

Consensus

Volume 16
Issue 2 *Lutheran Pietism*

Article 14

11-1-1990

Christian Socialism: An Informal History

Oscar Cole-Arnal

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Cole-Arnal, Oscar (1990) "Christian Socialism: An Informal History," *Consensus*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 14.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol16/iss2/14>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

rage against nature—and be miserable—or accept it, and grow spiritually. Indeed, argues Julian, God's pronouncement on the first couple—"you are earth, and to earth you shall return"—shows divine mercy, for death puts a limit to suffering. Pagels' answer to the question why the majority of Christians chose Augustine's interpretation of the fall goes beyond theories of social control (humans are evil and need to be governed) to the human desire to understand and explain suffering and death as not simply random or quid-pro-quo punishment for wrong doing but as impersonal pattern: the fault lies in the primal parents.

At the annual meetings of the Canadian learned societies in religion at Université Laval in May 1989 a two-hour session was devoted to Pagels' book, with Pagels present to respond to the respondents to her book. Among the corrections and amplifications they suggested, one might interest readers of this journal who stand in the Augustinian tradition (e.g., Lutherans): in the chaos of the late Roman Empire, Christians in their helplessness might well have found the doctrine of divine grace more compelling than the guilt that Pagels suggests.

A fascinating book. In the words Augustine says led to his conversion, "Tolle, lege" ("Take, read!"). Then one can look forward to reading Jeremy Cohen's forthcoming work on Genesis 1:28, "*Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It*": *The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Cornell University Press, December 1989).

Harold Remus
Wilfrid Laurier University

Christian Socialism: An Informal History

John C. Cort

Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988

xiii + 401 pp.

No one would contest seriously that John Cort has the credentials to undertake "the battle" for Christian socialism against the ideas and practices that emerged from Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. He is a militant of many years, serving as a garment-worker organizer, as a member of the Catholic Worker movement and as a socialist journalist. Further, there has long been a need for an easy-to-read book about Christian socialism that provides an overview rather than specialization.

On the positive side, the book guides the reader with care and clarity, and there is a dignified sense of dialogue throughout. Unlike so many other authors Cort does not attempt to manipulate his audience. He is very direct about his own biases. "So this is an opinionated history," he tells us, "but all writing of history is by definition opinionated." Also, Cort

sets his definitions at the outset, thus allowing the reader to make some immediate assessments to guide his or her own critique. Cort's attempts to link biblical, early church, medieval, Reformation and modern history to his general theme is laudable, as are his sections which single out women and blacks in order to highlight their contributions to Christian socialism. His commitment to ecumenism by a demonstrable attention to both Catholic and Protestant socialists is commendable indeed. His extensive quotes are useful as well, providing welcome opportunity for the protagonists to speak for themselves.

However, in spite of these very positive characteristics, *Christian Socialism* has some serious flaws which reflect not only the author's legitimate bias but also his claim to deal with a holistic perspective. His handling of the biblical material, especially with respect to Jesus' message of the Kingdom, is far too sketchy, and his linking of patristic and medieval thought to the socialist battle against Adam Smith is a bit contrived. Definitionally, though he struggles mightily to be fair and though he achieves some success in these matters, his own Fabian blinders limit his analysis seriously. Even to consider Jacques Maritain for inclusion in his book calls into question his own definitions of socialism; the centrist Maritain was always an avowed antisocialist and conservative in spite of his guarded acceptance of pluralistic democracy. Also one cannot help but be chagrined by the exclusion of serious attention to much of the Third World which has been so instrumental in its contributions to Christian socialism. "Whole continents—notably Africa and Asia—whose importance cannot be overestimated, will be almost invisible," he tells us. If they are that important (and they are), then one might ask why he did not give them their due. Finally, in spite of his dedication to "democratic" socialism, he gives overwhelming space to theoreticians, intellectuals and popes. To be sure, activists and groups of militants receive some attention, but they are not given the attention they deserve. Too much space is provided for papal social thought that could have been utilized to describe such mass movements as the Latin American base Christian communities, the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne, the Canadian labour churches, Marc Sangnier's Sillon and the worker-priests, to name but a few.

John Cort's *Christian Socialism* is a valuable book, an instrument of dialogue for one branch of the tradition he espouses. However, it is only that and should be heralded simply as a western social democratic form of Christian socialism with all its glory and limitations. It is not a Christian socialist *magnum opus*, nor should it be treated as such. As "an opinionated history" it needs to be balanced with other opinions from the same common tradition.