

Social Gospel Principles in the Songs of Woody Guthrie

Mark Allan Jackson

In the song “No Disappointment in Heaven,” written as a reaction to the Carter Family’s “No Depression in Heaven,” singer and political activist Woodrow “Woody” Guthrie presents the Christian afterlife as being free of “debts,” “burdens,” and “rents,” a place where there are “No mortgage or loans to repay.” Gone are all bankers and landlords. Instead, “we all will be equal in glory,” and “You will work for each other in Heaven.”¹ This song projects an egalitarian paradise far removed from the harsh reality of late 1930s America when it was written, a brutal era that Guthrie well documented in other pieces such as “Do Re Mi,” “Tom Joad,” and even in a lesser-known verse of “This Land Is Your Land.” For in an original version of this last song, we find the following scene:

One bright sunny morning in the shadow of the steeple
By the Relief Office I saw my people
As they stood hungry I stood there wondering if
God Blessed American for me.²

Although he could conceive of God’s Kingdom as a place of spiritual fellowship and social righteousness, Guthrie well knew that his America was far removed from this state — and perhaps even from God’s grace. In fact, “No Disappointment in Heaven” ends in a call for a change when the narrator cries out, “Let’s have it here like you’ve got it up there.”³ In this demand, Guthrie stands as an adherent of Social Gospel principles, for advocates of this Christian movement wished to enact the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” in effect advocating that “everyone must take an active part for the kingdom to come, not solely in the divine afterlife but here on earth.”⁴

In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, especially in the South, many evangelical Christians took up premillennialist views — believing that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent and that they should prepare for this event through individual spiritual discipline that would result in them being born again in the Lord.⁵ In effect, they readied themselves to enter the peaceful kingdom of heaven rather than primarily addressing the earthly woes that surrounded them, thus often eschewing the mundane concerns of civic/political engagement. In fact, the Carters’ song “No Depression in Heaven” can be seen as an expression of this belief system in that it notes that “here the hearts of men are failing” and that “this

world [holds] toil and struggle,” but in heaven, “the lovely land that’s free from care,” the realities of the Depression will be merely an unpleasant past, a memory.⁶ This view well matches with general premillennialist beliefs.

But in response to this rather passive view of secular matters, some other Christians during this same era recognized that they could work within their lifetime to better their own souls through aiding their fellow men and women, even as they prepared for the afterlife. In fact, some of these faithful even maintained that Christ’s return would only happen if all social evils were removed through human effort. Thus, the movement offered a religious rationale for addressing the very real issues affecting the nation, such as racial prejudice, economic inequality, and many other social ills. This religious-based drive for social justice generally falls under the Social Gospel label.⁷ The efforts of this group also often jibed with that of adherents of the Progressive Movement, a broad, primarily secular, coalition of individuals and groups drawing from a variety of political and philosophical ideologies who also pushed for reforms in government and business that would bring about greater prosperity and equality for all Americans. Thus, the religious foundation underpinning the efforts of adherents of Social Gospel to enact various forms of social justice paired well with the secular moral beliefs of many political and civic workers of the same era, making for a relatively potent combination during the first decades of the twentieth century.

Although it appears that Woody Guthrie never directly studied any of the founding proponents of this particular religious movement, such as Walter Rauschenbusch or Josiah Strong, the singer’s acquired personal convictions drove him to apply certain Christian principles to contemporary social problems such as economic inequality and systemic civil injustice. Nevertheless, this adherence to Social Gospel views was not that of his youth, for his religious upbringing was more fundamentalist and conservative in nature, driven largely by the principle that salvation only comes through individual faith in Christ rather than collective civil action. But in time and through hard experience — his own and that of the people he knew best, the busted, disgusted, down and out of America — Guthrie was able to reshape his own religion-based views to promote Christian-based collective social engagement through his art.

During his early years, Guthrie began the religious journey that would eventually inform his particular ideas of Christianity, that of the brotherhood of man. As a boy, he only occasionally attended a local Methodist church in Okemah, Oklahoma.⁸ Still, his parents and other family members poured “hymns, spirituals, songs about how to save your lost and homeless soul and self” into his hungry ear.⁹ As a result, his initial spiritual understanding was left largely un beholden to any one particular Christian discipline, as he took from many traditions — even though some were only

expressed through song, just as he would later convey his own beliefs through his music. Only after moving to Pampa, Texas, in 1929 did he become more deeply engaged in Christianity, reading “the bible and the life of Jesus almost day and night.”¹⁰ During the early years of the Great Depression, he also befriended a music-loving Church of Christ preacher named E. C. McKenzie, who helped direct the singer’s interest in this faith and even baptized him.¹¹ Guthrie’s attendance at this or any church did not last long, however. Instead, he preferred to approach religion in his own individual and eclectic manner. So even in a time of his most obvious spiritual searching while affiliated with a traditional church, Guthrie’s Christianity was more informed by his own interpretation of the Bible rather than controlled by any particular doctrine, allowing for his own personal political beliefs to shape his religious views.

Perhaps Guthrie’s eventual connection between Christianity and social action derived partially from a surprising source, for many adherents of both the Populist and Socialist movements in Oklahoma and Texas at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries used biblical language and images to help get their points across about social and economic inequality to their largely Protestant members, a move very much in line with the Social Gospel and Progressive Movement partnership. As Populist editor and organizer Leo Vincent noted, “the law that labor recognizes is the law of the great Father above . . . [but] the law that capital works by is Mammon worship.”¹² These leftist political movements had wide acceptance in the early decades of Guthrie’s life and their ideas still reverberated even in his early adulthood. However, it does not appear that the singer tied Christian principles to any of his burgeoning political ideas in his youth; but the moment where he joined his own eclectic Christian faith to a push for social justice soon approached. In part, he seems to have come to his connection by recognizing that his own views of righteous behavior and those of some of his community’s religious leaders did not jibe during the difficult times of the Dust Bowl era. In fact, he condemned in song what he saw as religious opportunism, driven by that very “Mammon worship” Vincent had referenced.

Throughout the 1930s, a large part of the nation Guthrie describes so beautifully and vividly in some of the most loved verses of “This Land” found itself in desperate conditions. For long before this era, the entire region, but especially the southern plains, experienced periods of drought and dust storms. Even after the grassland made way for the farmlands, the area experienced many dry seasons — the last epic one having occurred in the 1890s. Between the years of drought, crops greened and grew as farmers tilled the soil and drew profit from the bounty of the land. Then in 1931, the rains failed to come and record-high temperatures broiled the region, killing much of the cotton and wheat crop. The combined effects of over-plowing

and drought allowed the unhampered winds to strip the precious topsoil from the earth and send it swirling across the southern plains in great clouds of dust.¹³

At first, these tempests did not ravage Guthrie's then hometown of Pampa, Texas, as they did other places in the region soon to be dubbed "The Great Dust Bowl," but some small storms did come through, leaving a thin powder perpetually hanging in the air. It drifted into homes and settled on furniture, clothes, even food. Nothing remained untouched. Although these problems were not easily endured, the worst was yet to come. On April 14, 1935, sometimes called "Black Sunday," the greatest dust storm of all raged across the majority of the southern plains, the dust rising up in a great wave thousands of feet high, sweeping over fields and towns, blotting out the sun, covering the land in darkness, and bringing the fearful dread of the Apocalypse along with it.

This last reality did not escape Guthrie's notice as he described the people's religion-based foreboding in both "Dust Storm Disaster" and "So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh." In the fourth verse of the former, the narrator shifts from noting the destruction of the entire region to expressing the frightening reality around him. He says, "It fell across our city / Like a curtain of black rolled down." In the next line, he emphasizes the communal dread among those suffering through the dust storm and fearing for their eternal souls: "We thought it was our judgment / We thought it was our doom."¹⁴ Here, Guthrie represents Black Sunday as being a sure sign of the Apocalypse. The first reaction upon which the song's narrator focuses is the Dust Bowler's religious fear. In the third verse, he touches upon the sense of doom this gigantic dust storm provoked in residents: "We talked of the end of the world."¹⁵ During a spoken introductory piece for "So Long" made during a 1940 recording for the Library of Congress, Guthrie voices the people's belief that this monstrous storm represented the wrath of God visited upon a villainous race:

This is the end, this is the end of the world. People ain't been living right. The human race ain't been treating each other right, been robbing each other in different ways, with fountain pens, guns, having wars, and killing each other and shooting around. So the feller who made this world, he's worked up this dust storm.¹⁶

These kinds of sentiments do not seem to have originated in Guthrie's imagination, for many who experienced the ravages of Black Sunday also mention the religious fears this storm evoked. Detailing similar but even more heightened fears, Clella Schmidt (who lived in Spearman, Texas, during the Great Depression) recalls the reaction of a frightened young

female neighbor. Before the storm of April 14th came, Clella's family had tried to pick up this woman and her baby. Just as they got to her house, the dust hit hard. The young woman then became hysterical, even going so far as to suggest that she "kill the baby and herself because it was the end of the world and she didn't want to face it alone." Luckily, Clella's father, through the quoting of Bible verses, convinced the woman that the end was not near.¹⁷ As Guthrie's lyrics suggest and this story confirms, the fear of God and his judgment firmly embedded itself in those experiencing the worst the Dust Bowl had to offer.

With the seeming apocalyptic nature of the dust storms, many people felt the need to get religion, and Guthrie comments on the results. In two verses of "So Long," he makes some comic jabs at Dust Bowl preachers, even suggesting that they used the people's fear of the storms to get people into church just to wheedle money out of them:

The telephone rang, and it jumped off the wall,
And that was the preacher paying his call.
He said, "Look at the shape that the world is in,
I've got a cut price on salvation from sin."¹⁸

Here Guthrie is clearly condemning. The line "I've got a cut price on salvation from sin" suggests that the preacher is offering a discount on spiritual pardons. Although it is unfair to accuse all southwestern religious leaders of cashing in on the fear the storms aroused, some churches did do a thriving business after the dust clouds hit the southern plains. In particular, longtime Oklahoma resident Caroline Henderson noted on March 8, 1936, that "one village church reported forty people in attendance on one of the darkest and most dangerous of the recent dusty Sundays."¹⁹

In the next verse, Guthrie continues his attack on greed masquerading as religiosity. Once the parishioners arrive and "jam" and "pack" the churches, the story takes an interesting twist. Because "that dusty old dust storm blowed so black, / The preacher could not read a word of his text," so he takes up collection, just before skipping town and leaving the dust and his congregation behind as he sings the chorus, "So long it's been good to know you."²⁰ Thus, the greed of the supposedly sanctified individual is exposed, setting the church up as a mere racket. Actually, some preachers did leave due to the dust. In Grant County, Kansas, a Church of God preacher left his post. According to a local newspaper, he said, "We feel it is advisable to get out of this dust bowl for our health's sake."²¹ Just as the fictional Preacher Casy did in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, some Holiness and Pentecostal preachers left the dust and drought of the southern plains behind and traveled to California. Some even set up new churches there.²² Thus, early in his life and writing career, Guthrie could

find both use and abuse in Christianity as it was generally practiced in his own community.

Even during his journey from the Dust Bowl to California in the late 1930s, Guthrie still found the traditional institutions of the Christian church far removed from brotherhood and social involvement, although he recognized that these impulses did exist in many of the people hardest hit by the economic downturn. In fact, he told and retold a story about his own run-in with several churches and their reluctance to help the needy as he was hoboing from Texas to California in the late 1930s: “When I hit Tucson, Arizona — I was really . . . dirty, tired, and so hungry, I was shaking all over.”²³ Although advised to stay on “the working folks’ end of town” by other traveling vagabonds, he ends up wandering through the “‘good’ part . . . where the ‘moneyed’ folks live.” Hungry, he stops at several churches to see if he could do “a job of work . . . to earn a bite to eat.”²⁴ However, he does not have much luck and reviews the rejections he has tallied:

One lady, a maid at some church there, said, You better get away from this back door before the parson comes back and sees you — he don’t like for anybody to knock on his back door. At the big Catholic Cathedral on the other side of town, the nun lady said, I’ll have to call the father, so he come to the door and said, Sorry, Son, but we’re livin on charity our selves, there’s nothing here for you. I looked up at the cathedral, every single rock in it cost ten dollars to lay and ten to chop out, and I thought, Boy, you’re right — there’s nothing here for me. If piling rocks on top of one another is the top of your religion, I ruther have . . . the hoboos.²⁵

Then the singer walks “down to the shacks of the railroad workers, the Mexicanos, the Negroes, the whites,” where food is given freely, even though these generous souls have few worldly goods themselves.²⁶ This contrast between religious institutions neglectful of the basic needs of people asking for help and the poor who gladly offer it stands as a stark reminder that even the institutions can forget the promise of Christian charity, while individuals most directly impacted by want can be depended upon to understand and help those needing assistance. It is they, not the traditional church, who act with Christ’s grace in Guthrie’s scenario.

Fortunately, the singer did not give up on this potential force for good when he challenged the very notion of what being a Christian was. As also documented in *Bound for Glory*, after arriving in California, Guthrie meets up with several other men who have been riding the rails. Noticing a sign reading, “Free Meal & Nights Lodging. Rescue Mission,” the men start joking around about prayer. Suddenly, the conversation turns serious, with

this cast of rough characters opening up about the power of religion in their own lives. But the concluding comment comes from “an old white-headed man” who tells the assembled men:

All of this talking about what's up in the sky, or down in hell, for that matter, isn't half as important as what's right here, right now, right in front of your eyes. Things are tough. Folks broke. Kids hungry. Sick. Everything. And people has just got to have more faith in one another, believe in each other. There's a spirit of some kind we've all got. That's got to draw us together.²⁷

After the old man finishes, the rest nod their heads in agreement. In effect, we find these men of the road, these “bums,” all subscribing to the idea that a communal religious spirit resides in the people of America. Here, voiced by one of his own characters, we find Guthrie's own ideas concerning the need for Christian unity in this world. In essence, this character illustrates the necessity of Social Gospel principles — that the men and women in this life must push for equality and justice, the very same impulses exhibited by Christ.

Guthrie continued to develop this view while singing on KFVD radio in Los Angeles. In a songbook that he hawked on the air, we can find him laying out these beliefs and continuing to use his own vision of Christianity to comment on the injustices of this world, on its greed and lack of charity. In particular, he writes, “Preachers preach” the idea of “One Big Union.” Here, Guthrie reconstructs preachers into a force for good, presenting them as potential voices of brotherhood, just as Preacher Casy becomes in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Then Guthrie adds, “You believe in it because the bible says You'll all be One in the Father. That is as High as Religion goes. Then on over there somewhere it says, God is Love. So you see that the Reason you got Religion is so's everybody can All be One in Love.” He even uses Christianity to advocate against private ownership of land: “Bible says God Owns Everything. That means that a Man is wrong when he jumps up and says, I own This Land, I own this House, I Own this Factory, YOU KEEP OUT!”²⁸ A few years later, he would express this same sentiment in a lesser-known verse of “This Land Is Your Land”:

Was a big high wall there that tried to stop me
A sign was painted said: Private Property.
But on the back side it didn't say nothing —
God blessed America for me.²⁹

In the KFVD songbook, Guthrie elaborates on this principle by exposing the hypocrisy in Christianity as often practiced, especially in terms of economic realities. For he acknowledges that the “Rich Man” also thinks he follows God’s way: “They say they are ‘religious,’ say they’re ‘Christians,’ say they’re ‘good’.” In the end, Guthrie concludes that capitalism conflicts with the tenets of Christianity; for he believes, “Th’ very first thing you got to do to be a Christian is to sell all your goods and give it to the Poor.” If you do, then and only then will you be deep within God’s love: “That’s Real Religion. Living, Loving and Giving.”³⁰

During his time in California in the late 1930s, Guthrie began combining and equating many of his new political influences and his unique brand of Christianity, one that reflected Social Gospel principles. In an article he wrote later in life, he looked back in time to a night in California when he had come across a small rural church that was holding a service for striking cotton workers. In the course of the sermon, the preacher tells the assembled workers, “Jesus Christ of Nazareth, himself, was . . . a radical, a union organizer asking the rich to share their goods with you hungry and you poor, whose hand the rich has robbed.” Even more interesting, Guthrie links this story to his first purchase of a piece of communist literature, the Constitution of the Soviet Union, which he refers to as “my bible” at one point.³¹ It was during this time that Guthrie first encountered communist ideology through friends, colleagues, and various other relationships, which greatly influenced his thinking for the rest of his life. The story unfolded in this article indicates that Guthrie overlapped Christianity, unionism, and communism with little real difference being made between them. In his estimation, each becomes a force for justice and equality, for bringing salvation to humankind on Earth rather than just in the afterlife. Thus, both his religious and political beliefs are evolving during this time, joining together to push for positive change in the day to day lives of the common people, with Guthrie even presenting Christ as a reshaper of economic realities, an image that he returned to several times — as we shall see later.

Part of Guthrie’s egalitarian vision continued to come out of his belief that a spiritual imperative urged all people to create harmony and fellowship with each other. We can see this impulse worked out in many songs of this period. We can see this Social Gospel spirit in Guthrie’s best-known song concerning sharecropping, “I Ain’t Got No Home in This World Anymore.” Taking for inspiration the old gospel song “I Can’t Feel at Home in This World Anymore,” popularized by the Carter Family in the early 1930s, Guthrie recasts the religious piece so it documents the harsh realities the sharecroppers experienced. Like Wobbly songwriter Joe Hill, Guthrie rejected any type of religious song that urged listeners to blithely accept the wrongs in this world in the hope of receiving heavenly rewards, “pie in the sky” when they die, which reflects the passive premillennialist

view noted earlier. The result of Guthrie's meditations on his subject is "I Ain't Got No Home in This World Anymore," in which the narrator is displaced due to a banker's greed. In an afternote, Guthrie explained his reason for composing the song: "I seen there was another side to the picture. Reason why you cant feel at home in this world any more is mostly because you aint got no home to feel at."³² In essence, the song protests the reality of many of America's farm workers, implicitly calling for change in the vein very much in line with Social Gospel principles. Containing a more overt exploration of Christian unity, the 1939 song "This Morning I Am Born Again" presents us with a narrator who does "not seek a heaven / In some deathly distant land," who "No longer desire[s] a pearly gate / Nor want[s] a street of gold." Reborn, the narrator centers his life around helping others in the mortal world: "I give myself, my heart, my soul / To give some friend a hand." Through this selflessness, he already finds himself "in the promised land" while on Earth.³³

Even after moving to New York City in 1940, Guthrie continued to write songs that combined the religious drive that he had long entertained and his passion for uniting all the members of the working class, especially during World War II when he was in the merchant marine. Mistakenly, biographer Joe Klein points to the singer's sea voyages as the moment when "he developed a coherent philosophy that managed to encompass both his earlier spirituality and his current Marxism."³⁴ As noted earlier, the singer started making this connection as early as 1939, although some of his writing from this time, such as "Union Spirit" and "Union's My Religion," does connect religious feeling with union efforts more obviously than much of the singer's earlier work.³⁵

One of the most interesting pieces he wrote during his time at sea is "Good Old Union Feeling," which emphasizes the worldly Christian unity that Guthrie craved. In looking at this song, we find that "Jesus of Nazareth told his people one and all; / You must join the Union Army / When you hear that Spirit call!" Guthrie expands the Christian influence in this song by invoking an image often found in the spirituals created during slavery in America: "Abraham led the slaves of Egypt through the sea! / We'll be slaves to greed and fear / Until our Union sets us free!" Slavery, and the means to overcome it, makes another appearance in verse four, where the narrator reveals that "Old Abe Lincoln" said, "Not a white man can be free / While the dark man is a slave." Then the last verse offers us a vision of golden unity: "the Union shining like the sun / . . . draws us all together! / And melts us into one!"³⁶ Here, the Christian spirit, tied briefly to the Old Testament vision of Exodus and the Republican ideals of Lincoln, unites all workers — black and white — into one force, one union body. Thus, many forms of social injustice are defeated by all peoples coming together in Christian fellowship through One Big Union.

In January 1945, Guthrie returned to his song “This Morning I Am Born Again,” changing a few lines and adding a whole new verse:

I see just one big family
In this whole big human race
When the sun looks down tomorrow
I will be in a union place.³⁷

Although the song still reflects the narrator's newfound realization that this world, not the next, can be heavenly, the added lines give this vision a slightly different focus. For if the world embraces the idea of Christian unity, then others might be born again in both Christ and a spirit of earthly unity. A year later, Guthrie again took up this idea. In his notebook he writes, “The best religion I ever felt or ever seen is world union. The highest step in any religion is your joining up with the union of every mind and hand in the world.”³⁸ In song and prose, Guthrie constantly calls for a joining together of many to form a force for good, one that adheres to Social Gospel principles, one that works to better the state of all.

In this push, Guthrie finds no political party worth damning, just as long as they all move towards this goal as well. Earlier in the 1939 songbook *On a Slow Train through California*, Guthrie had equated and also defended various groups and politicians he admired. At one point, he poked fun at the stereotypical depiction of party members: “A Communist was seen walking down Main St. . . . without a bomb . . . without a piercing black eye, without a thought of war — without a job.” Then he added, “I am never overly attracted by anybody till every body else goes to jumpin’ on ‘em. Strikes me they framed up a Carpenter that same way, back over in Jerusalem.”³⁹ Here, we see Guthrie again joining together what might seem contradictory impulses: communism and Christianity. But he unites them by noting that all who seek to change the economic realities of America, all who push for equality, are denounced and threatened with destruction.

As Guthrie represents the situation, the views of Christ put him at odds with the authorities of his time because he advocates for a radical change in the economic and social conditions of his people in this world. In some moments, Guthrie was quite explicit in expressing this view. In introducing the song “Jesus Christ” to Alan Lomax during a 1940 interview, Guthrie says, “[Christ] was called an outlaw.”⁴⁰ Later, Guthrie even combined his view of Christ's politics with his outsider status by referring to him as “a socialist outlaw.”⁴¹ Another indication of Guthrie's thoughts about Christ as an outlaw figure appear upon the realization that he has set the lyrics of “Jesus Christ” to the tune of the outlaw ballad “Jesse James.” This decision does not seem a random one. Both James (at least the legendary version) and Christ advocated shifting wealth from one class to

another and both suffered death as a result of this stand, betrayed by one of their own. But these social reformers' methodologies greatly differ. Instead of using physical strength or weapons to separate the rich from their money, as Jesse James does, Christ uses words to urge them to do so. He tells them, "Sell all of your jewelry and give it to the poor." Although "the working people followed him around, / sang and shouted gay," the powers that be are not ready for such a message of charity and end up killing the Carpenter for his ideas. Betrayed by "One dirty coward called Judas Iscariot," Christ is turned over to the authorities. Then the "bankers and the preachers," "the landlord," and the "cops and the soldiers" in their employ nail "him on the cross" and lay "Jesus Christ in his grave."⁴²

All the actions mentioned above are presented as past events, but the song includes a comment about the present, for Guthrie also believed that Christ's message would be equally disturbing to the wealthy in the here and now. In a written introduction to this piece, he explains its origins:

I wrote this song looking out of a rooming house in New York City in the winter of 1940. I saw how the poor folks lived, and then I saw how the rich folks lived, and the poor folks down and out and cold and hungry, and the rich ones out drinking good whiskey and celebrating and wasting handfuls of money at gambling and women, and I got to thinking about what Jesus said, and what if He was to walk into New York City and preach like he used to. They'd lock Him back in jail as sure as you're reading this.⁴³

This argument, that Christ would meet the same fate if he did return, is reflected in the last verse of the song. After telling us that the song was written in New York City, the narrator speculates, "If Jesus was to preach what He preached at Galilee, / They would lay Jesus Christ in His grave."⁴⁴ Thus, the message of Social Gospel — that all earthly denizens should shoulder equal shares of the economic spoils, that the privileged should aid the poor — is set as a drastic, even dangerous, challenge to the status quo.

According to one critic, Guthrie's Christ in this song is "more Steinbeckian than Marxian, reflecting not a revolutionary dialectic but a sentimental exaltation of the working class, which was his interpretation of the Depression era's Popular Front Americanized radicalism."⁴⁵ But how is the song not revolutionary? It includes a figure who urges the rich to give away their possessions to the poor. Certainly, if this reversal did happen, the change would be drastic, even revolutionary, in its effects. Sounding like Guthrie's own personal editorial, a character in *Bound for Glory* tells some assembled men exactly what advice Christ would give them:

If Jesus Christ was sitting right here, right now, he'd say this very same dam thing. You just ask Jesus how the hell come a couple of thousand of us living out here in this jungle camp like a bunch of wild animals. You just ask Jesus how many million of other folks are living the same way? Sharecroppers down South, big city people that work in factories and live like rats in the slimy slums. You know what Jesus'll say back to you? He'll tell you we all just mortally got to work together, build things together, fix up old things together, clean out old filth together, put up new buildings, schools and churches, banks and factories together, and own everything together. Sure, they'll call it a bad ism. Jesus don't care if you call it socialism or communism, or just me and you.⁴⁶

Like this character, Guthrie did not think of his Christ as adhering to one particular political perspective or ideology. His Christ advocated an economic, a political, a moral unity that transcends any label such as Communist or Socialist. His Christ offers a possibility of a true brotherhood of man on Earth.

Guthrie certainly did not see Christ as a sort of despot, imposing his views on others. He felt that Christ truly represented the positive ideals that people would gladly follow since it would lead to true equality and justice. In fact, Guthrie offered up Christ as a candidate for the highest office in America in his song "Christ for President." Editorializing for a moment, its narrator says:

Every year we waste enough
To feed the ones who starve;
We build our civilization up
And we shoot it down with wars

But this situation can be overcome "with the Carpenter on the seat." In fact, with Christ "Away up in the capital town / The U.S.A. would be on the way / Pros-perity bound!"⁴⁷ Here, Guthrie presents Christ as a truly democratic leader — an advocate for economic equality, for justice in this world and not just Heaven.

The necessity of this overall exploration is rather simple. Too often, the debate about Guthrie's political principles — or even the political left as a whole, both in the past and the present — centers around ideology separated from a strong religious foundation. The American right wing claims religion, God always being on their side, while the left is seen as being moral relativists at best or amoral at worst. But religion doesn't have

to be conservative, fearful, or capitalistic. In fact, history gives us many progressive figures who drew upon the justice traditions within Christianity, Martin Luther King, Jr. being a prime example that many know and revere. This belief system, and its followers, can demand equality and fairness for this world, not just the next. Woody Guthrie stands as a prophet of this possibility, even though he drew upon communism, socialism, populism, democracy, and other progressive political ideologies. They all informed his religious beliefs. In effect, Guthrie's Social Gospel-centered Christianity came to be an essential pillar of his push for justice and fairness for all.

NOTES

¹ Woody Guthrie, "No Disappointment in Heaven." *Songs of Woody Guthrie* (c. 1941), p. 178. Woody Guthrie Manuscript Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Box 2.

² Original version of this song held in the Woody Guthrie Archives, Tulsa, Oklahoma (WGA), Songs 1, Box 3, Folder 27.

³ "No Disappointment in Heaven," *Songs of Woody Guthrie*, p. 178.

⁴ Cecelia Tichi, *Civic Passions: Seven Who Launched Progressive America (and What They Teach Us)* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), pp. 206, 221.

⁵ Randall J. Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 12.

⁶ Carter Family, "No Depression in Heaven," on *The Original Carter Family from 1936 Radio Transcripts* (Old Homestead Record Company, 1975), Track 3.

⁷ For a general background concerning this movement see Robert Handy, *The Social Gospel in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966; Ronald White, *Liberty and Justice for All: Racial Reform and the Social Gospel* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990; Susan Collins, *A Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001).

⁸ Ed Cray, *Ramblin' Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), p. 85.

⁹ Woody Guthrie, *American Folksong* (New York: Oak Publications, 1961), p. 2.

¹⁰ Woody Guthrie, "About Woody," in Alan Lomax, Woody Guthrie, and Pete Seeger, eds., *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 22.

¹¹ Cray, p. 85.

¹² Quoted in Worth Robert Miller, *Oklahoma Populism* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), p. 113. For a detailed discussion of Oklahoma Socialists' use of Christianity, see Garin Burbank, "The Gospel According to Local Socialists," in Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red: The Gospel of Socialism in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1910-1924* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), pp. 14-43.

¹³ For a useful history of the Dust Bowl, see Timothy Egan, *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006).

¹⁴ Woody Guthrie, "The Great Dust Storm (Dust Storm Disaster)," *Dust Bowl Ballads* (Rounder Records, 1988), Track 1.

¹⁵ Woody Guthrie, "Dusty Old Dust (So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh)," *Dust Bowl Ballads*, Track 14.

¹⁶ Woody Guthrie, spoken introduction to "So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh," *Library of Congress Recordings* (Rounder Records, 1988), Disc 1, Track 8.

¹⁷ *Surviving the Dust Bowl*, directed by Ghana Gazit and David Steward. WGBH Boston Educational Foundation, 1998.

- ¹⁸ Guthrie, "So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh," *Library of Congress Recordings*, Disc 1, Track 9.
- ¹⁹ Caroline Henderson, "Letters from the Dust Bowl," *The Atlantic*, vol. 157, no. 5 (May 1936), p. 550.
- ²⁰ Guthrie, "So Long, It's Been Good to Know Yuh," *Library of Congress Recordings*, Disc 1, Track 9.
- ²¹ *Grant County Republican* (Ulysses, Kansas), August 27, 1936, p. 1.
- ²² James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 201.
- ²³ Guthrie, "About Woody," *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, p. 23.
- ²⁴ Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* (New York: Plume, 1983), pp. 202-204.
- ²⁵ Guthrie, "About Woody," p. 23.
- ²⁶ Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, p. 210.
- ²⁷ Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, pp. 229-30.
- ²⁸ Woody Guthrie, "One Big Union," *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, p. 281.
- ²⁹ Woody Guthrie, "This Land Is Your Land," WGA, Songs 1, Box 3, Folder 27.
- ³⁰ Guthrie, "One Big Union," *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, p. 281.
- ³¹ Woody Guthrie, "My Constitution and Me," *Daily Worker Magazine*, June 19, 1949, pp. 3, 12.
- ³² Woody Guthrie, note to "I Ain't Got No Home in This World Any More," Woody Guthrie Papers, Ralph Rinzler Archives, Center for Folklore and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C., Box 1, Folder 1.
- ³³ Woody Guthrie, "This Morning I Am Born Again," in Guthrie, *Pastures of Plenty*, ed. Dave Marsh and Harold Leventhal (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), p. 27.
- ³⁴ Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), p. 280.
- ³⁵ Woody Guthrie, "Union Spirit," WGA, Songs 1, Box 3, Folder 28; Guthrie, "Union's My Religion," WGA, Songs 1, Box 3, Folder 28.
- ³⁶ Guthrie, *American Folksong*, p. 33.
- ³⁷ *The Woody Guthrie Newsletter*, January 1968, p. 6. A copy of this newsletter is held by the Performing Arts Reading Room in the Library of Congress.
- ³⁸ Guthrie, *Pastures of Plenty*, p. 172.
- ³⁹ Woody Guthrie, *On a Slow Train Through California* (c. 1939), pp. 2, 23. Copy held in WGA, Songs 2, Notebook 89.
- ⁴⁰ Guthrie, "They Laid Jesus Christ in His Grave," *Library of Congress Recordings*, Disc 2, Track 3.
- ⁴¹ Klein, p. 163.
- ⁴² Woody Guthrie, "Jesus Christ," on Guthrie, *This Land Is Your Land: The Asch Recordings*, Vol. 1 (Smithsonian Folkways Records, 1997), Track 13.
- ⁴³ Guthrie, "Jesus Christ Was a Man," *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, p. 336.
- ⁴⁴ Guthrie, "Jesus Christ," *This Land Is Your Land*, Track 13.
- ⁴⁵ Wayne Hampton, *Guerrilla Minstrels: John Lennon, Joe Hill, Woody Guthrie, and Bob Dylan* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), p. 130.
- ⁴⁶ Guthrie, *Bound for Glory*, p. 251.
- ⁴⁷ Guthrie, *Pastures of Plenty*, p. 43. Although Guthrie never recorded the song himself, it was recorded by Billy Bragg and Wilco on *Mermaid Avenue*, Vol. 1 (Elektra, 1998), Track 9.