

enough to illustrate that Christians not only *can be* socialists but clearly *have been* socialists.

If you are a Christian who believes as Martin Luther King, Jr. did, that we must transform our society from a "thing-oriented" society to a "person-oriented" society, that people are more important than profit motives and property rights, and that "true compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar ... It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring," then, chances are, *you* are a Christian socialist.

If you would like to learn more about socialist ideas and values, we invite you to visit our website: <http://chicagodsa.org>.

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# Can Christians Be Socialists?

By Michael Baker

**Yes, they can!**

In fact, many Christians throughout the history of the United States *have been* socialists. The United States has had traditions of Christian socialism that predate the work of Karl Marx, the economist and philosopher whose work most people associate with socialism, and some traditions even predate the founding of the United States itself.

Today, many Christians are interested in learning about Christian socialism because they are weary of the political influence of the so-called "Christian" Right, a group whose values they do not see as representing their own or as even being particularly Christian, and because they are interested in finding a positive, progressive political movement in which to put their values into practice.

## Some Christian Socialist History

To many people, Christian socialism in the United States is associated with communal societies that began to emerge around the 1730s and 1740s during a period called the "Great Awakening." This "Great Awakening" was a first in a series of "Great Awakenings," all of which were periods characterized by religious revival and a conviction that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent.

During these periods of revival, some of the more radical religious groups, interested in preparing themselves by "faith and works" for the Second Coming, created alternative, communal societies in order to facilitate their preparation.

One such communal society was the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, a group more commonly known as the Shakers. The Shakers were a Protestant religious sect that originated in England in 1747 and came to the United States in 1774. The

Shakers practiced the common ownership of property and equality between men and women, at least in the area of religious leadership.

A somewhat later, well-known communal society was the Oneida Perfectionist Society, founded in 1848. This community practiced common ownership of property and gave men and women equal voice in community governance. Women often worked alongside men, doing the same work, and children were raised by the community without the use of corporal punishment and were encouraged to pursue their own interests.

Many other such Christian communal societies could be mentioned, such as the Harmonists (or Rappites), the Janssonists, the communal experiments of William Keil, and the Ephrata Cloister. Some of these groups held beliefs and engaged in practices that many Christians today would find disagreeable. Nevertheless, what these groups illustrate is that Christianity has a history of radical thought with socialist inclinations that predates the founding of the nation.

However, Christian socialism has consisted of much more than the development of communal societies. Christian socialism is a tradition that continues to this day with the better part of its history focusing on the pursuit of social and economic justice for the general public, as the following brief highlights of some well-known Christian socialists illustrate:

**Adin Ballou** (1803–1890) was a Universalist and Unitarian minister who advocated the practice of “Practical Christianity,” the concept that Christians were called to put their beliefs into practice in order to create a new, better society. Ballou advocated abolitionism, nonviolent resistance, pacifism, and socialism. He helped found the Hopedale Community, a community that endeavored to put the ideas of Practical Christianity into practice.

**Francis Bellamy** (1855–1931) was a Baptist minister and Christian socialist. He is most remembered for composing the Pledge of Allegiance as part of a promotional American flag

campaign for the magazine *Youth's Companion*. Many people would be surprised to learn that the Pledge of Allegiance was composed by a socialist and that the words “under God” were not in Bellamy’s version of the Pledge in spite of his ministerial background.

**Jackson Stitt Wilson** (1868–1942) was a Methodist minister, social worker, and a mayor of Berkeley, California. Wilson cited, among other things, the injustices he had witnessed against working people and his study of economics and sociology as leading him to socialism. Wilson saw in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount the fundamental principles of social justice and a comprehensive social program that could be made a reality only through socialism.

**Norman Thomas** (1884–1968) was a Presbyterian minister, pacifist, and leader of the Socialist Party of America. He ran for president six times on the Socialist ticket, as well as five times for other offices. Thomas worked in numerous civil rights, labor, and peace groups, including the ACLU, NAACP, CORE, and SANE. Thomas campaigned against racial segregation and anti-labor practices, as well as against the internment of Japanese Americans following the attack on Pearl Harbor. He advocated for birth control, environmental conservation, and the opening of the United States to Jewish victims of Nazi persecution.

**Reinhold Niebuhr** (1892–1971) was a German Evangelical pastor and theologian. As a pastor in Detroit, Michigan, he spoke out against the inhumane working conditions in the automobile industry and permitted union organizers the use of his pulpit. Niebuhr also spoke out against the Ku Klux Klan, which had a large presence in Detroit at the time. Reinhold is credited with authoring the popular “Serenity Prayer”: “God give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, the courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other,” as one version goes.

**Dorothy Day** (1897–1980) was a Catholic anarchist who co-founded with Peter Maurin the Catholic Worker movement. Still active today, the Catholic Worker movement establishes communities that practice voluntary poverty, prayer, and nonviolent direct action and offer direct aid to the homeless and poor. Day and

the Catholic Worker movement were a significant influence on the famous American socialist leader Michael Harrington, who began his activist career working with Day at a Catholic Worker house.

**Bayard Rustin** (1912–1987) was a Quaker, pacifist, and activist involved in numerous social justice causes. Rustin is most remembered for his work with A. Philip Randolph, leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and the pacifist A. J. Muste, leader of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), an organization that employed Gandhian nonviolent resistance to challenge racial discrimination laws. Rustin was the main organizer of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the event at which Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. In his later life, Rustin’s activism focused primarily on gay and lesbian issues.

**Frank P. Zeidler** (1912–2006) was a politician who is most remembered for being elected to *three* terms as the mayor of Milwaukee, Wisconsin on the socialist ticket. Zeidler’s administration was marked by the large-scale construction of public housing, the creation of the state’s first educational television station, and various city beautification programs, all of which were accomplished without sending the city into further debt to repay its loans. According to Zeidler, his Lutheran faith compelled him to adopt his socialist beliefs during the Great Depression.

**Martin Luther King, Jr.** (1929–1968) surely needs no introduction as a Christian advocate for social justice. However, what many Americans do not know about him is that in his later life King adopted the ideas of democratic socialism. His experience in the Civil Rights movement compelled him to conclude that a redistribution of resources was necessary to correct injustice because the civil rights victories for which he and many others had labored so hard were hollow without corresponding economic rights.

## [I Want to Learn More](#)

The above are only snippets about Christian socialism in the United States, but these few examples should be