

‘Messiah of the Masses and Prophet of the Proletariat’: Reexamining Eugene Debs in the Framework of Spiritual Socialism

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Introduction

In 1890, the Episcopal periodical *The Living Church* printed that “One of the great questions of the day is how to bring the Church to the poor or, as it is often expressed, ‘how to reach the masses’”—this indicating the church’s fear over losing the disillusioned working class.¹ The sentiment was not unique to the Episcopal church, and by the dawn of America’s Gilded Age, Protestant churches were struggling to reconcile their allegiance to industrial capitalism with a commitment to working-class practitioners. Attempts at reconciling socioeconomic stratification within the church pews were belied by individualistic explanations of wealth and poverty from the pulpit. As Heath Carter observed, Protestant clergy had “largely failed to muster a critical analysis of the nation’s changing economic life” and instead, “[attributed] vast disparities of wealth in their midst to the poor’s individual failings.”² The tensions between an increasingly wealthy church pastorate and the growingly disenchanting working-class had produced a ‘crisis’ within American Protestantism. Namely, working-class Christians were seeking out and creating new theologies while established denominations grew anxious over the specter of their “loss sheep” being swayed towards anarchism, socialism, and other perverse ideologies.³

As the American churches lamented the need to ‘reach the masses’ several American socialists equally observed the need to reach those working men and women who belonged to the Christian churches. The famed African American socialist George Washington Woodbey remarked that, “Socialists cannot win without reaching the millions of working people who belong to the various churches of the country.”⁴ Woodbey sensed the receptiveness of Christians at the time to a socially conscious political message. Certainly, the social disruptions and discontent that sprang from industrialization brought Protestant Christianity and socialism closer than ever before in the early twentieth century. As Jacob Dorn writes:

Socialism offered not only a radical critique of American political and economic institutions; it also offered the zeal, symbols, and sense of participation in a world-transforming cause often associated with Christianity itself. The religious alienation of the working class and the appeal of socialism were often causally linked in the minds of socially conscious Protestant leaders.⁵

Yet, while some American socialists were softening their stance to the importance of religious socialism, it was far from a foregone conclusion that working-class Christians would coalesce behind a radical party. Rather, the first decades of the twentieth century saw an explosion of both secular and Christian responses to the 'labour question' that produced hardened Christian Socialists like W.D.P. Bliss and the polarizing E.E. Carr; Christian labour activists like Rev. Jesse Jones and the surprisingly radical Christian Labour Union (CLU); middle-class Social Gospelers like Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch; and animated Pentecostal populists who steered rural labour in more conservative direction.⁶

While working-class activists did not funnel into one single movement, for a brief period many of the various secular and religious labour activists were drawn together under the prophetic leadership of the famed Indiana socialist, Eugene V. Debs. Debs' ability to broaden the base of American socialism and command the interests of radical Christians is well documented by labour historians. Dorn contended that Debs "extolled Jesus as a true friend of the people, a workingman himself, whose life sanctioned, not meek acquiescence, but protest against injustice."⁷ Likewise, Janine Giordano Drake adds that "Eugene Debs deliberately made room for Christian Socialists in his growing Socialist Party."⁸

As Debs' tenure at the head of the Socialist Party of America is increasingly revisited, so too is his peculiar relationship to American Christianity. In addition to Dorn and Drake, scholars like Dan McKanan, David Burns, and Heath Carter, have attempted to situate Debs in the history of the American religious left. This collection of scholarship has effectively reanimated the radical capabilities of American Christianity. Debs and countless others drew upon Protestant vernacular to frame socialism as a moral imperative. Yet, the character of Debsian socialism is hard to pin down. Can we consider him a Christian Socialist like Bliss or Charles Sheldon? Does his upbringing on Rousseau, Hugo, and Eugene Sue mark a strong humanistic influence in his thought? Finally, how do scholars reconcile his appeal to Social Gospelers like Walter Rauschenbusch?

Building upon existing scholarship, the following paper makes two contributions to our understanding of Debs' impact on American socialism. First, Debs and his position towards religious radicalism are reframed within the typology of "spiritual socialism" as opposed to Christian socialism, the Social Gospel, and Christian humanism. Second, as a "spiritual socialist" Debs was an outsider or 'liminal' figure, which animated his prophetic image. I argue that prophetic-liminality—e.g., his position betwixt and between secular socialists and Protestant reformers—allowed him to broaden the coalitions of American socialism without falling victim to the dogmatic religiosity of Christian socialists and Social Gospelers, nor the secular orthodoxy of scientific socialism. Like other spiritual socialists, Debs' prophetic identity brought him closer to an American radical tradition that labour activists and Protestant Christians alike could identify with. In the words of Sacvan Bercovitch, "to be an American is to assume a prophetic identity."⁹

A Brief History of Eugene Debs: from Labour Leader to Radical Prophet

A history of American socialism cannot be written without touching on Eugene Debs' tenure at the helm of the Socialist Party of America (SPA). Between 1896 and 1920, Debs ran the most successful bids for the presidency by a socialist candidate in United States history. The Indiana native and founding member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) notably won six percent of the popular vote in his bid for the presidency in 1912 and just shy of four percent in 1920. To this day Debs' electoral success is the highpoint of American socialism, and his campaigns inspired future presidential candidates such as Norman Thomas, Michael Harrington, and most recently, Senator Bernie Sanders.

Just as a history of American socialism cannot be written without Debs, the socialist party leader cannot be studied without discussing the remarkably religious tone of Debsian socialism. Most biographical accounts of Debs' life begin by acknowledging that there was limited exposure between the young labour leader and organized religion. Debs' secular outlook was influenced by his upbringing in a French immigrant household, where enlightenment and Christian-humanist texts were regularly taught. Eugene's father Daniel raised his children on the works of Voltaire, Eugene Sue, and Victor Hugo, marking a strong humanistic tradition in their upbringing.¹⁰ David Burns argued that "as Debs was absorbing the radical religious lessons contained in Voltaire, Sue, and Hugo, he was also discovering that believers committed atrocities in the name of Christ."¹¹ The tension between the Debs family's disregard for organized religion and their embrace of Christian-humanist philosophy had instilled in the young Eugene a sense that Christianity was in its most primitive state full of "radical possibilities," yet was perverted by the very vestiges of the church.¹²

As Debs recalled, his earliest exposure to religious texts came in the form of a Bible he won in a spelling competition. Inscribed in the Bible were the words, "Read and Obey," to which he would joke that he "never did either."¹³ Debs' disregard for organized religion persisted through his early career as a labour organizer. In his 1889 article, "The Church and the Workingman" published in the *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, Debs wrote, "the poor discover that the rich Christians do not regard religion as a pledge of equality in the church nor 'outside of the church."¹⁴ A critical view of religion led him to run in circles with prominent agnostic commentators like Robert Ingersoll, while his increasing involvement in Socialist politics shaped a common fear that the greatest threat to socialism's global success was the Catholic church.¹⁵

Most scholars note a shift in Debs' political and religious thought following his imprisonment for the Pullman strike. It was at the Pullman strike that Debs first articulated his own political theology, aligning the radical-historical Jesus with the embattled railway workers on strike. Debs castigated the Pullman factory and the Christian institutions which sided with the titans of industrial capitalism. Writing in support for the strikers, he proclaimed: "Humanity and Christianity, undebauched

and unperverted, are forever pleading for sympathy for the poor and the oppressed."¹⁶ His contention that the strikers were acting in the same vein as Christ marked a reorientation of his political ideology.¹⁷

In the years following the Pullman strike, Debs' engagement with theology, the radical-historical Jesus, and Protestant morality only strengthened. The influence of the radical Jesus on Debs was so recognizable that his neighbor Isabel Maclean penned these words in her endorsement of Debs' Presidential candidacy:

Such, then, is the religious life of Eugene Debs. He obeys literally and unstintedly the "new commandment" that was given unto us. His religion is love—love of humanity as a whole, and of individuals composing it. Regardless of their deserts. He radiates it, as the sun does its light, because it is there and must come out. Debs believes greatly in men; therefore, do they believe greatly in him.¹⁸

Maclean's image of Debs was not unique either, the famed Indiana poet James Whitcomb Riley declared, "God was feeling mighty good when he made 'Gene Debs, and he didn't have anything else to do all day."¹⁹ Despite remaining secular, Debs' appeal to Christianity had fostered a saintly image of the labour leader, where any connections Debs had made with the biblical social reformer were in turn reflected upon him.

Debs' newfound appeal to religion was not only visible through the laudatory remarks of his contemporaries. In his own rhetoric, Debs embraced a historical worldview that saw revolutionary development as a continuum starting with Christ and ending with the triumph of socialism. Defending the historicity and radical character of Jesus against the sanitized and passive version portrayed in churches, he argued "To me Jesus Christ is as real, as palpitant and persuasive as a historic character as John Brown, Abraham Lincoln, or Karl Marx. He has persisted in spite of two thousand years of theological emasculation to destroy his revolutionary personality, and is today the greatest moral force in the world."²⁰ Contrary to criticism that socialism was antithetical to the aims of Christianity, Debs argued instead that Christianity could naturally flourish alongside socialism. He stressed that socialism, like Christianity, elevated the *soul* and *spirit* of the practitioner and the Christian community. Capitalists, on the other hand, were "barren of the social spirit."²¹

There is an abundance of literature on the religious character of Debsian socialism. Important scholarship from Dan McKanan and David Burns connects Debs to a broader Christian-humanist tradition. From this scholarship, we understand how Debs' embrace of the radical-historical Jesus drew him closer to a Christian-humanism that existed beyond the limits of the American political tradition—thus making his message universal.²² Meanwhile, others like Nick Salvatore and Jacob Dorn connect Debs to the social Christian thought that emerged

from the American evangelical tradition. The following section attempts to locate Debs among a different tradition in American history, one that is between the secular-humanistic and religious readings of the Indiana socialist: spiritual socialism.

Recasting Eugene Debs as a “Spiritual Socialist”

In his 2003 essay, “‘In Spiritual Communion’: Eugene V. Debs and the Socialist Christians,” Dorn posed a serious question to American labour historians: “*How could those who came to the Socialist party out of religious motives and often retained a strong Christian identity revere a man [Eugene Debs] whom many others considered an atheist and enemy of all religion and morality?*”²³ Dorn proceeded to argue that scholars must critically examine how Debs drew upon “transcendent religious symbolism” to engage a more “diverse” Christian contingent in a movement often ignored by historians.²⁴

The key to Debs’ appeal was twofold. First, he valued the position of Christians within the socialist party. This is visible through his efforts to make room for the once disregarded *Christian Socialist Fellowship*. In 1908, Debs broke rank with elders in the Socialist party who historically rebuked the Christian left as “mere sentimentalists.”²⁵ Instead, he agreed to address the *Christian Socialist Fellowship’s* annual conference during his presidential bid, and declared the ministers were comrades in the Socialist movement: “I have read your declaration of principles, and I applaud your heroic proclamation. I am glad that these ministers of the gospel, against whom I will admit that until recently I had some prejudice, are working hand in hand with us, and that we can work together in the greatest cause that ever appealed to the efforts of men.”²⁶ Debs’ declaration brought the secular and religious wings of the party closer together, and created a path forward for the Christian left within the SPA.

Second, and of greater scholarly consequence, Dorn argued that Debs’ religious views resembled that of the Christian socialists and radical Social Gospelers. Like the Christian socialists of the time, Debs directed his critiques of religion not at theological tenets, but rather at the failure of the Church to uphold Jesus’ social message.²⁷ Moreover, Debs maintained a public affinity for the radical-historical Jesus—whom he often extolled as the first in a great line of socialist reformers. Building on Dorn’s work, Dan McKanan traced the influence of Debs to his sculpting of a “Socialist party theology.” This theology was distinct from the more institutionally rigid Social Gospel—though it did appeal to many Social Gospelers—and was instead a “religious reasoning” between radical political movements.²⁸ The distinctive socialist theology combined the Social Gospel’s commitment to social salvation while insisting that the end to capitalism would truly usher in the Kingdom of God on earth.²⁹

This scholarship offers an important assessment of *how* Eugene Debs managed to pull together, even if short-lived, a coalition of working-class activists from the secular and Christian ranks. However, their analyses fall short of addressing the “why” underlying Debs’ success. Scholars of labour history and American

religion alike must wrestle with why, given all that is known about Debs' peculiar relationship to the American religious tradition, he was regarded as a prophet of moral Socialism in the early twentieth century.

This exercise requires recasting Debs within a recent typology known as "spiritual socialism." This typology comes from the work of Vaneesa Cook, whose primary interest was identifying activists that did not fit within our existing frameworks of the Social Gospel and Christian socialism. As Cook writes, "if spiritual socialists have not found a footing in the historiography, it is in large part because they had a hard time finding a definitive place among their contemporaries. They were activists in limbo, deemed too radical for Christians and too religious for many on the left."³⁰ Unlike Christian reformers or orthodox Marxists, spiritual socialists did not embrace dogma nor adhere closely to a creed. Instead, these activists emphasized a simplified social message of Jesus freed from the assumption that moral suasion, legislation, or religious leadership would change society.³¹

Spiritual socialists such as A.J. Muste, Sherwood Eddy, and Dorothy Day were not sentimentalist or utopian thinkers, but radicals who offered democratic and grassroots alternatives to socialist party politics. They also held nuanced understandings of structural inequality and exploitation on par with their Marxist interlocutors. Spiritual socialists framed their critiques of capitalism and the impiousness of 'High-Church' Christianity through the vernacular of moral dissent. They advocated, as the Italian novelist Ignazio Silone wrote, "an economy in the service of man, not the State or of any policy of power."³²

So where does Debs fit among Muste, Eddy, and Day? Surely, he was not as religious as these spiritual socialists. However, spiritual socialism is not limited to a specific Christian theological tradition. As an example, Cook discusses how spiritual socialists like Irving Howe and Lewis Coser never ascribed to formal theology, but they channeled practical socialist ideals through the moral backdrop of their Jewish upbringings. Though never formally raised in a religious tradition, Debs similarly fell back on the moral lessons and tenets inherit to Christianity. Debs' ability to equate class conflict with the "moral dualism" of Protestantism—e.g., God vs. Mammon or Labour vs. Capital—allowed him to frame his fight as a moral crusade.³³

Apart from being caught between the secular and religious left, spiritual socialists are defined by their vision of "religious redemption" for the secular alternatives to capitalism.³⁴ In short, they believed that socialism would be heralded in by the simple practice of religious virtues. Moreover, spiritual socialists shared the belief that religion (broadly defined) and socialism were one in the same. This is echoed in Debs' famous statement that socialism was "merely Christianity in action."³⁵ In fact, Debs regularly framed the aims of socialism and "true" Christianity as analogous. In an interview with Lincoln Steffens, Debs argued that socialism would prefigure the existence of churches, freeing them to preach undebauched Christianity: "For men, would be free, you understand; much freer than now, and

not only industrially, but politically, intellectually, religiously – every way. We would have no churches that didn't dare preach Christianity."³⁶ For Debs, like other spiritual socialists, Christianity was "impossible under capitalism" however, under socialism he believed it would be "natural."³⁷

The 'spiritual' in spiritual socialism is non-sectarian, anti-institutional, and lived. Importantly, this type of spirituality is juxtaposed to the more ministerial Social Gospel and the doctrinaire Christianity of Christian socialists. The former, largely mediated social discontent through ecclesiastical reform; while the latter was, despite assumptions otherwise, steeped in the beliefs and vernacular of Christianity. As Robert T. Handy and Vida Scudder remarked, "in general [Christian socialists] were Christians in a more ultimate sense than they were socialists."³⁸

Debs' political philosophy and program failed to fit in either of these two camps. While his socialism was framed by spiritualism, its radical character was not tempered. Debs never wavered from the belief that society was plagued by class-based struggle. This is evident in his famed "Canton Speech," which resulted in his imprisonment for violating the Espionage Act. Denouncing the inequity of imperialist warfare he proclaimed, "Wars throughout history have been waged for conquest and plunder.... And that is war, in a nutshell. The master class has always declared the wars; the subject class has always fought the battles."³⁹ In his writings and public addresses, Debs displayed an understanding of class struggle and historical exploitation on par with his Marxist interlocutors. Another example is his opening speech as the candidate for the 1904 Socialist Party ticket, where he employed the language of revolutionary emancipation to call on the working man to overthrow capitalism: "The very moment a workingman begins to do his own thinking he understands the paramount issue, parts company with the capitalist politician and falls in line with his own class on the political battlefield."⁴⁰

Even as Debs maintained a radical edge, his framing of socialism was remarkably different than the scientific socialists of his day. Radicalism and morality were not competing values; rather, as Debs often contended, true socialism conducted the idealistic and moral aims of religion. In his essay, "Socialist Ideals" he wrote:

So idealistic is [socialism] in its aims that, while having no specific religious tendency or purpose, it partakes somewhat of the nature of a religious movement and awakens something of a religious enthusiasm among its adherent . . . We shall have beautiful thoughts and sentiments, and a divinity in religion.⁴¹

As illustrated in the quote, Debs understood his political efforts as fundamentally religious ones. He patterned both his thought and philosophy after the revolutionary Jesus—as well as socialists like Marx, Bellamy, and Kautsky—to whom he credited the first and most famous workers revolution: "[Jesus] launched for the overthrow

of the empire of Caesars and the emancipation of the crushed and miserable masses from the bestial rule of Roman tyrants.”⁴² Debs even hung a portrait of Jesus on his jail cell, and later in his campaign offices.⁴³

Certainly, Debs’ position among the various actors and movements of the left is hard to pin down. In recent years, the degree to which he is connected to the “American Protestant tradition” has led to disagreement among scholars, with some arguing that casting Debs’ legacy among religious reformers dampens his radicalism.⁴⁴ However, this debate could be assuaged by situating Debs closer to the legacy of spiritual socialists. Although Cook identified spiritual socialism as a post-World War movement, Debs represents a bridge between the idealism of the ‘old-left’ and the pluralist-practicality of the spiritual socialists who founded the post-war ‘new left.’ Spiritual socialists like A.J. Muste shed their faith in left-liberal traditions and institutions following the First World War, and instead articulated socialism through a post-war sensibility that no one individual nor party could bring about change. Muste and other spiritual socialists like Sherwood Eddy were shaped by disillusionment with the failure of the SPA and more impactfully the end of Debs’ tenure, which had brought them to socialism in the first place.⁴⁵

The passing of the torch from ‘old left’ to ‘new left’ features spiritual socialists as the middleman—they were those activists who shifted thought from universal revolution to grassroots, democratic change. Yet, Debs paved the path for the spiritual socialists that followed. Through his work, he pushed American socialism in a more moral, pluralistic, and democratic direction, and in the process he was heralded by many in the secular and religious left as prophetic.

Prophetic-liminality and the Appeal of Eugene Debs

“Debs is truly a man with a message. He is an Embodied Sentiment. An Incarnate Ideal. He is the Messiah of the Masses, the Prophet of the Proletariat, the Industrial Immanuel.”
- Walter Hurt, *Eugene V. Debs: An Introduction*

(a) *The prophetic character of Saint ‘Gene*

James Darsey argued that Debs’ prophetic voice was the greatest measure of his success in American politics. The socialist leader’s prophetic influence emanated from his ability to be an “ethical presence” for individuals fighting for a hopeless cause, rather than a radical icon for a subversive political movement.⁴⁶ Indeed, Debs was viewed by his contemporaries, especially those of faith, as a prophetic figure. The founder of the Peoples church of Cincinnati, Herbert S. Bigelow, equated Debs’ imprisonment to that of Jesus’ crucifixion, and even claimed that Debs had replaced Lincoln as America’s most “Christlike character.”⁴⁷ Even while in prison, Debs was regarded as a prophetic voice. Chaplain Father Byrne

once remarked that Debs emanated a “Christlike” demeanor that had a profound effect on the moral character of his fellow inmates.⁴⁸ This view was not limited to Debs’ voters either. The early twentieth-century author Robert Hunter wrote, “They say a prophet is without honor in his own country, but in Terre Haute you will find that however much they misunderstand the work that ‘Gene is doing, there is not one who does not honor and love him.”⁴⁹

So, was the labour leader imbued with some divine prophetic traits? The secular upbringing of Eugene Debs would prompt him to scoff at such a suggestion. Still, it is important that scholars take serious note of the factors which led him to be decorated as a prophet for the American socialist movement. Namely, Debs successfully tapped into what Dan McKanan called the “prophetic power” that sustains the American radical tradition.⁵⁰ This “prophetic power” was the ability of American radicals to frame their agendas or movements through the dialectic of *denouncement* and *announcement*. On one hand, radical prophets in American history are linked by their ability to speak out (or denounce) forces that hinder the common man. On the other hand, these prophets announce the realization of God’s plan on earth—or to put it another way, the pathway to a new socialist society.

This prophetic power links together the voices of dissent from John Brown to Dorothy Day. While Debs featured into McKanan’s history of the Gilded Age of socialist party politics, his propheticism is lost among the cacophony of important socialist actors that helped to turn the SPA from irreligious to “radically pluralist.”⁵¹ Somewhat understated, Debs is cast pragmatically as the “ideal candidate [for the SPA] ...an eloquent workingman with a Jesus-centered spirituality who had been heroically imprisoned in a strike.”⁵² However, Debs’ unique position, one between the secular and religious groups of the left, is nothing short of critical for understanding *why* he was regarded in such a prophetic manner.

For increased clarity, it is important to unpack why propheticism is pivotal to both the American story, and to the story of Eugene Debs. The American infatuation with ‘prophets’ or ‘prophetic leadership’ is embedded in the nation’s founding myth. In what Sacvan Bercovitch called the “Puritan view of intermediate identity,” he described how Americans understand their history through the stories of national triumphs ushered in by a moral (even “Christ-like”) character – e.g., George Washington or Abraham Lincoln.⁵³ This “prophetic exemplar” fuses “universal virtues with the qualities of national leadership” by blurring the once rigid boundaries between sacred and secular identity.⁵⁴ In short, American prophets succeed in making political aims religious ones, and vice-versa. Moreover, they succeeded in connecting the conditions of everyday life (representation, poverty, racism, etc.) to ultimate or transcendent ends.

While the prophets in Bercovitch’s intellectual history are connected to the founding and early years of nationhood, his work provides a conceptual bridge to McKanan’s history of the American radical tradition. That is, “prophetic power” is not only sustained in American radical movements, but is also a trait characteristic

of American national heroes. Therefore, in understanding Debs' "prophetic power" we may also comprehend how he surmounted cultural barriers to socialism. But what was Debs' prophetic power? Beyond denouncing American capitalism as immoral and announcing a path towards American socialism, the prophetic power of spiritual socialists like Debs came from their liminal position (what Cook called "limbo") between sacred and secular authorities.

(b) Spiritual socialists as liminal figures

Once again, the typology of spiritual socialism provides a scaffold for unpacking the legacy of Eugene Debs. What is implied but never explicitly stated in Cook's work is the idea that spiritual socialists were *liminal* figures. The concept of liminality draws its import from the works of social theorists like Victor Turner and Pierre Bourdieu. Turner concisely defined liminal figures as those who, "(1) fall in the interstices of social structure, (2) are on its margins, or (3) occupy its lowest rungs."⁵⁵ The archetypes of these liminal figures include the "prophet" and the "artist," both of which "rid themselves of the clichés associated with status incumbency and role-playing ... to enter into vital relations with other men in fact or imagination."⁵⁶ Importantly, these archetypes move their fellow man and women to strive towards the (r)evolutionary potential that has yet to have been realized in history.

Like liminal figures, spiritual socialists were not fixed to the social structures of their day—be those religious or political. Instead, their influence came from operating on the interstices or margins of existing social structures. Spiritual socialists like Myles Horton affected change by sidestepping electoral politics and church reform, and instead built a radical community on the local/grassroots level through the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. Others like Sherwood Eddy built radical alternative communities such as the Delta Cooperative Farm in Mississippi. Maybe the best example is Dorothy Day, who according to the social critic Dwight MacDonal, offered a "special" and "effective" socialism that reaffirmed values like equality and morality without engaging in the absolutism of Marxism or Christianity—the irony of course being that Day herself was Catholic.⁵⁷ These spiritual socialists all succeeded in liminal spaces between the church and the state; moreover, each came into their own as an activist after leaving behind organized religion.

So, what are we to make of Eugene Debs? As a candidate for the American Presidency, he was imbedded in the social structure of American politics. There is then a contradiction between Cook's claim that spiritual socialists were less visible but equally influential, and Debs' stature as a party leader. The former beckons the role of a prophet; the latter, as many leftists today might argue, a sellout.

Yet, Debs' multiple candidacies were anything but conventional. Arguably his most famous campaign came in 1920, where he launched his bid from the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary as a "candidate in seclusion."⁵⁸ Before campaigning as

Prisoner 9653, Debs ran successful campaigns in 1900, 1904, 1908, and 1912—all of which saw the labour leader use his national platform not as a means to winning the Presidency, but rather to encourage the organization of working-class people. His rhetoric rarely centered on elections, the role of the presidency, nor the change that could be made through the existing system; it was however, a message aimed at raising class consciousness. Take for example this quote from his acceptance speech at the 1912 Socialist party convention:

We do not plead for votes; the workers give them freely the hour they understand. But we need to destroy the prejudice that still exists and dispel the darkness that still prevails in the working class world. We need the clear light of sound education and the conquering of economic and political organization.⁵⁹

Similarly, in his 1920 acceptance address Debs gleefully announced that he was an “American Bolshevik” before scolding his comrades in the SPA for “cautiously chasing votes” rather than organizing workers.⁶⁰ As Debs’ acceptance speeches illustrate, electoral politics were peripheral – if not insignificant – to the project of working-class organization.

Debs also broke from the party by defending the credentials of Christian radicals against doctrinaire Marxists and the skeptical union bosses of the labour movement. On one occasion, Debs’ support for the enigmatic minister Bouck White placed him at odds with the influential head of the New York local, Julius Gerber. Debs championed Bouck White’s controversial tactic of disrupting services at John D. Rockefeller’s home church (the Fifth Avenue Baptist Church), and argued that White’s methods were “preferable to the methods of those who sit back and do nothing but talk and find fault with those who actually do things.”⁶¹ A second example is Debs’ defense of the Episcopal priest Irwin St. James Tucker.⁶² When Tucker was chastised by party leadership for falsely attributing interviews on prisoner amnesty to Debs, the socialist leader overlooked the articles and instead praised Tucker’s stance on amnesty and his actionable methods.⁶³ While Debs was no fan of organized religion, he admired those radical ministers who critiques their fellow churchmen’s support for industrial capitalism.

(c) Prophetic liminality in the leadership of ‘the outsider’ Eugene Debs

Even though Debs was part of the Socialist Party’s political elite, he was a liminal figure within the movements of the religious left. His ability to appeal to the social and moral discontent of radical Christians without fear of losing the more secular wing of the party hinged on his status as an ‘outsider’ to the Christian tradition. Simply put, there was little threat that Debs would have the SPA singing hymns under his tenure. His ability to extend the Christian social message beyond

the limits of the American republican tradition—and instead, align Jesus with “palpitant and persuasive” radical figures like Karl Marx—also hinged on his undefined relationship with Christianity.⁶⁴ Beyond being an ‘ethical presence,’ Debs’ prophetic leadership came from his biting social critique of capitalism and organized religion.

Debs and the spiritual socialists held in tension multiple factions of leftists through a prophetic application of social criticism. To borrow from Michael Walzer, these activists were neither “dispassionate strangers” nor “estranged natives” of established secular and religious institutions.⁶⁵ Instead, they were able to establish critical authority among their peers by maintaining an “ambiguous connection” to institutional and cultural authorities—e.g., the Socialist party and organized religion.⁶⁶ It was because of this ambiguous connection that their criticisms of the church, state, and capitalism, were neither tampered down by institutional might nor subsumed into more inward-looking programs. As an outsider to organized religion, Debs was shielded from charges of heresy even more than other spiritual socialists like Eddy, Miles Horton, and A.J. Muste, who once belonged to the church.

The ambiguous position of Debs and spiritual socialists is critical. Janine Drake argued that “the working-class religious left competed with, temporarily allied with, and was nearly coopted by the Social Gospel movement.”⁶⁷ To an extent, those radical voices that worked within organized Christianity were swallowed under the weight of the Church. For example, organizations like the Federal Council of Churches stunted the criticism and influence of radical ministers like Harry Ward by endorsing the *Social Creed of the Churches* to counter external socialist influences. Ironically, in the battle for the authority over working-class Christian interests, the ministerial Social Gospel became collateral damage. Christopher Evans observed that the legacy of progressive and radical Christianity was better sustained after the first world war by those “beyond Protestant institutional citadels.”⁶⁸ Evans, like Cook, uses the example of Sherwood Eddy as a leader of the religious left who deftly combined the “sacredness of personality”—e.g., modelling one’s life on Christ-like ideals – with the belief that Christianity commanded the perfectibility of societal social structures.⁶⁹ This mission brought Eddy to work both outside of, and in conflict with, mainline religious institutions. Among his Christian comrades, Debs employed a common language and mission.

Like Eddy, Debs’ prophetic character came in part from his capacity to draw upon the very tenets of Christianity whose institutions he condemned. His rhetoric of denunciation/annunciation followed the standard form of social criticism, whereby a prophet: (I) declares “public pronouncements” or hegemony as hypocritical; (II) attacks the “actual behavior and institutional arrangements”; (III) searches for “core” or universal values; and (IV) demands for everyday life to be reoriented in accordance with these values.⁷⁰ In his “Open Letter on Poverty” he decried the hypocrisy of Christian clergy, writing:

The warnings which have recently issued from both the pulpit

and the press in this city against the “unworthy poor” prompt me to ask these Christian gentlemen if the great Teacher they profess to follow ever made any discrimination between the “worthy” poor and the “unworthy” poor. The poor were the poor to him because he was of their number.⁷¹

But Debs did not stop at condemnation. Rather, he defended welfare as a core value of humanity, while lambasting the insincerity of church-based charity:

They [the poor] are all God’s creatures and they are all human beings, and how anyone professing to be a Christian can warn the community not to give them a mouthful of food, but to turn them away to starve and die can only be reconciled with that whited sepulcher, which so often passes for “Christian charity.”⁷²

For Debs, organized Christianity persisted to “destroy [Christ’s] revolutionary personality,” which eventually pitted an ‘emasculated’ Church against the “greatest moral force in the world” – Jesus.⁷³

It was in the tradition of the “greatest moral force in the world” that Debs presented himself, as opposed to Marx and socialist intellectuals. However, Debs removed the figure of Jesus from the institutional attachments of the church; just as he removed socialism from Marx. As Nick Salvatore wrote, “In the Patriarchs of the Old Testament and in the angry Christ of the New, Debs found a prophetic model that legitimized his critique and demanded no apologies for frank, even harsh, pronouncements.”⁷⁴ What was appealing in Debs’ reimagination of Christ was the proletarian character that he and other working-class labourers could attach themselves to. The Jesus that Debs extolled more closely approximated American labourers than the apostles of the church, or than the revolutionaries of the international proletariat. Debs’ self-constructed tradition was not limited to Jesus either; he all too often “summoned the spectres” of past martyr’s and prophets who dared to push revolutionary means in the pursuit of societal perfection.⁷⁵

A prophet’s liminal position requires that they not only invoke traditions or moral laws common to their audience, but that these traditions are reworked to support their social criticism. The prophet is therefore “parasitic upon the past, but they also give shape to the past upon which they are parasitic,” writes Michael Walzer.⁷⁶ Debs was well versed in this practice. Through rhetoric he constructed himself as a respondent or participant in a historically divine plan. Debs often drew attention to the history of past heroes like John Brown who were martyred by the state and/or organized religion. The suffering of these radical individuals was equated to his own suffering on behalf of a feeble working class. Boastfully, Debs would ask, “Who shall be the John Brown of Wage-Slavery?” and the answer was assuredly him.⁷⁷ Yet, rhetoric alone did not sustain Debs’ prophetic ethos. Debs’

socialism drew from his personal experiences as a labour organizer, his fitful conversion to socialism in prison, and his intellectual upbringing on Christian humanist literature. It was a lived ideology that pulled from dissimilar traditions and experiences that were fit to meet the needs of the American working-class—particularly those of faith.

The prophetic liminality of Debs elevated a *charisma* that drew new activists to the socialist movement. Debs' charisma was not institutionally sanctioned, but derived its authority by existing outside of, and in conflict with, fixed structures. Not unlike the itinerate preachers of a century earlier, Debs' appeal came from his 'liminal capital', that is, the capacity to exist between groups, and to extend a space where others can jettison their cultural consciousness to join the movement. Whereas the preachers of the Second Great Awakening had set forth to preach a simple Christianity free from institutional limitations, Debsian socialism articulated a simple, moral maxim of economic equality. Blending motifs from Protestant Christianity with a critique of capitalism, Debs freed socially conscious Christians to interpret in his movement an alternative America that more closely resembled God's kingdom. To put it another way, Debs' positive reception among Christian leftists was influenced by the dialectic between his criticism of 'Churchianity' and his embrace of Christian moralism. His sharp opposition to what Edward Shils called the "central-institutional system" (e.g., the church), was complimented by a passionately positive connection to the values and symbols of the "center" (e.g., a belief in "true" Christianity), giving rise to charismatic propheticism.⁷⁸

We can see this reception at play in the laudatory remarks of Debs' contemporaries. Walter Hurt proclaimed that Debs was "more than a personality – he is a duality. In him are embodied in disunited combination the two dominating dynamic forces of human creation—love and wrath."⁷⁹ Debs' appeal was, as Hurt explained, his commitment to an unceasing protest against capitalism and its machinery, in combination with a loyalty to the "Peasant of Palestine" and the divine adjuration to "love ye one another."⁸⁰ Isabel Maclean praised Debs as a true Christian, despite Debs' disdain for the church, "There are many Socialists, but only one Debs. Many believe in Socialism, but Debs *is* a Socialist. Many believe in Christianity, but Debs *is* a Christian."⁸¹ James Whitcomb Riley may have best captured the prophetic liminality of Debs when he wrote:

And there's 'Gene Debs, a man 'at stands
 And holds right out in his two hands
 As big a heart as ever beat
 Betwixt here and the judgement seat.⁸²

Conclusion

Spiritual socialists like Debs unknowingly bridged the gap between the 'old' religious left and the 'new' left. They were both ahead of their time, and yet necessary for

the continued survival of a radical faith in America. By removing radical faith from the dictates of Churches, Debs and others placed the authority of moral dissent back in the hands of working people and their movements. Although Cook's typology of spiritual socialism begins with Muste and post-war activism, it is important that Debs be considered as part—if not the beginning—of this tradition.

Before Muste, Eddy, and Dorothy Day, Debs had placed spiritual socialism on the map through his numerous campaigns. Like these revolutionary activists he viewed the aims of Christianity and Socialism as analogous. Moreover, he upheld the principal tenets of Christianity outside of organized religion—condemning the churches for failing to live up to their moral creeds. At the same time, Debs pushed his own party to expand and welcome in faithful comrades. Crucially, Debs and the spiritual socialists were activists in 'limbo,' or liminal figures. Their social critique of American Christianity left them organizing without the aide of the churches. However, freed from institutional impediments, these activists were well positioned to carry the radical faith into the post-war era, unlike the Social Gospellers and Christian socialists. Debs' liminal position was the driver of his prophetic ethos. In his morally founded critique of organized Christianity, Debs fostered 'liminal capital' among socially conscious Christians and working-class labourers, which in turn allowed them to interpret his version of socialism and his religious identity in their own way.

On a final note, it is important to reflect on why this topic is important. Recently, members of the New York City chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (NYC-DSA) engaged in a prolonged Twitter debate over the leadership's decision to invite a pastor to hold a prayer at the party's convention. This decision split those in attendance, with many arguing that the decision was misguided and failed to capture the mission of the party. Others slammed the leadership for failing to promote pluralism. This incident calls to our attention the challenging task facing American socialists trying to reach communities of faith. Debs may help us to understand how secular socialists can find common ground with faith-based communities through a shared tradition of moral dissent.

NOTES

¹ Qtd. in Christopher L. Webber, “William Dwight Porter Bliss (1856-1926) Priest and Socialist,” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 28, no. 1 (1959): 15.

² Heath W. Carter, *Union Made: Working People and the Rise of Social Christianity in Chicago* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199385959.001.0001>.

³ Carter, *Union Made*, 5.

⁴ George Washington Woodbey, *Black Socialist Preacher: The Teachings of Reverend George Washington Woodbey and His Disciple, Reverend G.W. Slater, Jr* (San Francisco: Synthesis Publications, 1983), 260.

⁵ Jacob H. Dorn, “The Social Gospel and Socialism: A Comparison of the Thought of Francis Greenwood Peabody, Washington Gladden, and Walter Rauschenbusch,” *Church History* 62, no. 1 (March 1993): 82, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3168417>.

⁶ While Socialists succeeded for a time in decoupling agrarian Producerism and moral revivalism, the political spirit of the American Midwest ultimately swung towards more conservative-populist politics, see: Jarod Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South* (University of Illinois Press, 2010).

⁷ Jacob H. Dorn, “In Spiritual Communion?: Eugene V. Debs and the Socialist Christians,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 2, no. 3 (2003): 311.

⁸ Janine Giordano Drake, “Between Religion and Politics: The Working Class Religious Left, 1880-1920” (Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2014), 76.

⁹ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (Yale University Press, 1975), 121.

¹⁰ Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (University of Illinois Press, 1982), 10.

¹¹ David Burns, *The Life and Death of the Radical Historical Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 165.

¹² For a more detailed background on Eugene Debs’ upbringing see the chapter “The Fireman of Terre Haute” in, Burns, *The Life and Death of the Radical Historical Jesus*.

¹³ Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs*, 11.

¹⁴ Eugene V. Debs, “The Church and the Workingman,” *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine* 13, no. 4 (April 1889), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1889/890400-debs-churchandworkingman.pdf>.

¹⁵ Dorn, “In Spiritual Communion,” 310.

¹⁶ Eugene V. Debs, “Labor Strikes and Their Lessons,” *Striking for Life: Labor’s Side of the Labor Question: The Right of the Workingman to a Fair Living*, July 1894, Marxist Internet Archive.

¹⁷ Burns, *The Life and Death of the Radical Historical Jesus*, 175.

¹⁸ Qtd. in James H. Hollingsworth, *Eugene V. Debs, What His Neighbors and Others Say of Him*, 27 p. (Terre Haute, Ind.: s.n., 1912), //catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/10029928.28.

¹⁹ Hollingsworth, *Eugene V. Debs, What his Neighbours and Others Say of Him*, 30.

²⁰ Eugene V. Debs, *Eugene V. Debs and Jesus of Nazareth* (Winnipeg Labour Church, 1918).

²¹ Eugene V. Debs, "The Social Spirit," *The American Socialist*, December 11, 1915, Marxist Internet Archive,

<https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/spusa/1915/1211-debs-social-spirit.pdf>.

²² Burns, *The Life and Death of the Radical Historical Jesus*, 163.

²³ Dorn, "In Spiritual Communion," 306.

²⁴ Dorn, "In Spiritual Communion," 306.

²⁵ Dorn, "In Spiritual Communion," 319.

²⁶ Eugene V. Debs, "Debs Addresses Fellowship," *Appeal to Reason*, June 13, 1908, Kansas Historical Society.

²⁷ For more on the thought of Christian Socialists see: John C. Cort, *Christian Socialism: An Informal History, With an New Introduction by Gary Dorrien* (Orbis Books, 2020).

²⁸ Dan McKanan, "The Implicit Religion of Radicalism: Socialist Party Theology, 1900–1934," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 3 (September 1, 2010): 751, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfq050>.

²⁹ McKanan, "The Implicit Religion of Radicalism," 750.

³⁰ Vaneesa Cook, *Spiritual Socialists: Religion and the American Left* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 10.

³¹ Cook, *Spiritual Socialists*, 12.

³² Qtd. in Cook, *Spiritual Socialists*, 4.

³³ Richard Oestreicher, "Saint Gene: A Review Essay (Book Review)," *Indiana Magazine of History* 88, no. 1 (1992): 51.

³⁴ Cook, *Spiritual Socialists*, 16.

³⁵ Qtd. in Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs*, 165.

³⁶ Lincoln Steffens, "What the Matter Is In America and What to Do About It: An Interview with Debs by Lincoln Steffens," *Everybody's Magazine*, October 1918, sec. What is Socialism?, Marxist Internet Archive.

³⁷ Steffens, sec. Foundation Love of Man for Man. In "What the Matter Is In America and What to Do About It: An Interview With Debs by Lincoln Steffens," *Everybody's Magazine*, October 1918.

³⁸ Robert T. Handy, "Christianity and Socialism in America, 1900-1920," *Church History* 21, no. 1 (1952): 49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3162069>.

³⁹ Eugene V. Debs, "The Canton, Ohio Speech" (The Call, June 16, 1918), E.V. Debs Internet Archive, www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1918/canton.htm

⁴⁰ Eugene V. Debs, “The Socialist Party and The Working Class” (1904 Socialist Party Convention, Indianapolis, September 1, 1904), https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1904/sp_wkingclss.htm.

⁴¹ Eugene V. Debs, “Socialist Ideals,” *The Arena*, November 1908, Marxist Internet Archive.

⁴² Debs, *Eugene V. Debs and Jesus of Nazareth*, 11.

⁴³ Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs*, 312.

⁴⁴ For more on this debate, see Maurice Isserman’s Op-Ed in *The New York Times*, and the rebuttal from Thomas Mackaman on *The World Socialist Web Site*.

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Maurice Isserman, “Opinion | America’s Original Socialist,” *The New York Times*, April 20, 2019, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/201904/20/opinion/americas-original-socialist.html>.

⁴⁵ Cook, *Spiritual Socialists*, 26–27, 61.

⁴⁶ James Darsey, “The Legend of Eugene Debs: Prophetic Ethos as Radical Argument,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 74, no. 4 (1988): 43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638809383852>.

⁴⁷ Dorn, “In Spiritual Communion,” 305.

⁴⁸ Eugene V. Debs, *Walls and Bars* (Chicago, Ill., Socialist Party, [c1927]), 229–30, <http://archive.org/details/wallsbars00debs>.

⁴⁹ Hollingsworth, *Eugene V. Debs, What His Neighbors and Others Say of Him*, 14.

⁵⁰ Dan McKanan, *Prophetic Encounters: Religion and the American Radical Tradition* (Beacon Press, 2012), 3.

⁵¹ McKanan, *Prophetic Encounters*, 136.

⁵² McKanan, *Prophetic Encounters*, 141.

⁵³ Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, 148.

⁵⁴ Bercovitch, *The Puritan origins of the American Self*, 149.

⁵⁵ Victor W. Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” in *Ritual* (Routledge, 2010), 371.

⁵⁶ Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” 372.

⁵⁷ Cook, *Spiritual Socialists*, 91–92.

⁵⁸ Terence McArdle, “The Socialist Who Ran for President from Prison—and Won Nearly a Million Votes,” *Washington Post*, March 6, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2019/09/22/socialist-who-ran-president-prison-won-nearly-million-votes/>.

⁵⁹ Algie Martin Simons and Charles H. Kerr, *The International Socialist Review* (Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1912), art. Eugene V. Debs “Speech of Acceptance.”

⁶⁰ Ernest Freeberg, *Democracy’s Prisoner: Eugene V. Debs, the Great War, and the Right to Dissent* (Cambridge, BRAZIL: Harvard University Press, 2008), 211–12, <https://>

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⁶¹ Qtd. In Dorn, "In Spiritual Communion," 319.

⁶² For more on the relationship between Debs and Irwin St. James Tucker see: Jacob H. Dorn, *Socialism and Christianity in Early 20th Century America* (Greenwood Press, 1998), sec. 'Not a Substitute for Religion, but a Means of Fulfilling it': The Sacramental Socialism of Irwin St. James Tucker.

⁶³ Dorn, "In Spiritual Communion," 320.

⁶⁴ Eugene V. Debs, "Jesus, the Supreme Leader," *Progressive Woman*, March 1914, Marxist Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/spusa/1914/0300-debs-jesus-supreme.pdf>.

⁶⁵ Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Harvard University Press, 1987), 38–39.

⁶⁶ Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, 37.

⁶⁷ Janine Giordano Drake, "The Other Social Gospellers: The Working-Class Religious Left, 1877–1920," in *The Religious Left in Modern America: Doorkeepers of a Radical Faith*, ed. Leilah Danielson, Marian Mollin, and Doug Rossinow, Palgrave Studies in the History of Social Movements (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 21, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73120-9_2.

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⁷² Debs, "Open Letter on Poverty," 2.

⁷³ Debs, "Jesus, the Supreme Leader," 1.

⁷⁴ Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs*, 64.

⁷⁵ Darsey, "The Legend of Eugene Debs: Prophetic Ethos as Radical Argument," 442.

⁷⁶ Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, 1987, 70.

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⁷⁹ Walter Hurt, *Eugene V. Debs: An Introduction* (Williamsburg, Ohio: Progress Publishing Company, 1900), 38, http://debs.indstate.edu/h967e9_1900.pdf.

⁸⁰ Hurt, *Eugene V. Debs: An Introduction*, 38–39.

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⁸² Hollingsworth, *Eugene V. Debs, What his Neighbours and Others Say of Him*, 22.