

# **Woody Guthrie and the Jesus and "Commonism"**

Ron Briley

THIS MACHINE  
KILLS  
FASCIS

*Following the re-election of President George W. Bush in 2004, political pundits were quick to credit Christian evangelicals with providing the margin of victory over Democratic challenger John Kerry. An article in The New York Times touted presidential adviser Karl Rove as a genius for focusing the attention of his boss upon such "moral" issues as same-sex marriage and abortion, thereby attracting four million evangelicals to the polls who had sat out the 2000 election.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis of the Democratic Party upon such matters as jobs in the economically-depressed state of Ohio apparently was trumped by the emotionally-charged issues of gay marriage and abortion, which evangelicals perceived as more threatening to their way of life than an economy in decline.*

This reading of the election resulted in a series of jeremiads from the political left bemoaning the influence of Christians upon American politics. In an opinion piece for *The New York Times*, liberal economist Paul Krugman termed President Bush a radical who "wants to break down barriers between church and state." In his influential book *What's The Matter with Kansas?*, Thomas Frank speculated as to why working-class people in Kansas, a state with a progressive tradition, would allow themselves to be manipulated by evangelists and the Republican Party into voting against their own economic interests. Kevin Phillips, a former adviser to Republican President Richard Nixon, whose writings are now embraced by those on the political left, lamented the formation of an *American Theocracy* in which evangelicals embrace military conflict and crusades into the Middle East as a way to bring about Armageddon, or the biblical "end of time."<sup>2</sup>

These dire predictions, however, fail to account for the more complex role Christianity has played in politics throughout American history. In fact, while religion certainly has been used

## **Christian Left:**

to promote conservative social and political agendas in this country, it also has been used numerous times to advance more liberal causes, as well. There are many examples of the impact of progressive Christian activism in the political arena, including the Great Awakening, the evangelical campaign to abolish slavery, Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel, Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement, and the crusade of individuals such as Daniel and Philip Berrigan and William Sloane Coffin against nuclear weapons and the Vietnam War.

More recently, Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners* magazine, has called for resurrecting the legacy of Christian social justice in order to advance the quest for spiritual meaning and progressive social change. In *The Soul of Politics*, Wallis argues:

We need a personal ethic of moral responsibility, a social vision based on bringing people together, a commitment to justice with the capacity also for reconciliation, an economic approach to be governed by the ethics of community and sustainability, a restored sense of our covenant with the abandoned poor and the damaged earth, a reminder of shared values that call forth the very best in us, and a renewal of citizen politics to fashion a new political future.<sup>3</sup>

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During the 1930s and 1940s, for example, folksinger Woody Guthrie combined the teachings of Jesus Christ with working-class political ideology in a way that helped common people address the economic inequalities of Depression-era America. In his music, voluminous journals, political commentaries, and life story, Woody Guthrie articulated the values of a progressive Christianity envisioned by Jim Wallis and so many others. Guthrie's politics were eclectic, combining elements of agrarian Jeffersonianism, Marxism, and Christianity, and, apparently, he perceived no fundamental contradiction between Marx and Jesus. To Guthrie, communism was simply common sense and the sharing of God's resources as called for in the Bible. In a 1941 journal entry, Guthrie wrote:

When there shall be no want among you, because you'll own everything in common. When the Rich will give their goods into [sic] the poor. I believe in this way. I just can't believe in any other way. This is the Christian way and it is already on a big part of the earth and it will come. To own everything in common. That's what the Bible says. Common means all of us. This is pure old 'commonism.'"<sup>4</sup>

Guthrie believed that communism and Christianity both extolled the common ownership of resources and the means of production. Although he rarely quoted directly from scripture, or from Marx and Lenin for that matter, Guthrie apparently was influenced by such Bible passages as Acts 2:44-45, in which early Christians are charged to "sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's needs." The angry God of the Old Testament was of little interest to Guthrie. Instead, he was drawn to the New Testament and its promise of Jesus as a messiah bringing social justice to a troubled world. Guthrie sometimes cited Matthew 19:16-24 and its portrayal of Jesus as a champion of the poor. In this particular passage, a wealthy young man asks Christ what he must do to gain eternal life. Jesus responds that, to be perfect, one must sell his possessions and share the money with the poor. Unwilling to part with his wealth, the young man leaves in disappointment. Jesus then tells his disciples, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." It was this same Jesus, Guthrie noted, who

chased the "money changers," or bankers, out of the temple in Jerusalem, asserting, "My house shall be a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of thieves" (Matthew 21:12-14).<sup>5</sup>

It was these scriptural images of Christ, crusader for the poor and downtrodden, that Guthrie embraced and combined with his progressive political ideology. During the dark days of the Great Depression, when so many honest, hard-working Americans were suffering economically, Guthrie chastised the wealthy for their seeming insensitivity, while he comforted the poor by reminding them that, according to the Bible, the meek ultimately would inherit the earth.

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie, who would become one of the most influential folk singers and songwriters in American

history, was born July 14, 1912, in Okemah, Oklahoma, during a time when the Socialist Party, under the leadership of Eugene Debs, used the region's long-standing populist tradition to foster a strong following in the American Southwest. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the class conflict between city and country was exacerbated by growing farm tenancy and absentee landlordism. Combining with militant industrial unions of timber workers and miners, the Socialist Party in the Southwest, according to James R. Green in *Grass-Roots Socialism*, appealed to a "permanently exploited proletariat of workers and farmers with a class-conscious ideology more radical than Populist reform." However, the Socialist Party in the Southwest did not champion a materialistic atheism. Instead, the socialist tradition in states such as Oklahoma and Texas embraced a millennial Christian tradition espousing the scriptural promise that the meek would inherit the earth. Accordingly, the Socialist Party often did well in areas where Pentecostal groups enjoyed popular support. In *Grass-Roots Socialism*, Green writes, "In the early 1900s the new holiness sects of the Southwest clearly represented the primitive Christianity of the oppressed. The holiness movement was a 'radical opponent' of materialism and modernism in the established churches, and in that sense it was a product of the same kind of class consciousness that led poor people to socialism."<sup>6</sup>

In *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904-1920*, Jim Bissett echoes the conclusions reached by Green. Bissett asserts that there was no hypocrisy involved with the socialist leaders employing religion to attract support for the party platform. In fact, political gatherings often resembled revival camp meetings and included prayers. Bissett argues:

Marxism and Christianity achieved a synergy in the Party, combining in a unique way to strengthen the movement. Thus, while the Marxist ideas that socialists brought to Christianity energized the democratic, communitarian strain in evangelical Protestantism, religion simultaneously deepened and made relevant the Marxist ideological core of the Socialist Party. The resulting message became all the more powerful.

Although the philosophical differences between socialism and communism sometimes do seem a bit blurred in Guthrie's thinking, he did grow up in a region where many working-class people saw no inherent conflict between fundamentalist Christian beliefs and radical political ideology.<sup>7</sup>

Many Oklahoma socialists also embraced the cult of Jesus Christ, which comprised an essential element of Guthrie's left-wing political ideology. Socialists in Oklahoma expressed

reverence for Jesus, emphasizing his working-class origins and eventual betrayal by the political elites and capitalists. This was the Jesus loved and admired by Guthrie in his music and writing. In *American Jesus*, Stephen Prothero asserts that Guthrie and the socialists of Oklahoma were hardly unique in their celebration of Jesus. In fact, both the image and the teachings of Christ had long been incorporated into a variety of American political and ideological movements as a way to lend legitimacy and "moral authority" to these movements. Prothero argues that the paradox of Jesus in American culture is that he is embraced by "Christian America and multireligious America," as well as by secularists and that "To see Americans of all stripes have cast the man from Nazareth in their own image is to examine, through the looking glass, the kaleidoscopic character of American culture."<sup>8</sup> To Guthrie and many Oklahomans and Texans suffering through the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, Jesus was the champion of the dispossessed who would not desert them, even during their long and difficult mass migration to California.

Ironically, Woody Guthrie and his family had not always been among the downtrodden. As a matter of fact, Charlie Guthrie, Woody's father, was a small town real estate entrepreneur who made a comfortable living and opposed the anti-capitalist teachings of the Socialist Party, which his son later would so heartily endorse.



Woody, George, Nora, and Charley Guthrie on the porch of their home, Okemah, Oklahoma, 1926. Courtesy of the Woody Guthrie Foundation and Archives.

However, during the oil boom of the early 1920s, Charlie Guthrie began to lose his financial footing, as larger businesses came to dominate the region's real estate market. A sharp decline in personal income soon combined with a series of family tragedies that would create years of hardship and suffering for the Guthries, placing them firmly within the ranks of the many millions of other desperate families mired in the Depression.

The Guthrie family troubles began in earnest when Woody was still a teenager and his older sister, Clara, died after her dress mysteriously caught fire. Many local townspeople blamed Guthrie's mother, Nora, especially since she recently had begun to act in a very eccentric manner, including wandering the streets in various states of undress. Not long afterward, in June 1927, Charlie Guthrie was severely burned in a fire that, in fact, was started by his increasingly unstable wife. Nora soon was institutionalized and diagnosed as suffering from Huntington's chorea, a degenerative disease which attacks the brain and central nervous system. Due to his troubled family history, Woody,

a physically small boy, often was ostracized by his peers. His response was to perform poorly in academics and play the role of class clown, although he did read avidly and took pleasure in playing the guitar and harmonica.<sup>9</sup>

With the onset of the Great Depression in late 1929, Guthrie moved to Pampa, Texas, to join his father, who was living there with relatives and managing a boarding house. During his seven-year stay in Texas, Woody attended high school, performed with country dance bands, and occasionally appeared on local radio stations.<sup>10</sup> Although Guthrie had grown up in the rather strict religious environment of rural Oklahoma, his family did not attend church on a regular basis. In Pampa, however, Guthrie underwent a religious conversion experience, in large part because of the influence of his uncle, Jerry P. Guthrie, and a local minister, Reverend Eulys McKenzie of the Church of God in Christ. According to Guthrie biographer Joe Klein, McKenzie "was a gentle man with a kind heart — even though he had a reputation for giving wild fire-and-brimstone



Woody Guthrie (left) with the Junior Chamber of Commerce Band, Pampa, Texas, 1936. Courtesy of the Woody Guthrie Foundation and Archives.

sermons every Sunday — and he convinced Woody that it was important to make a spiritual commitment and be baptized by total immersion." Although he soon stopped attending church on a regular basis, Guthrie would retain a life-long interest in the Bible, in part due to his religious experiences in Texas.<sup>11</sup>

It is not surprising that Guthrie was initially attracted to an "outsider" Pentecostal denomination, such as the Church of God in Christ. While most fundamentalist Christians believe that those who are saved or "born again" will go to heaven, Pentecostal worshippers who engage in such practices as speaking in tongues or faith healing often argue that they have achieved an even more advanced state of spirituality not typically found in the less emotionally-charged services of other more mainstream denominations. In fact, many of these other denominations, including the Methodists, often regarded such practices as simply "emotional outbursts." However, because

In 1936, Guthrie left Pampa and headed out to California as part of the more than three million Dust Bowl refugees who fled to the West Coast in hopes of finding new economic opportunities. Guthrie was shocked at the disdain and prejudice with which many in California greeted these Dust Bowl migrants. Traveling by freight, he encountered thousands of destitute, unemployed men, many of them former labor union members with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). These old "Wobblies" introduced Guthrie to the music of the legendary folk singer and activist Joe Hill (born Joseph Hillstrom), and Guthrie began carrying around a copy of the *IWW Little Red Song Book*. One of Hill's best-known tunes, "The Preacher and the Slave," addresses the issue of religion and social justice by claiming that religion is often used simply to brainwash working people by promising them pie in the sky after they are dead. Guthrie was profoundly influenced by Hill and celebrated

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they involved a more fundamentalist, emotionally-oriented approach to worship, the Pentecostal churches became home during the 1920s and 1930s to many poor tenant farmers who resented the wealthier, more established churches and believed that God would answer the common man's needs through the gifts of healing and speaking in tongues. Historian Jim Bissett concludes, "Thus, God himself understood what the rest of society seemed to have missed; in God's eyes, the impoverished farmers who worshipped in fundamentalist churches were superior to their political and economic enemies." Guthrie had little patience with organized religion, preferring the primitive Christianity of the early church and following the teachings of Jesus. Like the disgruntled preacher Jim Casey in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Guthrie was searching for the one big soul.<sup>12</sup>

In October 1933, Woody Guthrie married a local Pampa girl, Mary Jennings, who at the time was only sixteen years old. Two years later, the couple's first child was born, and Guthrie worked to support the family by painting signs, reading fortunes, drawing pictures, and playing music. Inspired by the massive dust storms engulfing North Texas and Oklahoma, Guthrie began to pen tunes such as "Dusty Old Dust," proclaiming:

So long, it's been good to know you  
This dusty old dust is a-gettin' my home  
And I've got to be drifting along.<sup>13</sup>

the life of this Wobbly minstrel in the composition "Joseph Hillstrom." Describing the execution of Hill by a Utah firing squad as a martyr's death, Guthrie wrote:

My comrades are marching up and down the streets  
Of all the cities and towns around  
They can sing Joseph Hillstrom never let them  
down.<sup>14</sup>

Despite his growing interest in social and political activism during the 1930s, Guthrie was hardly ready to desert his religious principles. In his autobiography *Bound for Glory*, Guthrie evokes the cult of Jesus when he describes his experiences riding the rails with the unemployed and dispossessed. Sitting around a campfire in Redding, California, with a group of men seeking work, Guthrie describes an intelligent-looking young man, approximately twenty years old, who is speaking of the need for a social vision in the country. The young man asserts that the people need to get together and build things like dams, railroads, factories, and ships. He excitedly evokes the image of Jesus in the discussion, proclaiming:

That's what 'social' means, me and you and you  
working on something together and owning it  
together. What the hell's wrong with this, anybody  
— speak up! If Jesus Christ was sitting right here,

right now, he'd say this very same damn thing. You just ask Jesus how the hell come a couple of thousand of us living out here in this jungle camp like a bunch of wild animals. You just ask Jesus how many millions of other folks are living the same way? Sharecroppers down South, big city people that work in factories and live like rats in the dirty slums. You know what Jesus'll say back to you? He'll tell you we all just mortally got to work together, build things together, fix up old things together, clean out old filth together, put up new buildings, schools and churches, banks and factories together, and own everything together. Sure, they'll call it a bad ism. Jesus don't care if you call it socialism or communism, or just me and you.<sup>15</sup>

This statement articulates clearly Guthrie's view of "commonism" and the type of primitive Christian socialism or

When Robbin asked whether the folksinger had any reservations about being associated with the Party, Guthrie replied, "Left wing, chicken wing — it's all the same thing to me. I sing my songs wherever I can sing 'em. So if you'll have me, I'll be glad to go." Further demonstrating the eclectic range of his political preferences, Guthrie also informed Robbin that the people he most admired were Jesus Christ and Will Rogers.<sup>17</sup>

The Oklahoma-born folksinger became a featured entertainer at California Communist Party rallies, leading to speculation about whether Guthrie ever officially joined the organization. Biographer Ed Cray accepts the view of many Guthrie family members and associates that Woody lacked the discipline and ideological commitment to be a Party member. On the other hand, Communist Party organizer Dorothy Healey described Guthrie as active in California Party affairs during the late 1930s, and biographer Joe Klein accepts Guthrie's assertion that he joined the Party sometime in 1936. In his examination of Guthrie and the Communist Party, Ronald Cohen found

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communism extolled in the biblical book of Acts. It is a utopian religious vision which Guthrie maintained even as he became involved with the Communist Party during his stay on the West Coast from 1936 to 1940.

Shortly after arriving in California, Guthrie settled with relatives in Glendale and was able to obtain a job with his cousin, Jack Guthrie, singing on radio station KFVD in Los Angeles. Woody soon established a popular duet with Maxine Crossman, whom he called Lefty Lou. In addition to Guthrie's singing duties, KFVD station owner Frank Burke recruited him to do some reporting for Burke's progressive newspaper, *The Light*. Angered by how the capitalist system seemed to abandon the unemployed millions who were living in Hoovervilles along the highways and underneath the bridges of California, Guthrie asserted, "I hated the false front decay and rot of California's fascistic oil and gas deals, the ptomaine poison and brass knucks, the jails and prisons, the dumped oranges and peaches and grapes and cherries rolling and running down into little streams of creosote poisoned juices."<sup>16</sup>

Guthrie's growing frustration with the mistreatment of Okies in California drew him into increasingly radical circles. Ed Robbin, correspondent with the communist newspaper, *The People's Daily World*, and political commentator for KFVD, asked Guthrie to perform for some Communist Party functions.

no contradiction in Guthrie's admiration for the Communist Party alongside his celebrations of Jesus Christ and traditional American values. Like many in the 1930s, Guthrie was attracted to the Party's basic domestic goals, "while resisting any slavish obedience to Party doctrines or dictates." He was more of a follower of Debs and Lincoln than Lenin and Stalin, but he perceived communism as offering a vision of equality, democracy, and peace. Cohen concludes that Guthrie was "a Red, but of



Woody Guthrie and Maxine Crissman (Lefty Lou). Courtesy of the Woody Guthrie Foundation and Archives.

his own stripe — no contradiction in a political climate where anything was possible, as Woody demonstrated.”<sup>18</sup>

Whether Guthrie formally joined the Party or not, he certainly did draw cartoons and wrote a regular column entitled “Woody Sez” for *The People’s Daily World*, the West Coast Communist Party daily newspaper published in San Francisco. The “Woody Sez” columns, which eventually included 174 commentaries and ran from May 1939 to January 1940, featured Guthrie’s drawings and such down home philosophy as “I ain’t a communist necessarily, but I have been in the red all my life.”<sup>19</sup>

A closer reading of these columns reveals that Guthrie was a good deal more complex and sophisticated than the country bumpkin persona he sometimes projected in his writing. Beneath the colloquialisms and the frequent misspellings is an intellectual whose prose articulated the suffering as well as the dreams of the Dust Bowl refugees. Guthrie’s columns do not rely upon quotations from Marx or Lenin, but they certainly indicate a strong sense of class consciousness and disdain for the

believe in life, and wear the uniform of death. There are certain men who never think of any other thing besides slaughter. They are blood soaked butchers and they are believed to be heroes. Three fifths of the people decide to murder the other two fifths, who must take up killing in order to stay alive. Locate the man who profits by war — strip him of his profits and war will end.”<sup>20</sup>

While Guthrie may have been following the Communist Party line in this denunciation of war, his open opposition to military conflicts also fit well with the New Testament conception of Jesus Christ as the Prince of Peace, and depictions of a meek, peaceful Jesus remained a staple in Guthrie’s columns for the communist *People’s Daily World*. Guthrie attacked bankers, landlords, furniture dealers, utilities, and doctors for charging the poor usurious interest rates and exorbitant fees. Guthrie evoked the biblical image of the dispossessed as being God’s

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negative effects of capitalism on the common working people. While not extensively theoretical by any means, Guthrie’s pieces, nevertheless, do offer some evidence of party influence, as the folksinger supported the shifting and often confusing Communist Party line during the late 1930s.

With the secret signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact on August 23, 1939, followed by Germany’s invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, it was a difficult time to be a communist. The Popular Front policy of collective security against fascism was abandoned as Stalin, convinced after the Munich crisis of 1938 that the Western democracies would not stand up to Hitler, determined that the interests of the Soviet Union could best be served by a temporary alliance with the Nazi dictator. A corresponding shift in policy by the Communist Party in the United States made it apparent to many critics that American communists simply were following the dictates of the Soviet Union and exercised little independence. Yet Guthrie did not desert the Party, shifting from the anti-fascist Popular Front to a denunciation of capitalist-led wars as exploitive of the working class. In a November 22, 1939, “Woody Sez” piece, Guthrie exclaimed:

War is a game played by maniacs, who kill each other. It is murder, studied and prepared by insane minds, and followed by a bunch of thieves. You can’t

chosen people, asserting, “You Land Shirks, and other Friskers, listen to me, the hungrier you make us, the smarter we get... cause all of the good books on religion advice [sic] you to fast and think...and the fastest you think is when youre [sic] right hungry.” In many ways, Jesus served as an effective model for inspiring people to challenge the bankers and capitalists. As Guthrie argued, “Today we need to make a Whip of small organizations an small movements — an bind them and wind them into one great big ‘Whip’ — an drive not only the Money Changing Ideas and thoughts out of their own minds, our bodily Temple — but all so to drive the Money Changers out of the Temple of our Nation.”<sup>21</sup> He believed that the people did not have to passively wait for the return of the Messiah; instead, they could follow the example of Jesus and overthrow the exploiters, ushering in an earthly paradise of equality based on the teachings of Christ.

Guthrie envisioned an earthly paradise in which all people would enjoy access to the planet’s resources. He dreamed of an America where the common people could find fulfilling work and be free from exploitation. Guthrie placed little faith in organized religion, believing instead in the message of the working-class carpenter bringing peace, equality, and justice to the world. Embracing the Jesus who taught that “the last will be first, and the first will be last” (Matthew 20:16), Guthrie wrote:



*The Almanac Singers (Woody Guthrie, Millard Lampell, Bess Hawes, Pete Seeger, Arthur Stern, Sis Cunningham), 1941. Courtesy of the Woody Guthrie Foundation and Archives.*

Should the Master appear again on earth, that he would take a look at the churches, a look at the sinners, and associate himself at once with the sinners...as he did before. Religion is to forget yourself and work for the good of others. Outside of that there is no religion...no progress...no hope for you, your neighbor, your coming grandchildren. Find out who is causing the Trouble here in this Old World — remove the power from their hands — place it in the hands of those who ain't Greedy — and you can roll over and go to sleep.”<sup>22</sup>

Guthrie was more interested in ends than means, and he  
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seemed to have no problem with the Communist Party if it could help the commonwealth of equality called for by the Prince of Peace.

On January 7, 1940, Guthrie wrote his final column for *The People's Daily World*. His adherence to the Communist Party line following the Nazi-Soviet Pact resulted in a parting of the ways between the radical folksinger and progressive KFVD radio station owner Frank Burke. With nothing to hold him in California and restless once again, Guthrie, his wife, and his children headed back to Pampa, Texas, for a short time before moving on to a new promised land for migrants of the world — New York City.

At first, life was difficult for Guthrie in New York, but his



big break came when actor and friend Will Greer organized *The Grapes of Wrath* Evening on March 3, 1940, to benefit John Steinbeck's Committee for Agricultural Workers. Guthrie shuffled on to the stage and announced that he was proud to be part of the "Rape of Graft" show. His performance so impressed Texas-born Alan Lomax, Assistant Director of the Archives of Folk Song at the Library of Congress, that he convinced the Oklahoman to join him in the studio to record *Dust Bowl Ballads*.<sup>23</sup> Guthrie briefly revived his "Woody Sez" column for the New York City Communist Party newspaper *The Daily Worker*, but most of his time was occupied by hosting two radio shows for CBS — *Back Where I Come From* and *Pipe Smoking Time*. However, conflicts with sponsors over his outspoken political views led Guthrie to quit the show, pack up his family,

<http://ecommons.txstate.edu/jtmh/vol7/iss1/3>

and head back to California in January 1941.<sup>24</sup>

Guthrie's discontent with his first experience in New York City was evident in his composition "Jesus Was a Man," or as it is sometimes called "They Laid Jesus Christ in His Grave." Guthrie asserts that he wrote the song during the winter of 1940, as he gazed out the window of a rooming house and observed that the poor of New York City were cold and hungry, while the wealthy were "drinking good whiskey and celebrating and wasting handfuls of money at gambling and women." The folksinger concluded that if Jesus Christ were to preach his message of redistribution of wealth on the streets of New York City, "They'd lock him back in jail as sure as you're reading this."

In "Jesus Was a Man," the working-class origins of the man from Galilee are celebrated. Jesus is a brave carpenter who preaches that

the rich should give their possessions to the poor. Guthrie writes:

He went to the rich and He went to the poor,  
He went to the hungry and the lonely  
He said that the poor would win the world,  
So they laid Jesus Christ in His grave.

The Jesus presented by Guthrie is a revolutionary who comes with a sword to achieve justice for the common people. Guthrie concludes:

When the patience of the workers gives away,  
'Twould be better for you rich if you'd never been  
born!  
For you laid Jesus Christ in His Grave.<sup>25</sup>

In this composition, Guthrie is clearly influenced by minstrel Billy Gashade's "Jesse James" ballad, in which James is betrayed by his supposed friend, "that dirty little coward," Robert Ford. Likewise, in Guthrie's "Jesus Was a Man," the carpenter who champions the poor is betrayed by "a dirty little coward called Judas Iscariot." Guthrie also may have been influenced by the popular 1939 Hollywood film *Jesse James*, starring Tyrone Power and Henry Fonda as Frank and Jesse James, heroes to the poor and downtrodden. In Guthrie's ballad, he portrays the James brothers as victims of the greedy railroad owners who had hired hoodlums to drive the farmers off their land. Even though railroad thugs bombed their home and killed their mother, the James brothers continued to fight against corrupt corporate interests. As Guthrie points out, "No wonder folks like to hear songs about the outlaws — they're wrong all right, but not as dirty and sneakin' as some of our so-called higher ups." Social banditry certainly ran counter to Communist Party orthodoxy, which emphasized collective action and identity rather than individual adventurism, but Guthrie continued to celebrate outlaws' robbing from the rich to serve the poor in other compositions, such as "Billy the Kid," "Belle Starr," and "Pretty Boy Floyd."<sup>26</sup>

Guthrie clearly believed that Jesus Christ belonged in this tradition of the socialist outlaw as his composition "Jesus Was a Man" indicates. There is considerable anger and criticism of the corrosive effects of money in "Jesus Was a Man," perhaps reflecting Guthrie's concerns over being seduced or betrayed by the forces of wealth in New York City. However, he ultimately resisted the temptations of fame and fortune and returned to the West, where he was able to secure employment with the Bonneville Power Administration, helping build huge, federally-funded hydroelectric facilities. Inspired by the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration's willingness to undertake these extensive public works projects, as well as by the potential for

public power and more "socialist planning" to enrich the quality of life for the common people of America, Guthrie penned such classics as "Roll on, Columbia," "The Grand Coulee Dam," and "Pastures of Plenty." The massive public projects described in these songs evoke the "social work" blessed by Jesus that Guthrie extols in his autobiography.

In the summer of 1941, Guthrie separated from his wife, Mary, and returned to New York City, joining Pete Seeger and the Almanac Singers who were performing antiwar and CIO union organizing music. With the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Guthrie and the Almanac Singers dropped their antiwar songs, following the Communist Party line of again advocating a Popular Front against fascism. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and subsequent American entry into World War II, Guthrie penned "Talking Hitler's Head Off Blues," which was published in *The Daily Worker*. He also began going around New York City with the slogan "this machine kills fascists" scrawled on his guitar. Guthrie found personal happiness during the war years, falling in love with a dancer, Marjorie Greenblatt Mazia, and beginning a second family. He also served for a time in the Merchant Marine with his friend Cisco Houston. However, Guthrie's political views soon put him at odds with others in the Merchant Marine, and he eventually was inducted into the U. S. Army on May 7, 1945, the day Nazi Germany surrendered to the Allies.<sup>27</sup>

Guthrie viewed the Second World War as a collective effort to end fascism and usher in an era of democracy and prosperity for the common people. Thus, he downplayed Jesus as socialist outlaw in his song "Jesus Christ for President" (which would be recorded by Billy Bragg and Wilco in the late 1990s). With the Communist Party returning to the Popular Front strategy of cooperating with bourgeois democratic regimes, including President Roosevelt's New Deal, "Jesus Christ For President" presents Jesus in a less revolutionary guise and willing to work within the electoral system to create a more equitable and just society. The capitalists and money changers still need to be driven from the temple, but in this composition the process does not require a revolution. With the carpenter as President, the crooked politicians will be dispatched from office, while jobs and pensions will be guaranteed for young and old. But whether socialist outlaw or democratic politician, Jesus will provide the peace and prosperity foretold in the New Testament, for which Guthrie longed. He concludes "Jesus Christ For President" with these lines:

Every year we waste enough  
To feed the ones who starve  
We build our civilization up  
And we shoot it down with wars —  
But with the Carpenter on the seat  
Away up in the capital town

The U.S.A. will be on the way  
Pros-perity bound!<sup>28</sup>

In "This Morning I was Born Again," written in January 1945, Guthrie reiterated the example of Jesus transforming the world into an earthly paradise, although this time the carpenter and the working masses could accomplish this themselves through the union movement. It would not be necessary to have Christ as King or President. Sounding a bit like Joe Hill and dismissing the Christian sense of personal redemption in being born again, Guthrie writes:

I no longer look for heaven  
In Your deathly distant land  
I do not want your pearly gates  
Don't want your street of gold

Instead, Jesus's vision could be achieved in the temple of the union hall:

I breathe the life of Jesus  
And old John Henry in  
I see just one big family  
In the whole big human race  
When the sun looks down tomorrow  
I will be in the union place<sup>29</sup>

Thus, according to Guthrie, the people had within themselves the power to reinvent the post-war world according to Christ's teachings.

Despite Guthrie's initial post-World War II optimism, the 1950s would usher in a politically and ideologically stifling period known as the Cold War, in which anti-communist hysteria, McCarthyism, and a conservative reaction against the gains made by the union movement during the New Deal prevented the realization of the utopia envisioned in "Jesus Christ for President" and "This Morning I Am Born Again." Although he had been involved with Pete Seeger's "People's Songs," a cooperative among left-oriented folk musicians, from 1946 to 1949 and was active in the 1948 Progressive Party Presidential candidacy of former Vice President Henry A. Wallace, Guthrie would not suffer the same degree of political persecution as many of his left-leaning associates during the McCarthy era. This was primarily due to the onset of personal problems and failing health, which kept the singer largely out of the public eye throughout much of the 1950s.

Guthrie's next round of troubles began soon after the close of World War II. On February 6, 1947, he was devastated when his four-year-old daughter Cathy perished in an apartment fire. Although Woody and Marjorie would have three more

children, Guthrie's behavior became increasingly erratic. He was drinking heavily and would leave the family for long periods of time. Assuming that alcoholism was his problem, he checked himself into a hospital. In September 1952, he was diagnosed as suffering from Huntington's disease, which had claimed his mother's life. A distraught Guthrie divorced Marjorie, retreated to California, and attempted to form a new family with twenty-year-old Anneke Marshall. Unable to cope with her husband's condition, however, Anneke soon divorced Guthrie, and, by 1956, he was institutionalized. Marjorie, who had remarried, took over the task of looking after Woody during the final eleven years of his life, forming the Guthrie Children's Fund to help organize the folksinger's finances.

Despite these personal setbacks and the chilling political climate of the 1950s, which resulted in the blacklisting of many performers and former associates, Guthrie refused to recant his beliefs in either Jesus Christ or the Communist Party. In the late 1940s, he still perceived the Communist Party as being the political organization most committed to realizing the promise of Christ's teachings. In a letter to relatives in California, Guthrie wrote "The communists always have been the hardest fighters for the trade unions, good wages, short hours, nursery schools, cleaner workshops and the equal rights of every person of every color. Communists have the only answer to the whole mess. That is, we all ought to own and run every mine, factory, and timber track." Even as his health deteriorated, Guthrie refused to alter his views on the promise of communism. In one of his last letters, he stated that he could not vote for President Dwight Eisenhower in the 1956 presidential election, because "Eisenhower can't be my big chiefy bossyman till he makes alla my United States alla my races all equal...I vote for only communist candidates. Anyhow they'll be the ones to ever even partways try to give birth to my racey equality."<sup>30</sup>

Guthrie continued to remain true to both communism and Christ, refusing to believe that Jesus had forsaken him, despite the singer's rapidly deteriorating health. In fact, during his extended hospitalization, Guthrie referred to Christ as his doctor. Although there is no indication that Guthrie's faith in the communist vision of Jesus faltered, in his final years, suffering from a crippling disease, the singer increasingly evoked Christ as his personal savior. Realizing his desperate straits, Guthrie wrote his father "maybe Jesus can think up a cure of some kind," and he composed "Jesus My Doctor," in which he concluded:

Christ you're still my best doctor  
You can always cure what ails me<sup>31</sup>

On October 3, 1967, Guthrie finally succumbed to the disease ravaging his body. A loyal disciple of Christ who attempted through his music and association with the Communist Party

to spread Jesus's teachings regarding social justice, Guthrie appeared to assume in his final years that his efforts to establish a Christian earthly paradise would be rewarded in heaven. Certainly Guthrie's influence would continue to resonate throughout popular culture for generations with the music of Bob Dylan, Peter, Paul, and Mary, Bruce Springsteen, and countless younger artists. However, in the more conservative political climate of recent years, there has been an effort to deradicalize Woody Guthrie. School children continue to sing "This Land Is Your Land," but they often do so without the historical context of the Great Depression, and the more radical verses in which Guthrie questioned private ownership of property most often are removed from public school songbooks.

*Bound for Glory*, director Hal Ashby's 1976 cinematic tribute to Guthrie concludes with the folksinger's departing California for the greener pastures of New York City in the early 1940s. As he rides a freight train, Guthrie, portrayed by David Carradine, sings "This Land Is Your Land," which he wrote in February 1940. Under the direction of Ashby, the film's conclusion becomes a bicentennial tribute to the resilient spirit of the American people. Most film viewers, however, certainly would not surmise that Guthrie penned his anthem in angry response to what he believed was the shallow nationalism of Irving Berlin's "God Bless America." As Bryan K. Garman suggests in *A Race of Singers*, the problem with Ashby's film "is that it depicted Guthrie as a romantic individualist." In his critique of the movie, Garman argues that, "The most important thing about the film's Guthrie is not that he fought for social and economic justice but that he celebrated the American landscape and inspired all people to take pride in themselves and their individual accomplishments."<sup>32</sup>

To honor her father's remarkable social, political, and musical legacy, Woody's daughter, Nora Guthrie, recently commissioned British rock musician Billy Bragg to examine over one thousand lyrics in the Woody Guthrie Archives. Nora stated that she selected Bragg for the project, because his political commitment and sense of humor reflected that of her father. In the late 1990s, Bragg, in collaboration with the American folk rock band Wilco, produced two *Mermaid Avenue* albums, setting Woody's lyrics to music. The critically-acclaimed, Grammy-nominated *Mermaid Avenue* recordings reflect the wide range of Guthrie's concerns, including love, politics, and even a tribute to movie star Ingrid Bergman. Perhaps it was most appropriate that Guthrie's somewhat unconventional Christian principles are represented by an upbeat rock version of "Jesus Christ for President." Bragg and Wilco also covered another 1940 song "The Unwelcome Guest," in which Guthrie celebrates the outlaw tradition of robbing from the rich and giving to the poor. In this tune, Guthrie concludes that the wealthy and their legal representatives

may kill the outlaw, but others will take his place:

They'll take the money and spread it out equal  
Just like the Bible and the prophets suggest  
But the men that go riding to help those poor workers  
The rich will cut down like an unwelcome guest

The *Mermaid Avenue* sessions reiterate the juxtaposition of love songs, political protest, and Jesus Christ that have long made the Guthrie repertoire so unique and complex.<sup>33</sup>

There is a widely-held assumption among many Americans today that religion and Jesus Christ are the exclusive ideological property of the political Right. This examination of the music and politics of Woody Guthrie is a reminder that there is a long and rich tradition in American history in which many on the political Left also have drawn upon the teachings of Christ to support their more progressive ideology. The legacy of Jesus in American culture goes well beyond such current hot-button issues as abortion and same-sex marriage, and many fundamental Christian tenets also can be interpreted to support what some might consider a left-leaning political or social agenda. Such certainly was the case with Woody Guthrie and other members of the Christian Left during the 1930s and 1940s.

In his reading of the Bible, Guthrie perceived no fundamental conflict between the principles of communism and the teachings of Jesus Christ, especially the notion that the selfish grafters should be driven from the temple of America, and that God's resources should be shared among all people. Jesus, the Bible, and Christianity are contested legacies within American history and not the exclusive property of any one political ideology. While some progressive Christians may be uncomfortable with fully implementing the radical ideas of Woody Guthrie, his understanding of Jesus's teachings offers an example of social justice upon which Christians, and even non-Christians, may continue to draw. As Jim Wallis asserts:

The truth is that most of the important movements for social change in America have been fueled by religion — progressive religion. The stark moral challenges of our times have once again begun to awaken this prophetic tradition. As the religious Right loses influence, nothing could be better for the health of both church and society than a return of the moral center that anchors our nation in a common humanity.<sup>34</sup>

Almost certainly, Woody Guthrie's response to Wallis would be "amen!"★

## Notes

- 1 Todd S. Purdum, David D. Kirkpatrick, and Elisabeth Bumiller, "Karl Rove, the Architect of President Bush's Re-election," *The New York Times*, 5 November 2004, 22. A study by the Pew Research Center, however, asserts that while Bush's support among evangelical Protestants grew in 2004, "there is no evidence that evangelicals comprised a larger share of the vote this year." The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Religion and the Presidential Vote," 6 December 2004, accessed on July 17, 2006 at: [www.people-press.org/commentary/display.php3?AnalysisID-103](http://www.people-press.org/commentary/display.php3?AnalysisID-103).
- 2 Paul Krugman, "No Surrender," *The New York Times*, 5 November 2004, 31; Thomas Frank, *What's The Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004); Kevin Phillips, *American Theocracy: The Peril of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century* (New York: Viking Press, 2006).
- 3 Jim Wallis, *The Soul of Politics: A Practical and Prophetic Vision for Change* (New York: The New Press, 1997), xxiv; Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).
- 4 Ed Cray, *Ramblin' Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 284.
- 5 John C. Cort, *Christian Socialism: An Informal History* (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988); James A. Dombrowski, *The Early Days of Christian Socialism in America* (New York: Octagon Books, 1977).
- 6 James R. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895-1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 173, 368.
- 7 Jim Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904-1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 97.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 88-89; Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 7.
- 9 Harry Menig, "Woody Guthrie: The Oklahoma Years, 1912-1929," in Davis D. Joyce, *An Oklahoma I Had Never Seen Before: Alternative Views of Oklahoma History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 162-190.
- 10 Richard B. Hughes, "Woody Guthrie," *Handbook of Texas Music*, Roy Barkley, ed., (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2003), 129-130.
- 11 Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), 60-61; and Cray, *Ramblin' Man*, 85-81.
- 12 Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America*, 99.
- 13 "So Long It's Been Good to Know You," in Woody Guthrie, Alan Lomax, and Pete Seeger, *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People* (New York: Oak Publications, 1967), 226-227.
- 14 Moses Asch, ed., *American Folksong: Woody Guthrie* (New York: Oak Publications, 1961), 22-23. Joseph Hillstrom, a Swedish immigrant, changed his name to Joe Hill after arriving in America.
- 15 Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1943), 333-334. To maintain the original flavor of Guthrie's writings, this paper employs the original spellings and punctuation of Woody Guthrie.
- 16 Asch, ed., *American Folksong*, 4.
- 17 Ed Robbin, *Woody Guthrie and Me* (Berkeley, California: Lancaster-Miller Publications, 1979), 30-33.
- 18 Cray, *Ramblin' Man*, 138-140; Klein, *Guthrie*, 113-135; Dorothy Ray Healey and Maurice Isserman, *California Red: A Life in the American Communist Party* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Ronald D. Cohen, "Woody the Red?," in Robert Santelli and Emily Davidson, eds., *Hard Travelin': The Life and Legacy of Woody Guthrie* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 150.
- 19 Woody Guthrie, *Woody Sez* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1975); Dave Marsh and Harold Leventhal, eds., *Pastures of Plenty: Woody Guthrie, The Unpublished Writings of an American Folk Hero* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1972), 163; Paul Richards, "People's World," in Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, *Encyclopedia of the America Left* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 573-574; "Woody Sez," *People's Daily World (PDW)*, June 17, 1939, 4.
- 20 "Woody Sez," *PDW*, November 22, 1939, 4; Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).
- 21 "Woody Sez," *PDW*, July 12, 1939, 4; and "Woody Sez," *PDW*, December 5, 1939, 4.
- 22 "Woody Sez," *PDW*, October 27, 1939, 4.
- 23 John Steinbeck, "Foreword," in Guthrie, Lomax, and Seeger, *Hard Hitting Songs*, 8-9; Klein, *Guthrie*, 159.
- 24 Cray, *Ramblin' Man*, 195-199.
- 25 "Jesus Christ Was a Man," in Guthrie, Lomax, and Seeger, *Hard Hitting Songs*, 336-337.
- 26 "Woody Sez," *PDW*, October 10, 1939, 4; Asch, ed., *American Folksong*, 27-29.
- 27 Klein, *Guthrie*, 225; and Marsh and Leventhal, eds., *Pastures of Plenty*, 55-57.
- 28 "Jesus Christ for President," in Marsh and Leventhal, eds., *Pastures of Plenty*, 43.
- 29 "This Morning I Am Born Again," in Marsh and Leventhal, eds., *Pastures of Plenty*, 141.
- 30 Klein, *Guthrie*, 340, 415.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 408.
- 32 Bryan K. Garman, *A Race of Singers: Whitman's Working-Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 169-170.
- 33 Michael Bestin, "Supersonic Nursery Rhymes," *Austin Chronicle*, July 13, 1998, accessed on July 15, 2006 at: [weeklywire.com/ww/o7-13-98/Austin\\_music\\_feature3.html](http://weeklywire.com/ww/o7-13-98/Austin_music_feature3.html); Billy Bragg & Wilco, *Mermaid Avenue* (Elektra Records, 1998); and *Man in the Sand*, dir. Kim Hopkins (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Palm Pictures, 2001), DVD.
- 34 Wallis, *God's Politics*, 19.