theoretical Questions of Marxist-Christian Unity", *Radical Religion* 4 (1976), pp. 32–37.
- 53 Denys Turner, "Marxism and Christian Praxis", *Radical Religion* 4 (1976): 38–43.
- 54 "Editorial", *Radical Religion* 2 (17 November 1980): 60.
- 55 "Introduction", *Radical Religion* 3–4 (February 1978): 3–5.
- 56 Michael McKale, "Capitalism vs. Democracy: the Ruling class and politics of everyday life" *Radical Religion* 3–4 (February 1978): 38–57.
- 57 Baum reviewed Daniel Bell's book, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* for *Radical Religion* (Gregory Baum, "The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism", *Radical Religion*, 3–4, (February 1978): 81–83). Proof of the journal's attention to Baum also comes from the review of his book *Religion and Alienation* (David Ardagh, "Review of the book by Gregory Baum, *Religion and Alienation*" *Radical Religion* 2 (1978): 53–55.
- 58 Henry Mottu, "The Theological Critique of Religion and Popular Religion", *Radical Religion* 1 (1978): 4–15.
- 59 Rosalyn Baxandall, Elisabeth Ewen and Linda Gordon, "Labor and Monopoly Capital", *Radical Religion* 2 (29 March 1977): 57–60.
- 60 Johnson, Steve. "Imperialism", *Radical Religion* 2 (1978): 52–53.
- 61 John Boonstra, "In Cuba", *Radical Religion* 4 (4 March 1976): 59–60.

- ⁶² Steve Unruhe, “The Eyes of Latin America are on us: Nicaragua and the Continuing Revolution”, *Radical Religion*, 1, (November 1980): 55–60.
- ⁶³ Lee Cormie, “Marxism & Christianity: Convergence or Conflict?”, *Radical Religion* 3–4 (2 November 1979): 22–24.
- ⁶⁴ Letter from John Boonstra to ‘Dear Friends’, on *Radical Religion* headed notepaper, March 1981, in *Radical Religion: A Quarterly Journal of Critical Opinion*. Berkeley, CA: Graduate Theological Union Archives; Radical Religion Working Files (1973–1984); box-folder 2: 7.
- ⁶⁵ *Radical Religion*, 4 (1981) is the last issue.
- ⁶⁶ Letter from Laura Magnani to ‘Dear Subscriber’, September 30, 1981, in *Radical Religion: A Quarterly Journal of Critical Opinion*. Berkeley, CA: Graduate Theological Union Archives; Radical Religion Working Files (1973–1984); box-folder 2: 1.

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