Ethics and Intersectionality

Organizing Visions

Social Ethics and Broad-Based
Solidarity Activism

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Introduction

Organizing Visions of Social Ethical Organizers

Gary Dorrien

This book comes from a scrappy group of social ethicists and organizers who believe that academics, organizers, and clerics must forge new ways of working together in interfaith liberationist work. Charlene Sinclair, Aaron Stauffer, and I founded Social Ethics Energizing Democracy (SEED) in July 2022 to create a vehicle for this multifaceted project. Charlene is a veteran leader of organizing efforts to reverse generations of structural racism toward communities of color in the United States. Aaron is a former organizer for the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) and Religions for Peace who specializes in church-based community organizing. Both had written doctoral dissertations with me on the history, problems, and possibilities of broad-based interfaith organizing. We said it was time to bring together organizers, pastors involved in organizing, academics who teach social ethics and related subjects, and people with a foot in two or more of these camps. This book, on which Aaron has served as chief editor, exudes the commitment of SEED to faith-based organizing.

I came to this work through the door of solidarity activism, which led me into Episcopal Church ministry at the age of thirty and an academic career at the age of thirty-five. In my twenties, I was an organizer for the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), which morphed in 1982 into Democratic Socialists of America. In my late twenties and early thirties, I was also an every-week speaker for the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador and the founder of an Albany, New York, diocesan chapter of the Episcopal Peace Fellowship. I had belatedly joined a church and did not consider an academic career. Before I could join a church, I had to believe that churches could be effective in social justice

activism. Later, I made a similar judgment about the academy. I have long argued that breakthrough gains for universal healthcare, economic democracy, and saving the planet occur during periods of liberal ascendancy in solidarity with mass movements. The preconditions fitting this theory of change were lacking for most of my lifetime. They materialized only in recent years, yielding mass movements for justice and eco-justice, but also Right-nationalist movements that repudiate the norms and institutions of liberal democracy.

The Right-nationalist movements vying for power in Europe are mostly racial-ethnic, fueled by their hostility to multiracial liberal democracy, which they call "globalism," charging that Black and Brown migrants are reverse-colonizing the so-called native white Europeans. Right-nationalism in the United States expresses comparable grievances against non-White immigrants and liberal democracy, with three key differences: (1) The United States is a nation of immigrants with a distinctly powerful tradition of civic nationalism based on the claim that the United States is a creedal nation, not the homeland of an ethnic group. (2) Religion plays a much larger role in the United States than in most of Europe. And (3), fusing aspects of (1) and (2), every revival of US American nationalism resurrects the Manifest Destiny myth that America is an exception to history.

Journalist John O'Sullivan contended in 1845 that the United States had a Manifest Destiny to annex the Republic of Texas as a slave state and spread all the way to California and Oregon. God, he maintained, wanted Anglo-Saxon America to be as expansive and powerful as possible. Whig leaders were incredulous at this argument, objecting that Manifest Destiny was brazenly imperialist: Were they to suppose that no nation on earth has a divine right to universal conquest except the universal Yankee nation? The United States has compelled its political candidates ever since to profess their belief in American Exceptionalism, if not outright Manifest Destiny.

A powerful Right-nationalist species of American Exceptionalism has been ascending in American politics since 2011, the same year that a tipping point also occurred on the democratic Left. Barack Obama was elected president in 2008 amid a spectacular financial crash and George W. Bush's massive bailouts of the megabanks. A wildly angry movement calling itself the Tea Party railed against the election of a Black liberal Democrat and the disastrous Bush presidency, challenging the Republican Party establishment for control of the party. Donald Trump perceived in 2011 that, if he could take over the populist-nationalist insurgency, he

could overtake the Republican Party. He wasn't ready to run for president, but saw his opening, the tipping point on the political Right. Meanwhile, the crash and the bailouts of 2008 yielded tame reactions on the political Left, chastened by the demands of defending Obama, until the Occupy Wall Street explosion of 2011. Masses of people were fed up with being downsized and humiliated. For twenty years, neoliberal capitalist apologists had wielded a devastating slogan, "There is no alternative." Then TINA lost its shutdown power. Occupy Wall Street was a wild, brief, chaotic, turning point, demanding that there must be an alternative to severe inequality, White supremacy, and destroying the planet.[1]

New movements for immigration justice, a raised minimum wage, antiracism, equality, ecojustice, and First Nation peoples' sovereignty swiftly ensued—the Dreamer movement, Fight for $15, Black Lives Matter, the Bernie Sanders presidential nomination campaigns of 2016 and 2020, and the Dakota Access Pipeline protests. The democratic Left had been habituated to a stubborn remnant mode of organizing and an ever-shrinking unionism. Now we rejoiced at witnessing a new era of mass movements. The Bernie campaigns showed that tens of millions of US Americans are committed to universal healthcare, economic justice, abolishing structures of racial, sexual, and cultural denigration, and saving a suffocating planet. The Democratic Party, however, is a corporate powerhouse dominated by economic and cultural elites cut off from the struggles of working-class communities. Thus, it regarded Sanders as a mortal threat to the party, while Sanders spoke a one-key-only language of social democratic humanism that did not break through to Black and Hispanic voters. The estrangement of the Democratic Party from its own former base in the working class played a large role in electing Trump to the presidency in 2016, and a larger one in 2024.

The contributors to this book are scholar-activists who are committed to comprehending the historical roots and legacies of our work, including its ongoing historical trajectories. Many of us teach social ethics, a field founded in the 1880s by the social gospel movement, which argued that Christians are morally obligated to support movements for justice and peace. The emphasis of the social gospel on social justice organizing was

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[1] This section on anti-neoliberal turning points adapts material from Gary Dorrien, *Social Democracy in the Making: Political and Religious Roots of European Socialism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), ix–x.

novel in American Christianity. It impelled social gospel academics to invent a field that studied reform movements—social ethics. In subsequent decades, many social ethicists shucked off their field's original emphasis on organizing. Some returned to individualism, or a posited orthodoxy, or both; some said the social gospel attempt to reform society had been hopelessly naïve; and many allowed the Democratic Party establishment to define what was "real" in politics and society. This book imagines a new broad-based solidarity activism that builds on the social gospel, Niebuhrian realist, liberationist, and social Catholic traditions of struggling for justice.

The social gospel arose differently in White Protestant and Black Protestant churches. In White Protestantism, it was primarily an anxious response to the struggle between owners and workers, the rise of trade unionism, and the specter of urban corruption. Union organizers said it was obvious that White Protestant churches would never side with them. It was possible to imagine a Catholic social gospel, since many Catholics joined the unions, but Protestant ministers preached to the capitalist class that paid their salary. This accusation hurt the feelings of social gospel founders Washington Gladden and Richard Ely. They vowed to overcome their class bias, reaching out to working-class communities that despised the Protestant churches. A succeeding generation of social gospel founders led by W. D. P. Bliss, Vida Scudder, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Harry F. Ward took a further step, building a socialist flank alongside the social gospel mainstream.

In Black Protestant churches that advocated a social gospel, there was no choice concerning which issue trumped the others. The Black social gospel was the answer to an anguished question: What would a new abolitionism be? Abolitionism and the Civil War had come and gone; Reconstruction had been forsaken; the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were eviscerated in much of the South; the United States imposed a racial caste system lacking any parallel in the post-slavery Americas; and a mania of lynching descended on Black Americans. The founders of the Black social gospel—William Simmons, Reverdy Ransom, Alexander Walters, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Nannie Burroughs, and Adam Clayton Powell Sr.—did not say that America just needed to fulfill its Manifest Destiny. They said the United States must overcome the betrayal of its own faith that all human beings possess God-given dignity. They taught that God cares about the poor, the excluded, the oppressed, and the kingdom of God.

Both social gospel movements contained a mainstream of progressive reformers and a flank of socialists. The three founders of social ethics were Ely, an Episcopalian political economist who taught at Johns Hopkins University; Francis Greenwood Peabody, a Unitarian cleric who taught at Harvard Divinity School; and Graham Taylor, a Congregational cleric who taught at Chicago Theological Seminary. All were White progressives, radical only in the way that the social gospel was inherently radical, contending that Christianity operated for centuries with the wrong hierarchy of topics. The church is Christian only when it enlists churches in struggles for justice.[2]

Social Darwinism dominated the emerging social sciences, especially economics and sociology. This situation alarmed Ely and Gladden, driving them in 1885 to create the American Economic Association. The churches needed very much, they said, to accept Darwinian biology, but embracing the Social Darwinist ideology of predatory domination and laissez-faire capitalism was out of play. Morally, Social Darwinism was a non-starter for anyone who preached Matthew 25 sermons about seeing Christ in the faces of the poor. The social gospel founders did not know where to draw the line between Darwinism and Social Darwinism. They debated this issue with anguish, looking for help wherever they could find it, knowing they were out-gunned intellectually by Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner, the doyens of Social Darwinism. Meanwhile Ely, Peabody, and Taylor said that applying the social gospel to real-world contexts must be a field of its own. It was not enough to study the Bible or theology from a social gospel perspective. Nobody knows beforehand, or in a library, what the relevant issues and solutions are. Peabody reasoned that the reform movements reveal where the places of suffering and injustice exist in society.

Peabody's courses focused on movements for temperance, urban reform, and the rights of workers, Black Americans, and Native Americans. His method had three steps—observation, generalization, and correlation.

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[2] This section on the social gospel origin of social ethics adapts and capsulizes my work on this subject in numerous books, especially Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 1–5; Dorrien, *The New Abolition: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 2–5; and Dorrien, *Over from Union Road: My Christian-Left-Intellectual Life* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2024), 184–85.

Description and analysis are important, Peabody said, but merely academic. Solutions are good, but piecemeal. Social ethics aimed to grasp the ethical character and principles of society as a whole, employing the tools of the newfound social sciences to serve this purpose, binding social ethics to social science. Ely, Peabody, and Taylor were middle-class idealists who cringed at having to talk about power and the class struggle. They preferred to talk about democracy, faith, social progress, scientific advancement, peace, the common good, and the way of Jesus. They objected sharply to being called socialists, since socialist radicalism scared and repelled them. Yet in a broad sense of the term, almost the entire US American social gospel tradition was socialist for advocating cooperative ownership and the nationalization of natural monopolies.[3]

Socialism arose in England and France in the 1820s as the idea that workers should be able to work cooperatively with one another instead of being pitted against one another. Society should be organized as a community of producer cooperatives or cooperative guilds. Some contended that the vision of a cooperative society cannot be achieved without strong industrial unions, so various kinds of syndicalism arose contending that worker syndicates should *be* the government. Other new forms of socialism ascribed an important role to the state or conceived socialism itself as state collectivism. Karl Marx condemned all forms of state socialism as a sellout absurdity; meanwhile six kinds of "Marxian" theory arose interpreting Marx as a syndicalist, an anarcho-syndicalist utopian, a radical democrat, a two-house reformist revolutionary (which the German Social Democratic Party called Orthodox Marxism), a Communist, and a guild socialist. Christian socialists variously aligned with these types or espoused their own ethically-based perspectives.[4]

In England and Switzerland, Christian socialism was a major player in the political Left, and socialism was democratic. The leading Christian socialists included John Ludlow and Charles Marson (England), and Leonhard Ragaz and Hermann Kutter (Switzerland). In most of

[3] See Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making*, 6–59, 60–145; and Dorrien, "Social Ethics for Social Justice: The Legacies of the Social Gospel and a Case for Idealistic Discontent," in *Ethics and Advocacy: Bridges and Boundaries,* ed. Harlan Beckley, Douglas F. Ottati, Matthew R. Petrusek, and William Schweiker (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022), 106–30.

[4] Dorrien, *Social Democracy in the Making*, 50–79, 114–34.

Continental Europe, Christian socialists were marginalized, and Marxists contended that democracy was a bourgeois fraud. Real democracy, according to the Marxian Left, would be achieved only after the proletarian revolution abolished capitalism. In the United States, White religious socialists W. D. P. Bliss, George Herron, Walter Rauschenbusch, Vida Scudder, and Harry Ward, and Black religious socialists Reverdy C. Ransom, George Frazier Miller, W. E. B. Du Bois, George W. Slater, and George W. Woodbey frightened the social gospel founders by accentuating the differences between progressive reform and socialist restructuring. The Christian socialists developed a concept of power as inclusive transformative capacity. Capitalism, they said, is inherently predatory; you cannot reform it by adding cooperatives and social welfare.

Ransom and Woodbey stressed that capitalism was like slavery; in fact, it was the basis of chattel slavery and a form itself of slavery. Du Bois added that democracy and imperialism expanded together because White workers shared the spoils of exploiting people of color. The rule of might grew precisely as democracy spread. The only solution to this miserable picture, Du Bois said, was for the labor and socialist movements to reach all the way to the world's most oppressed people, not stopping with White workers. Some interpreters, past and present, have described the social gospel socialists as the real thing and the reformers as pretenders who thwarted the real thing. But the leading Christian socialists were not ideologues who believed in magical socialism or sought to divide the social gospel movement over this issue; only Woodbey espoused the magical Marxist dogma that socialism is the cure for all social ills. The Christian socialists prized the broadly social Christian movement to which they belonged, and it mattered to them that sin and evil long predated capitalism. On their view, the social gospel was the next Great Awakening movement, this time recovering the social justice teaching of the Bible.[5]

Two intertwined ironies were fateful for the social gospel. The movement's historic figures belonged to its socialist flank, but the movement was defined historically by the sentimentality, moralism, and idealism of its mainstream.

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[5] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The African Roots of the War," *Atlantic Monthly* 115 (May 1915), 707–14. This discussion capsulizes my extensive discussions in Dorrien, *The New Abolition*, 281–86 and 453–82; and Dorrien, *American Democratic Socialism: History, Politics, Religion, and Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), 42–119.

Social gospel reformers preached a gospel of cultural optimism and a Jesus of middle-class idealism. Many were pacifists who exalted the antiwar issue above all other issues, describing Mohandas Gandhi as the Jesus-figure of the twentieth century. Sometimes they urged Christians to stop talking about class, a degrading concept. In the early 1930s, Reinhold Niebuhr redirected American theology by ridiculing the social gospel on these points. His frosty proto-Marxist polemic, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), brilliantly skewered the optimism and idealism of the social gospel, while taking for granted its core commitment to social justice activism.

Politics, Niebuhr taught, is about struggling for power. Liberal denials of this truism are stupid, especially the moral idealism of progressive Christianity. Niebuhr contended that Jesus preached an ethic of individual perfectionism that paid no attention to social consequences. Moreover, there is no such thing as a moral group. No human group willingly subordinates its interests to the interests of others; morality belongs to the sphere of individual action. Therefore, the highest good of a Christian social ethic in the social sphere is not love, but justice, which requires a struggle for power. Niebuhr swung the field of social ethics to his language of crisis, paradox, tragedy, and power struggle, trading the Progressive language of progress and ethical idealism for the orthodox-sounding language of sin, redemption, tragedy, and transcendence. He moved simultaneously, as he said, to the socialist left politically and to the neo-orthodox right theologically. Then in the mid-1940s he tacked back to the mainstream of the Democratic Party, taking most of the social ethics field with him. Niebuhr said there was no good reason to remain a democratic socialist because the New Deal achieved most of the socialist agenda while Socialists languished in marginalized irrelevance. A bit later, he refashioned his Christian Realism as a species of Cold War anti-Communism, until the war in Vietnam went very badly and Niebuhr judged that Cold War containment had to be more selective.[6]

The greatest social gospel tradition is the one that arose in Black churches and paved the way to the Civil Rights movement. Black social gospel founders Reverdy Ransom, Alexander Walters, George Slater Jr., and Richard R. Wright Jr. enlisted their churches in the fight for racial justice, building protest organizations. They preached about equality, democracy,

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[6] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Scribner's, 1932); Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era* (New York: Scribner's, 1934); Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making*, 226–94.

and Jesus loving all the children. Not to enter the social and political struggle for justice was to betray Jesus. The founders passed this faith to the generation of Mordecai Johnson, Benjamin Mays, J. Pius Barbour, and Howard Thurman, who passed it directly to Martin Luther King Jr.

King's teachers showed him that church leaders could combine academic intellectualism, religious faith, and a passion for social justice. In fact, they said, it was imperative for the church to become known for combining these things. Johnson, Mays, Barbour, and Thurman were democratic socialists and anti-colonial internationalists who took for granted that the best versions of the social gospel were democratic socialist and anti-imperialist. King assumed the same thing, never believing it made him unusual. After King was assassinated in 1968, liberation theologies arose in South America, the United States, and South Africa, contending that theology must privilege the questions and experiences of oppressed people of faith.[7]

Acts of solidarity and praxis come first; liberation theology is secondary reflection shaped by the voices of oppressed people. James Cone, the leading founder of Black liberation theology, had begun his academic career in 1965 as a neo-orthodox theologian who bristled that racism was a low-priority topic in his field. He burned with rage at being stuck in a field that merely regurgitated what German theologians said. After King was cut down, Cone imagined a Black theology that fixed on the struggles of Black people to overthrow oppression and dependency.

Cone rejected the liberal commitment to engaging critical disbelief, putting God in question, searching for the historical Jesus, and making claims to ethical universality. White Christianity, he said, is demonic, not something to critically appropriate. If liberation is the essence of the divine nature, God is Black. "Black" names a specific identity group *and* is a symbol of all oppressed people. To be liberated is to become Black with God. Afterward, there arose several kinds of Black theology, including womanist versions that privileged the wisdom and experience of Black women. Social ethicist Katie Cannon founded womanist ethics on novelist Alice Walker's historic definition that a womanist is a Black feminist or feminist of color who is willful and courageous, loves other women and herself, is committed to survival and the wholeness of people, and bears the same relation to feminism that purple has to lavender.[8]

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[7] Gary Dorrien, *Breaking White Supremacy: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

[8] James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Harper & Row,

Catholic versions of the social gospel developed over the same timespan in the nineteenth century as socialism and the Protestant social gospel. In the 1830s, a tradition of social Catholicism responding to socialism began in Europe; in 1891, Pope Leo XIII intervened in it by issuing a historic pro-union encyclical, *Rerum Novarum.* This encyclical launched the papal tradition of Catholic Social Teaching. American Catholicism, however, was slow to develop a Catholic equivalent of the social gospel. Catholic workers streamed into the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor, but Leo XIII's scathing critique of capitalism was jarring, threatening, and out of play in American Catholic seminaries. For twenty-five years, it had no public American Catholic defenders except John A. Ryan, a moral theologian at St. Paul Seminary in Minneapolis and Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. Ryan contended in his first book, *A Living Wage* (1906), that the rights to live and marry inhere in all persons, there is a secondary and derivative right to a living wage, and the United States needed living wage legislation. He advocated an eight-hour workday, a progressive tax on income and inheritance, state government unemployment and health insurance, and national and state government ownership of the railroads and telephone companies.[9]

Ryan waited until 1919 to acquire Catholic company. The National Catholic War Council adopted his program for postwar social reconstruction, and Ryan founded the National Catholic Welfare Council (NCWC), serving for many years as head of its Social Action Department. Meanwhile the labor priest movement of the 1930s and the founding of Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker movement in 1933 broke the mold of an immigrant faith angling for acceptance. Social Catholicism, anchored by papal encyclicals, was now an established third way between unfettered capitalism and atheistic socialism, even in the United States. Catholic

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1969); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation,* trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973); Katie Geneva Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983); Gary Dorrien, *A Darkly Radiant Vision: The Black Social Gospel in the Shadow of MLK* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023), 205–32, 261–333.

[9] John A. Ryan, *A Living Wage* (New York: Macmillan, 1906); Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum: The Condition of Labor* (1891), in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage,* ed. David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 14–39; Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making*, 185–215.

institutions teach their history, ensuring that the papal tradition of Catholic Social Teaching and the broader tradition of social Catholicism will not be forgotten. The same cannot be said of the Protestant social gospel that founded social ethics and was Christian socialist at its best.

Social Ethics and Political Theology

Social ethics, as I conceive it, is a tradition of academic, ecumenical, and public discourse that analyzes the relations of power at multiple sites of exploitation, exclusion, harm, and oppression. It names an academic field, the tradition of social ethical theology that developed within the ecumenical movement, and a tradition of public intellectualism and interfaith activism. The social gospel origins of social ethics and its defining commitment to social justice naturally produced a tradition dominated by progressives, democratic socialists, Niebuhrian realists, and liberationists. But some traditions of social ethics are strongly conservative, ascribing greater importance to religious authority, notably conservative forms of Catholicism and evangelicalism, and some traditions of social ethics are merely academic, spurning the emphasis on activist organizing that founded the field.

The relationships between social ethics and political theology are similarly controverted. Social ethics is a field in the academy, whereas political theology is a subfield boasting a growing interdisciplinary following. There are no irreconcilable differences between these enterprises, but both have a Christian socialist origin, contrary to the Carl Schmitt story that many political theologians somehow prefer. Schmitt was a Nazi legal theorist who despised liberal democracy in standard Nazi fashion. He taught, cynically but interestingly, that all forms of political thinking are ways of renaming theological categories. His scholarly bandwagon—which got rolling in the political theologies of the 1960s, sprawled to multiple fields in the 1980s, and is now a cottage industry—gave theologians an opening to reverse his program: All theology is political, especially when it claims otherwise. This reverse-Schmitt procedure undergirds much creative work in contemporary religious thought, especially in neo-Marxist, Deleuzian, and liberationist forms of political theology. It tracks the displacement of God by the sovereignty of the modern state, which in some renderings gave way to the godly sovereignty of corporate neo-capitalism, capitalist Empire. It importantly counters the isolation of the political from the theological and religious that defined the soulless subjectivity

of Enlightenment rationality, which uprooted transcendence from the materiality of life.[10]

But Christian socialists wrote political theology, making some of these very arguments, long before Schmitt, Emanuel Hirsch, and Paul Althaus championed the atrocious idea of fascist theology. Early Christian socialism in England, Germany, Switzerland, the United States, and Canada was a creative response to the social ravages of unfettered nineteenth-century capitalism. In England and North America, it was predominantly cooperative, progressive, social ethical, and pragmatic, usually fusing liberal and democratic elements, with less opposition from ecclesiastical establishments than Christian socialists experienced elsewhere. In Germany, Christian socialism had a stronger ideological and statist character as a consequence of yearning for, and then defending, a unified state. Here, Christian socialists had to fight off a Social Democratic movement that was hostile to religion and established churches that were hostile to trade unions and socialism. Social ethics and political theology, I believe, work best when they live up to the religious socialist traditions from which they arose. To interpret the political theologies formulated by Jürgen Moltmann, Dorothee Sölle, and Johann Baptist Metz in the 1960s and 1970s as a renewal of Schmitt's enterprise is grievously wrong. Moltmann, Sölle, and Metz were Christian democratic socialists who knew what they owed to previous generations of Christian socialism.[11]

Social Ethics Energizing Democracy

In July 2022, Charlene, Aaron, and I convened a two-day gathering of twenty-five founders of SEED. The following January, we conducted two sessions at the Society of Christian Ethics conference in Chicago, where the idea of this book was first broached. Later, there was a weeklong gathering in Nashville, Tennessee, where the book was mapped out. We resisted the

[10] This discussion of political theology adapts material from Dorrien, *Social Democracy in the Making*, 2–3.

[11] Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future,* trans. M. Douglas Meeks (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969); Dorothee Sölle, *Beyond Mere Obedience: Reflections on a Christian Ethic for the Future* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1970); Johann Baptist Metz, *Theology of the World,* trans. William Glen-Doepel (New York: Seabury, 1969); Gary Dorrien, *Reconstructing the Common Good: Theology and the Social Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 77–100.

turf boundaries and stereotypes that keep organizers and academics from working together. Democracy in the United States, we said, always fragile and imperiled in the first place, has entered a new period of acute crisis. White Christian nationalism plays a major role in the mounting danger. Climate change is driving millions of desperate people from places that are no longer habitable. Ranged against a toxic tide of authoritarian nationalism, we see faint and fragmented resistance movements. We need stronger counternarrative voices in the work of social justice organizing, and we need to combat frontline loneliness, supporting those on the front lines doing the work. This book is one of SEED's founding projects.[12]

Aaron Stauffer, reflecting on the contribution of the social gospel to grassroots and labor organizing, describes the remarkable ministry of social gospel stalwart Howard "Buck" Kester in the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU). Born in 1904 to a Virginia tailor who moved the family in 1916 to Beckley, West Virginia, Kester witnessed the labor strife and racism of Beckley, watched his father drift in and out of the Ku Klux Klan, and joined the youth bastions of the social gospel movement as a student at Lynchburg College—the YMCA, the World Student Christian Federation, and the Student Volunteer Movement. He cut his activist teeth in the YMCA, working to integrate YMCA summer camps, and dropped out of Princeton Theological Seminary, because it spurned the social gospel. In 1926 he enrolled at Vanderbilt School of Religion, where he absorbed the social gospel socialism of social ethicist Alva Taylor, who was fired a decade later for being too radical. Kester joined the Socialist Party for its socialism, joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation for its pacifism, and joined the NAACP for its antiracism, writing journalistic reports on lynching for the NAACP. In 1934, he threw himself into sharecropper organizing. Stauffer recounts that Kester powerfully condemned sharecropping and wage labor by combining the republican conception of freedom as non-domination with socialist critiques of wage slavery.

Classic republican arguments for liberty presupposed colonies of enslaved and dominated persons. Kester was a labor republican, countering that sharecropping and the wage system were forms of slavery based on relations of mastery and subjection. He connected wage labor to wage slavery in organizing for the STFU, just as he bravely stumped for anti-lynching legislation that never passed in the US Congress. Kester's

[12] Dorrien, *Over from Union Road*, 265–67.

rhetoric of slavery and domination vividly described the conditions of the Black and White sharecroppers for whom he bravely labored in the STFU. He had come to STFU activism through his friendships with two divinity school classmates who became union organizers, Claude Williams and Ward Rogers. Stauffer accentuates that the STFU leaders relied on the religious faith they practiced, drawing on the ethos and hymnody of the Black church. They kept "hammering away in the church, at the church, with the church," as Kester put it. In the fields, the newspapers, and the political system, Kester and his STFU allies faced down constant vilification and oppression, winning precious few victories. In the churches, they took heart that they stood on solid ground. The God of love was their basis for believing that a cooperative commonwealth was not only possible, but is already the law of the divine moral order, the commonwealth of God.

American political scientist James C. Scott, in his controversial book *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998), argued that modern states overconfidently assume their ability to pursue social engineering in accordance with scientific laws discovered by the social sciences. State governments, he said, force "legibility" on their subjects by eradicating local cultural traditions and knowledge, creating homogenized societies that generate economies of scale while submitting to state control. Social ethicist Joe Strife, a longtime antipoverty activist and scholar, offers a critique of liberal Protestant social activism that turns on Scott's distinction between two types of knowledge, *metis* and *techne*.[13]

Metis is the tactile, local, enmeshed, commonsense knowledge of everyday life. *Techne* is the abstract, generalized, spreadsheet knowledge of the social scientist and the technocrat. Strife recounts that the social gospel founders sought earnestly to align Christian teaching and practices with the emerging social sciences. Jane Addams, a quintessential social gospel activist and the founder of the Hull House social settlement in Chicago, was an astute exponent of the street-level knowledge she acquired at Hull House. She spoke the embodied democratic language of *metis,* defending the virtues of the working-class people with whom she worked, but she also shared the enthusiasm of the settlement movement for the technocratic purview of sociology, with occasional snorts of class superiority and White privilege.

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[13] James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

The social work movement earnestly sought social scientific validation on its way to becoming a profession with academic status. As Strife drolly puts it, the settlement movement traded its grounding in everyday *metis* for Master of Social Work degrees. The democratic language of embodied practices from below gave way to the authority of the technocratic view from above.

Strife notes that the casework method arose as an attempt to reconcile the differences between these orientations. It was another form of social mediation resting on the good intentions of a friendly visitor, but now armed with an impersonal method of information gathering and assessment that suited the managerial needs of hospitals, schools, and governments. Three generations of White Protestant social gospel activists, Strife recounts, sanctified the gospel of sociology. Instead of touting what made Christian communities peculiar, particular, democratic, and at least potentially countercultural, liberal Protestants baptized the technocratic ethos and machinery of the administrative state.

After World War II, Strife observes, a new breed of Protestant activists tried to renew the social witness of mainline Protestant churches. Countering the mainline flight to the suburbs, three graduates of Union Theological Seminary—Don Benedict, Archie Hargrave, and George Webber—founded the East Harlem Protestant Parish (EHPP) in 1948. It was an echo of the settlement movement conviction that apprenticeships in urban life might inspire young people to struggle for social change.

EHPP trained thousands of seminarians and clergy in community organizing, notably Letty Russell, William Stringfellow, George Todd, Mary Todd, and George Younger. The new Protestant activists were more political and much less churchy than their social gospel forerunners. They developed a national network of action training programs operating across twenty denominations, pioneered the "urban plunge" tactic of dropping gently-raised students into urban neighborhoods, and adopted the community organizing approach of Saul Alinsky, especially his concept of politics as a struggle for power among self-interested individuals and communities. Strife allows that the EHPP's embrace of the Alinsky model could be interpreted as the consummate capitulation of liberal Protestantism to secular liberalism. But he counters that Alinsky's deep commitment to the dignity and empowerment of ordinary people at least enabled liberal Protestants to retrieve the language of life-giving community that it lost to technocratic secularism. Strife holds little hope for the old mainline Protestant denominations that once assumed a moral guardianship

role in society, but he can imagine a new age of the Spirit that disrupts all denominations.

Social ethicist Nicholas Hayes-Mota builds on the work of Catholic historians Paul Misner and John Coleman in arguing that the papal tradition of Catholic Social Teaching is only a partial and doctrinal strand of the Catholic social tradition, which is best called social Catholicism. The European tradition of social Catholicism, he observes, preceded by decades the pioneering work of John A. Ryan. This point marks a key difference between the Catholic and ecumenical Protestant traditions of social ethics. In *Social Ethics in the Making* (2009), I extensively analyzed the work of Catholic ethical thinkers Ryan, Dorothy Day, John Courtney Murray, Charles Curran, Michael Novak, Richard John Neuhaus, Dennis P. McCann, Lisa Sowle Cahill, Daniel C. Maguire, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, María Pilar Aquino, and David Hollenbach. There were also discussions of Rosemary Radford Ruether and the formerly Catholic Mary Daly. I took the same approach to organized Catholicism that I took to the organized ecumenical movement, digging the church tradition issue out of major thinkers who featured it in their writings and were players in ecclesiastical organizations. Ryan, Murray, Curran, Cahill, and Hollenbach were the foremost examples. All fixed on the ecclesiastical tradition of a single communion, the Roman Catholic Church, in a way that lacked any parallel among the leading social ethicists of the ecumenical Protestant traditions. Even the Anglican figures in this story—W. D. P. Bliss, Richard Ely, Vida Scudder, and Gibson Winter—came off as ecumenical Protestants on this issue, not as almost-Catholic. The Catholic tradition factor is as distinct as Hayes-Mota suggests.

Hayes-Mota shows that social Catholicism is a distinct tradition of modern politics and a sub-tradition within the Roman Catholic tradition. It began in the 1830s with Catholics who disliked the Enlightenment, were hostile to the French Revolution, and shuddered at socialists who saw themselves as the successors to both. Social Catholicism was politically conservative, except when it wasn't, as in the liberalism of Félicité de La Mennais and the socialism of Philippe Buchez.

Hayes-Mota stresses that *Rerum Novarum* established a doctrinal core for social Catholicism, taking positions on how to interpret Thomas Aquinas, what to think about labor unions, and how to oppose socialism. It established that Catholic Social Teaching expounds two central

values: personal human dignity and the primacy of the common good. Hayes-Mota draws upon Alasdair MacIntyre's contention that a tradition is a historically extended phenomenon with a socially embedded argument that includes an argument about the goods that constitute the tradition. Traditions are ongoing and internally pluralistic arguments. With the exception of Scandinavia and Britain, Hayes-Mota observes, it was the social Catholicism of the Christian Democratic parties that built Europe's welfare states. In the United States, social Catholicism never approached its European influence, but Murray made historic arguments for religious liberty that were vindicated at Vatican Council II, Day's Catholic Worker movement is nearly a century old, and the community organizing tradition founded by Alinsky in Chicago in 1940 has historically spoken the social Catholic language of personal dignity and the common good. Hayes-Mota contends that interfaith organizing cannot do better than to feature these two central values of social Catholicism.

The story of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) usually revolves around George Wiley, who took a leave in 1965 from his chemistry professorship at Syracuse University to serve as Associate National Director of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), resigned a year later from CORE, and founded in May 1966 the Poverty Rights Action Center, which morphed the following year into the NWRO. Wiley and NWRO president Johnnie Tillmon built a renowned advocacy organization demanding welfare reform and a guaranteed federally financed income. The NWRO quickly burgeoned into a national organization of 125,000 members led predominantly by poor Black women.

The story of the West Side, New York City chapter of NWRO that scholars customarily recount is the one that Columbia University social work professors Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven told in describing their experience of it. Cloward and Piven first proposed in a May 1966 article in *The Nation* to stoke a political crisis by increasing the number of welfare recipients. Overloading the existing welfare system, they reasoned, would force the governing Democratic Party to institute a minimum guaranteed income as an alternative to expanding the welfare rolls. Cloward and Piven went on to write important books about poor people's movements, welfare policy, and the disciplining of poor people. They wrote as activist participants in the movements they studied, which strengthened their personal authority as experts on their subjects, but they marginalized

the charismatic leadership of Beulah Sanders in telling a story that revolved too much around themselves.[14]

Carolyn Baker, who carries on the revolutionary community center work of her father at the General Baker Institute in Detroit, and Colleen Wessel-McCoy, a social ethicist at Earlham School of Religion and a longtime antipoverty activist, restore Sanders in memory to the standing she earned in the welfare rights movement. Sanders grew up among ten siblings in North Carolina, moved to New York City in 1955, founded the West Side Welfare Recipients League ten years later, and became vice chair of NWRO in 1969. She was a champion of the view that antipoverty organizations must be led by poor people. The NWRO made the process of applying for welfare less onerous and expanded the number of welfare programs available to poor families.

In 1971, one year before Wiley resigned and Sanders began her two-year term as national chair, the organization peaked at 800 affiliated chapters. Wiley's resignation set off a financial meltdown that stripped the NWRO of its funding in the ecumenical movement and terminated the organization in 1975. Baker and Wessel-McCoy offer a close reading of Sanders's December 1972 speech to the General Assembly of the National Council of Churches in Houston, Texas. In a perilous moment for a reeling NWRO, Sanders told the church leaders that too many of them blamed the poor for their poverty. The church needed to be biblical-Christian, not White-American, in the ways it treated the poor. It had to push back, she said, against "legislation that oppresses poor people, Black people, Chicano people, Indian people, Puerto Rican people, and all other people." Baker and Wessel-McCoy present Sanders as a prophet of the call to struggle against poverty, the opposite of perpetuating the usual forms of punishing its victims.

For those of us who entered social justice organizing chiefly through the door of socialist movements, trade unionism, or industrial unionism, the very term "organizing" tends to register first as "labor organizing." The late labor organizer Jane McAlevey, who died in 2024, began her extraordinary career as an Alinsky-style student organizer, environmental activist, and community organizer before moving in 1997 into union

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[14] Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven, "The Weight of the Poor: A Strategy to End Poverty," *The Nation*, May 2, 1966; Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

organizing in Stamford, Connecticut. There she developed her signature "whole worker" approach to organizing. McAlevey taught that unions must conceive workers as integral members of communities to build community power. The two dominant approaches to union organizing, she argued—advocacy and mobilization—rely too much on like-minded experts and unionists. The advocacy model features professional advocacy by experts, lawyers, and lobbyists. The mobilization model relies on the protest activism and electoral campaigning of committed union members. McAlevey contended that real organizing is harder, cuts deeper, and is more inclusive than the advocacy of professional experts and the "shallow organizing" of the mobilization approach. Real organizing persistently engages whole communities of workers and citizens, conducts one-on-one conversations with all members of enterprises and local communities, and cultivates organic leaders who possess the requisite personal credibility to influence holdouts and disbelievers. It builds grassroots mass organizations of workers, concentrating its resources on holdouts and disbelievers.[15]

K. B. Brower is a veteran labor organizer who worked with McAlevey and is a disciple of her approach, except Brower is a seminary graduate with a Christian basis who focuses on labor unions and faith communities working together. Brower argues that McAlevey's signature critique of the mobilization strategy applies very much to the organizing that occurs in faith communities. Christian nationalism, she observes, is rampant in the United States, which shows that much of the Church has lost entirely what it means to practice Christian discipleship. Brower tells a dismal story about a campaign she ran in DuBois, Pennsylvania, where 300 hospital nurses tried to form a union. The campaign had widespread support until the hospital management threatened to fire the campaign leaders, hired ten union busters, and flooded the town with anti-union propaganda. The campaign was crushed, and Brower wished she had begun by engaging local clergy. Later she worked with McAlevey in a campaign to unionize 1,000 nurses at a North Philadelphia hospital. This time, the campaign began by cultivating relationships with local congregations and church leaders, succeeded at identifying organic leaders, and beat the anti-union tactics that had worked in DuBois. McAlevey learned a great deal from this campaign,

[15] Jane McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); McAlevey, *A Collective Bargain: Unions, Organizing, and the Fight for Democracy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020).

Brower says, and so did Brower.

Capitalism has commodified everything and everyone, including the natural world. Brower writes that only two institutions in our hyper-commodified civilization have any chance of re-sanctifying the world—communities of faith and labor unions. When workers organize a union, they defy the message of their society that their lives do not matter, their work has no dignity, and nothing has sacred value.

Prominent social ethicist Cynthia Moe-Lobeda reports on her experience of teaching broad-based community organizing at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, California. In 2017, she and Christian Testament scholar Ray Pickett launched a required course for M.Div. and M.A. students in faith-based community organizing. Moe-Lobeda knew from her many years of teaching social ethics at Christian seminaries that White supremacy and wealth-based supremacy permeate seminary education despite decades of teaching liberation theologies. She also knew that a great deal of intellectual energy is routinely wasted on theory that only academics care about. Much of what passes as social justice ministry gets no further than mere talk, plus acts of charitable service, with no comprehension of systemic injustices. Moe-Lobeda yearned for ways of cultivating whole-person spirituality for ministry before she discovered that teaching faith-based organizing is a valuable way to do it. The ecofeminist theology of communion that suffused her previous work, she now brought to teaching community organizing: The aim of theological education should be to cultivate the community that God wants, a spiritual work of love that combats the interlinked injustices of racial capitalism.

Failures occurred, and lessons were learned. Many students experienced the use of agitation in organizing as abusive. Some protested that they enrolled at seminary to become pastors, not organizers. Some felt threatened by the presence of ecclesiastical authorities and officers holding power over them. Moe-Lobeda and her teaching team responded by dropping the language of training, integrating theology and Scripture into the course, placing the course more explicitly into contexts of congregational ministry, and grounding the course in practices of relationality. Confrontation has its place in organizing, but the Alinsky model exaggerates it. Alinsky organizing has a history of thrusting aggressive White males into congregations, and its emphasis on interests militates against the very communion that church members seek. Moe-Lobeda aptly stresses that community organizing is changing within and outside congregations. New organizing networks led

by women, people of color, and queer people are emerging. Theory that refutes myths of superiority, she argues, is indispensable, but so is the last aspect of decolonial theory—*action* that negates the myths.

Vanderbilt Divinity School social ethicist C. Melissa Snarr is the author of a valuable book, *All You That Labor* (2011), that describes how faith-based community organizing identifies pertinent issues, builds collective will, develops leaders, attains power, and catalyzes social change. She welcomes the surge of interest in teaching community organizing that has occurred over the past decade, commending theological educators for recognizing the practical importance of organizing in congregational contexts. In her contribution to the present book, Snarr argues that social movement theory is an underdeveloped resource for scholars and activists interested in the intersections between social ethics and social justice movements. Social ethics, she observes, arose in tandem with the social sciences, but contemporary theological education pays little heed to sociology. Seminaries still teach psychology of religion in practical theology courses, but do not teach about new developments in sociology. Snarr contends that social ethicists could benefit from social movement theories that explain how movements emerge, individuals are moved to act, activists choose their tactics, and movement activists are formed by movements.[16]

Early forms of social movement theory sought to explain the rise of fascism in Europe, developing psycho-social accounts of alienation and irrationality. This tradition of analysis continues in numerous studies of alienated followers of Donald Trump's MAGA movement. Snarr writes about two newer traditions of social movement theory inspired by the civil rights movement, both of which contend that social movements are more rational than the theories that sought to explain fascism. Resource mobilization theory emphasizes that all movements have a material history, whereas political process theory stresses that movements engender collective values and emotions. According to resource theorists, grievances are persistent and ubiquitous, so movements do not arise from an escalation of grievances. Movements arise when aggrieved groups acquire the material and leadership resources to achieve lift-off. Snarr credits civil rights historian Aldon Morris for originating the resource theory that people do not move spontaneously and irrationally into collective action. They move into

[16] C. Melissa Snarr, *All You That Labor: Religion and Ethics in the Living Wage Movements* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

action when they judge that they have the requisite resources to remedy a grievance. The political process school, meanwhile, focuses on how movements provide meaning for onlookers and movement participants, helping them to make sense of the world. Snarr commends the new social movement theories for turning aside overworked debates about why masses of people behave irrationally or selfishly. Studying the comparatively small number of people who join social movements, she argues, is more fruitful. For what we really need is to understand the "how" of ethical action.

Malinda Elizabeth Berry, during her years as a doctoral student in theology and social ethics at Union Theological Seminary, helped many people who did not know each other build community at Union through knowing her. This outward-reaching spirit pervades her contribution to this book, where she characteristically flips the focus from the organizer-leader to the experience of being organized as a student, trainee, faculty member, neighbor, and activist. As a Black, Mennonite, Womanist, senior professor of theology and social ethics at a Mennonite seminary, Malinda was already aware that the moral pride of earnest White Christians is often fragile and hair-trigger when their complicity in racist systems of domination is revealed. Then the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 drove her to ask anew why her faculty colleagues demonstrated "gross lack of skill" in dealing with the racism of others and themselves. What is lacking in the customary antiracism workshops and courses?

Berry offers two answers to this question. One is that antiracism training usually avoids any reference to, or sense of, spirituality. Berry's spirituality is "luxocratic," a metaphysical, pedagogical, and social ethical "rule by Light" that instills an egalitarian and benevolent way of life. Her formulation of it is influenced by Bahá'í Womanist theorist Layli Phillips Maparyan, who conceives luxocratic spirituality as a broader name for the traditional Womanist emphasis on doing the work that one's soul requires and helping others discover the treasures within themselves. Womanist luxocracy, Maparyan says, is a critique of domination and oppression, rooted in everyday experience, and is explicitly non-ideological, communitarian, and spiritual. Berry reflects that antiracist training usually lacks this emphasis on spirituality, overemphasizes ideological definition, and does not provide maps that identify a group's location in relation to its goal or purpose. She draws on the work of British social geographer Alastair Bonnett in fleshing out different answers to a question too seldom asked: "What do I believe is wrong about racism?" It helps, Berry

argues, to become aware of one's often too-readily assumed answer to this question. One might assume that racism is bad primarily because it disrupts community, or it is malignantly alien, or it sustains the domination of a ruling class, or it hinders the progress of the group oppressed by racism, or it is bad science, or it distorts the psychological identities of individuals and groups, or it violates the right to equality. When trainees become aware of their assumed matrix of beliefs on this question, they are better able to appreciate why people in the group practice antiracism in different ways.

Christophe Ringer teaches Christian social ethics at Chicago Theological Seminary, an institution located on Chicago's South Side, in the Woodlawn community, bordering South Shore. On May 4, 2024, he attended a meeting at South Shore International College Preparatory School at which hundreds of community residents gathered to protest against the City of Chicago's announced plan to use a nearby former public school as a respite center for migrants awaiting placement in a shelter. Texas Governor Greg Abbott had dispatched, since August 2022, over 16,000 Venezuelans seeking asylum to Chicago. The school had been shut down in 2013 by a Democratic mayor, Rahm Emanuel. The city had designated it in 2020 as a police training center without consulting the neighborhood. Four years later, the neighborhood seethed at being treated again as a dumping ground, again without being consulted.

Ringer's neighbors decried that the city had abandoned them in every way excepting the heavy hand of police. Some made ugly demands to expel the foreigners and close the border, but Ringer did not write them off as nativists. He heard the pain of neighbors struggling in a poor and hurting community. One woman crystallized the despair in the room. "We want to be loving," she said, "but part of love is reciprocity." If the City of Chicago could use South Shore to provide for Venezuelans, why did it do nothing for the people of South Shore?

Ringer explores the meaning of reciprocity as explicated by Harvard political theorist Tommie Shelby and the late Black feminist theorist bell hooks. Shelby describes justice as the fair reciprocity of citizens to each other and of government to all citizens. On welfare policy, reciprocity might be conceived as the relationship between a government that provides a benefit and debtors that repay the debt by working. Or it might be conceived as a mutual benefit on the model of free trade theory. Or it might be conceived as a Rawlsian social contract geared to produce a fair result in which the government guarantees a full-employment economy. Shelby

endorses the third type of reciprocity, which Ringer applies to the tensions between established residents and newcomers on Chicago's South Side. It is doubly unfair, he argues, to compel longtime downtrodden communities to bear the burden of housing and support for hurting newcomers. A government that cares about justice has to lift up the longtime poor while spreading the burden of caring for newcomers. Ringer adds, drawing on hooks, that Rawlsian-style social contract egalitarianism never gets far if love is torn apart from justice. Love is the will to extend oneself for the sake of the well-being of another or others. It is intentional and active beyond mere emotional feeling.

Stacey Floyd-Thomas is an eminent teacher, scholar, theorist, preacher, administrator, and organizer who explicates in this book her brilliantly full-orbed practice and pedagogy of Christian Social Liberation Ethics. As the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of Ethics and Society at Vanderbilt, she has significantly influenced the field of social ethics through her scholarship and teaching. Floyd-Thomas grew up in Corpus Christi, Texas, where she puzzled over a confounding question: "Why do Christians behave as though God doesn't exist?" Specifically, White Christians treated Black persons with contempt, and middle-class Black Christians spurned poor Blacks and the unchurched. This quandary propelled Floyd-Thomas into social ethics, studying with the founder of womanist ethics, Katie Cannon. Floyd-Thomas absorbed Alice Walker's historic definition of womanism and Cannon's historic Christian account of the moral wisdom of Black women. The first wave of womanist ethics was based on Walker's definition, Cannon's virtue ethic of dignity, grace, and courage, and Emilie Townes's explication of womanist spirituality. Floyd-Thomas launched the second wave with a pioneering book on womanist methods, *Mining the Motherlode* (2006), and a reader on womanist horizons, *Deeper Shades of Purple* (2006).[17]

Floyd-Thomas's *Mining the Motherlode* reformulated Walker's tenets as radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement. It employed literary analysis, sociology, and

[17] Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*; Emilie Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995); Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006); Floyd-Thomas, ed., *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

historiography to elucidate the womanist virtues described by Cannon. And it made an argument about the relation of womanist ethics to White feminist ethics and androcentric forms of Black theology: Womanist wisdom, Floyd-Thomas said, is about right relationships and integral wholeness, not an oppositional discourse. Walker, Cannon, and Townes were eloquent on this point. Walker said the souls that Black women save may be their own; Cannon repeatedly urged her students to do the work that their souls required; Townes cautioned against living in the folds of old wounds. In *Deeper Shades of Purple,* Floyd-Thomas showed that womanists did not merely aspire to reach beyond their inherited Protestant and Catholic traditions. Womanism, she said, was already an interfaith, global, multicultural womanist reality radiating "deeper shades of purple." It began as Walker's definition, developed as an ethical and theological movement pioneered by Cannon, Townes, and Delores Williams, and bloomed as an epistemology that crosses disciplinary boundaries. Floyd-Thomas stressed that womanism is not only the name of a moral-cultural ethos or a theological school. It is a way of knowing that has become indispensable for how the academy studies liberation, enabling the academy to study liberation in multiple fields and interdisciplinary contexts.

That does not mean, she argues, that womanism is most important as a broadly useful way to teach liberation studies. Saving one's soul transcends academic study; moreover, as a form of Christian ethics, womanism makes normative claims that are steeped in the Hebrew prophets, the teaching of Jesus, and biblical faith more broadly. The normative religious questions that drove Floyd-Thomas into social ethics remain her ultimate concerns. Why do people act as though God doesn't exist? How should we interpret and follow Christian ethical teaching? Floyd-Thomas contends that womanist liberationism is a biblically-based ethic of justice that rises to the level of a normative ethical standard and enlists in sociopolitical struggles for justice: "To separate the ethical pursuit of justice from its scriptural moorings is to sever it from its deepest source of inspiration and prophetic power."

She proposes a shorthand name, "just ethics," for this ethic of justice, or shorter yet, "JUSTethics." The just ethics that we need, she writes, cannot be merely a system of deontological norms, or utilitarian rules, or dogmatic utterances. Just ethics is a way of seeing the world shaped by a womanist-liberationist way of knowing. It is critical, expansive, and relational, affirming with bell hooks that education either integrates students into the regnant system of domination or it is a practice of liberation

that seeks to transform the system. It is expansive in drawing on biblical faith, interfaith scholarship, the history of theology, intersecting academic disciplines, the entire history of abolitionist and liberationist struggles, and the various movements that created and sustained Christian social ethics as a field. My five-stranded rope of theology, social ethics, philosophy, political theory, and intellectual history is one attempt to marshal a similar range of sources and commitments; Floyd-Thomas is characteristically astute and generous in assessing it.

We are the ones, she writes, whom the visionaries held in mind before they were cut down. Martin Luther King Jr., peering from his spiritual mountaintop, saw a better world coming, "in fact, a world house, a beloved community with all of us in it." Floyd-Thomas luminously urges her readers and students to summon their spiritual courage: "Let's foil the evil of our day by doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with the God whose spirit gives us perspective and power." In her expanding corpus of scholarship and teaching, Floyd-Thomas contributes to liberationist ethics a strategic womanist discourse about being in right relationship, an argument about womanism as a new way of knowing that applies to interdisciplinary studies of liberation, and a normative Christian fusion of scriptural faith and praxis: "By integrating the wisdom of scripture with the demands of social justice, we can create a more just and compassionate world for all."

Aaron Stauffer brings this book to a close by reprising the argument he made in his groundbreaking book, *Listening to the Spirit: The Radical Social Gospel, Sacred Value, and Broad-based Community Organizing* (2024). In 2010, he was serving as an IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation) organizer in San Antonio, Texas, when legendary organizer Ernesto Cortés remarked to him that organizing is about values, not issues. Issues fade, Cortés explained, but values don't fade. Stauffer's book offers a rich synthesis of social ethics, theology, political history, philosophy, and social theory written in the spirit of Cortés's maxim and expanding theologically upon it, arguing that BBCO (broad-based community organizing) works best by embracing the sacred values it engenders and runs upon, not by marginalizing faith. In our closing chapter, Stauffer distills his argument, envisioning a better form of community organizing than the classic model pioneered by Alinsky and longtime IAF executive director Edward Chambers.[18]

[18] Aaron Stauffer, *Listening to the Spirit: The Radical Social Gospel, Sacred Value, and Broad-based Community Organizing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).

Broad-Based-Community-Organizing-as-usual carefully selects winnable issues, focuses relentlessly on material interests and building power, avoids polarizing issues such as racial and sexual identity, abortion, and the death penalty, and usually revolves around White-male-cisgender individual organizers. Power is built, on this view, by winning winnable issues, while divisive religious values are best left at the door along with other identity claims and markers. Stauffer pushes back that good organizing builds relational power grounded in values that individuals and communities hold dear. Organizing on the basis of sacred values, he argues persuasively, is central to BBCO. At its best, BBCO develops practices that instill cooperative relationships and values; it is not merely a venue for organizing issue campaigns.

Like Anglican theologian Luke Bretherton, Stauffer makes a theological argument for the spiritual significance of organizing, conceives BBCO communities as alternative communities of interpretation, opposes assimilationist and accommodationist strategies that aim merely for a place at the table, and believes that BBCO organizing should aim to achieve a common life. Unlike Bretherton, Stauffer is not allergic to Marxist theory, does not claim that Christianity has its own social theory, does not oppose the counter-public concept of organizing, and is deeply rooted in the social gospel traditions that enlisted churches in struggles for social justice, created the ecumenical movement, and founded the field of social ethics. Bretherton conceives community organizing as middle-ground mediation between various groups pursuing a common life. Stauffer is closer to George Woodbey and Cornel West, arguing that the most important kind of organizing sides with dominated and exploited people in resisting oppression. Organizing, at its best, strives to be in solidarity with those suffering exploitation, expropriation, and domination. Stauffer compellingly describes the relational meetings and listening campaigns of BBCO as social practices—repertoires of activity grounded in ethical relationships that define institutions. As such they are religious practices that instill, and are guided by, sacred values of cooperation, relationality, solidarity, and normative principles of behavior.[19]

This section on Stauffer adapts material from Gary Dorrien, "The Radical Social Gospel as Broad-Based Community Organizing," *Interventions*, April 5, 2024.

[19] Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Bretherton, *Christ*

Stauffer draws on two camps of contemporary Hegel scholarship: the social theorizing of Pierre Bourdieu and the vast literature analyzing Bourdieu's analysis of social practices to undergird his theological case for conceiving BBCO as a spiritual practice. Mutual recognition, he argues, with help from Hegel and Bourdieu, is a social practice that is also a religious practice bearing sacred value. His genealogical undergirding is the radical social gospel that produced theologies of Christian socialism. Four historical traditions have fed community organizing even in its non-theorized iterations: the Protestant social gospel, Catholic social teaching, Black liberation theology, and Latin American liberation theology. The Spirit calls us to practice the golden rule in a spirit of love and community to build a cooperative commonwealth. But if that is true, Stauffer says, we need a BBCO that disrupts White supremacism and actualizes radical democracy, overcoming the assimilationist legacy of customary-BBCO.

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and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019).