

The Compatibility of Christianity and Socialism in the Context of the Kress Controversy of 1905 in Milwaukee

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The rise of Socialism in the first decade of the twentieth century was unrivaled in the history of the United States. In most cities and states, Socialism achieved only minimal gains and was mostly a small movement in comparison to the primary political parties. Wisconsin, however, experienced the steady growth of Socialism until 1910, when the Social-Democratic Party swept Milwaukee county and municipal elections.¹ The party remained involved with city politics through 1960, when the last Socialist mayor, Frank Zeidler, left office.

Although the Social-Democrats outlived the 1910 election by a half century, that election was the turning point in their successes for many reasons. First, the party never again achieved the overwhelming success it did in the 1910 election, and experienced a steady decline thereafter. Secondly, the success of the Social-Democrats in 1910 was partly a response by voters to the previous administrations', particularly that of Mayor David Rose, and the main parties' inability to take action against the expansive corruption of the previous decade.² Thus, by examining the party in the ten years prior to 1910, it is possible to track the growth of the party. Investigating the growth of the party will show how the evolution of arguments made by both the party itself and its individual members moved towards a more moderate platform, which greatly increased the party's support. This paper, therefore, will try to demonstrate how these modified arguments, directed to a larger audience, contributed to the growth of the party.

One point of contention for the voting public was the question of the compatibility of Socialism and religion – in particular, Catholicism. The official platforms of both the Catholic Church and Socialism (as defined by Karl Marx) were adamantly opposed to each other, both saying the other was nothing short of evil. As the vast majority of Milwaukee's population was Christian, and a very

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¹ Carl Thompson, "Labor Measures of the Social-Democrats, Milwaukee Administration," Pamphlet Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, WI.

² Joseph A. Ranney, "The Political Campaigns of Mayor David S. Rose," *Milwaukee History*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 4.

large number Catholic, in order for the Social-Democrats to win an election, they needed at least part of the Christian vote.

The conflict between Christianity and Socialism was spotlighted during the Kress Controversy of 1905 in Milwaukee. The controversy was between a Catholic priest, William Kress, and a Congregational minister and member of the Social-Democratic Party, Carl Thompson. For much of the early part of 1905, these two figures argued their views through the popular press, both intensely advocating their positions. Thompson saw Socialism as congruent with Christianity, while Kress viewed Socialism as the opposite of Christianity.

By examining the arguments used by the participants of the Kress Controversy and comparing them to arguments of other Socialists around the country, one can examine the evolution of Socialist opinions toward a more moderate platform, one not hostile to Christianity. Ultimately, it is possible to consider the use of moderate viewpoints as a catalyst for the Social-Democratic Party in Milwaukee to win over Christian constituents, and more specifically, the Catholics.

While some literature has examined the friction between Socialism and Christianity, none has focused on Milwaukee specifically. As Milwaukee has a rich history of Socialism and was the first major city in the United States to be Socialist-controlled, it should be further studied.³ Economic and political factors also played a large role in voting patterns in Milwaukee, and these factors, coupled with the easing of tensions between Christianity and Socialism, can explain why Milwaukee Socialists experienced such successes. Elsewhere in the country, Socialist victories were few and far between, and the party remained an insignificant minority. The arguments rendered through the Kress Controversy should yield answers to this discrepancy and provide the first study of Milwaukee in this context, as well as show the growth of the Social-Democratic Party.

This paper will assert that in moderating its arguments against religion and the Church, the Social-Democratic Party was able to win the Christian, and specifically the Catholic vote in 1910. While the corruption of the Rose years was a definite factor in the conversion of Christian voters, this paper will argue that the battle over religion was the main component affecting Christian sensibilities. Many Christians thought the Social-Democratic Party would be more effective than the primary parties, but were none too eager to boldly disregard the views of their respective churches. Opinions presented by the likes of Carl Thompson, showing the congruency of Christianity and Socialism, were crucial for Christian voters to justify their support for the Social-Democratic Party. While the Kress Controversy occurred in 1905, five years before the election swept by the Social-Democrats, it accurately reflects the changing tactics and arguments of the party in its attempt to attract more voters.

Socialist Arguments Against Christianity

Socialism as a general political ideology defined by Karl Marx was clearly

³ Bayrd Still, *Milwaukee: the History of a City* (Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1948), 279.

opposed to all forms of organized religion. Marx and his followers viewed religion as yet another institution that attempted to control the will of the people, manipulating and exploiting them. Marx believed that religion was a system of illusions created to give people a false sense of security and happiness, and that man would have to shake himself of religion to better his life and achieve true happiness. In *Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right*, Marx writes:

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creatures, the feelings of a heartless world, just as it is spirit of unspiritual conditions. It is the opium of the people.

The people cannot be really happy until it has been deprived of illusory happiness by the abolition of religion. The demand that the people should shake itself free of illusion as to its own condition is the demand that it should abandon a condition which needs illusion.”⁴

Religion clearly had no place in the system of Socialism that Marx envisioned.

While some Socialists remained steadfast in their adherence to Marxist philosophy, others adapted its principles to better fit their idea of Socialism as applicable to their time. As Marx became farther away in both time and place, Socialists began to view Marx’s Socialism not as an established system, but as a collection of ideas from which to construct their own political systems. Because of the vast differences in ideology between American Socialists of this time period, disagreement existed on some issues. Many of these issues dealt with the labor movement, such as increased wages and less hours, while others focused on education and the public ownership of utilities.⁵ For many people of this time, religion was a central part of their lives, and therefore, the issue of religion and its relationship to socialism was possibly one of the biggest points of contention.

Many Socialists agreed with Marx’s belief that religion was incompatible with Socialism, was harmful to the progress of society, and that it manipulated the public.⁶ Of all religions, Catholicism was seen by far as the most evil. Socialists accused the Catholic Church of many things, but their opposition to the Church centered primarily around one aspect. They associated the Church with capitalism and the perceived evils that came with it, including poverty and poor working conditions for laborers.⁷ Eugene Debs, a prominent Socialist Party leader and five-time presidential candidate, was critical of the capitalist-dependent Catholic Church, saying:

⁴ Karl Marx, *Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right*, quoted in Robert E. Doherty, “Thomas J. Hagerty, The Church, and Socialism,” *Labor History*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Winter 1962): 42.

⁵ Thompson, “Labor Measures.”

⁶ Morris Hillquit and John A. Ryan, *Socialism: Promise or Menace?* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913). See Ryan’s “Socialism in Irreligious,” 186-98. Ryan cites Marx, Frederick Engels, August Bebel, Joseph Dietzgen, and Karl Liebknecht, among others.

⁷ Frank Zeidler, “Catholicism and Political Life in Milwaukee,” in *Milwaukee Catholicism: Essays on Church and Community*, ed. Steven M. Avella (Milwaukee: Knights of Columbus, 1991), 42.

The Catholic Church is the implacable foe of Socialism. . . It teaches the lowly wage slaves to look with mistrust and hatred upon the great working class movement whose mission it is to unlock the economic dungeon in which he is serving a life sentence...⁸

Debs and others saw the Church as a supporter of capitalism, and therefore, negatively affecting the working class and its betterment, trying to keep laborers unorganized, poor, and uneducated.

Socialists also advocated the public ownership of property. Some believed that all property should be publicly owned, while others thought only land belonging to factories and other means of production should be owned by the public. By 1900, the popular stance was to support public ownership of only the means of production. Still, Socialists viewed the Church as a supporter of private property because, they said, the Church would lose all its power if it could not own and operate its own buildings. *The Social Democratic Herald* stated, “[T]he private ownership of property is supported by the gospel, apostolic teaching, and the rules of the Church, and is a divine ordination, not to be changed by the hand of man...A man cannot be a Catholic and a Socialist.”⁹

In truth, Milwaukee’s Social-Democratic Party was much more moderate than Marx would have liked, and “was quite different from other more radical varieties.”¹⁰ Victor Berger, founder of the party in Milwaukee, associated the Church with capitalism early in his career, but later grew more moderate. He was a right-wing Socialist who believed that change would happen gradually and not by revolution.¹¹ As time progressed, the Social-Democratic Party realized they needed to modify certain arguments in order to gain votes. The argument against religion became a less important part of their platform, until religion was either encouraged or not mentioned at all. This will be further explored later.

Christian Arguments Against Socialism

On the other side of the spectrum, many Christian leaders spoke out against Socialism. It is possible that because Catholicism, in particular, was most attacked by Socialists, the Church was also the most vocal in its opposition to Socialism. In 1891, Pope Leo XIII issued the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which contained the Church’s official position on Socialism. It stated that Socialists were against private property, the institution of marriage, and class harmony, and that they promoted free love. To ensure that no Catholic would try to argue the

⁸ Eugene Debs, “Comment,” *Wayland’s Monthly*, no. 92 (December 1907): 5, quoted in Doherty, 47.

⁹ *Social Democratic Herald* (Milwaukee), 23 July 1904, quoted in Doherty 46.

¹⁰ Zeidler, 42.

¹¹ Ranney, 17. Berger founded the party in 1892, and as time went on and the party grew, Berger and the party alike became more moderate. By the time of the Kress Controversy in 1905, and later, the 1910 elections, many of his positions had changed and moderated.

compatibility of Catholicism and Socialism, the Pope stated that Socialism “cannot be brought into harmony with the dogmas of the Catholic Church...”¹² Also in the encyclical, Leo XIII supported decent wages for workers as well as “holding that capital and labor are ordained by nature to live together and should achieve mutual agreement.”¹³

The Milwaukee clergy also did its part in promoting the official views of the church. Father Rogozinski, a priest of the Polish congregation of St. Hedwig’s in Milwaukee, invited Mayor David Rose to speak on politics from the pulpit during mass. Mayor Rose, a Democrat, actively spoke against his Social-Democratic Party competition.¹⁴ Father Rogozinski and the other priests in Milwaukee even changed Mass times so Mayor Rose could speak to all the Catholic congregations the Sunday before the election.¹⁵ Archbishop Messmer, leader of the Milwaukee Diocese, very openly expressed contempt for the Social-Democratic Party and encouraged the rest of his priests to do the same.¹⁶

It is at this point that one can begin to examine the arguments delivered in the Kress Controversy of 1905. Father William Kress, an anti-Socialist Catholic priest, utilized similar arguments against Socialism that many Catholic priests and leaders of other denominations had used. By examining Father Kress’s claims and also Reverend Carl Thompson’s pro-Socialist refutations, one can better understand the political climate at the time, and more specifically, the political climate in Milwaukee. The changing political climate and the growing number of arguments in favor of Socialism’s and Christianity’s compatibility illustrate the foundation needed for the Social-Democratic Party to gain the Christian vote.

Father Kress upheld the official stance of the Catholic Church, believing that Socialism and Christianity were completely incompatible. One of Kress’s favorite approaches to the dispute was to use the positions and statements of Socialist leaders. This made it difficult for people to argue that they were, in fact, compatible, although many succeeded in doing so. In one of his four lectures to St. Joseph’s Catholic Church, Kress stated, “According to [the] highest authorities in the Socialist party, Socialism and the Christian religion cannot coexist. That is why a Catholic cannot be a Socialist.”¹⁷ Father Bernard Vaughan, another priest who lectured on Socialism in New York during a series of ten conferences, also used this approach. In his lecture entitled “Socialism and Religion,” Vaughan spoke only of certain Socialists’ views of the Church and religion.¹⁸ Neither Kress nor Vaughan mentions anything about the Catholic Church’s stance on Socialism or if and why the Church itself believes that Socialism is incongruent

¹² Philip Hughes, *A Popular History of the Catholic Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 243, quoted in Zeidler, 41.

¹³ Zeidler, 41.

¹⁴ Ranney, 16.

¹⁵ Zeidler, 43.

¹⁶ Ranney, 17.

¹⁷ *Freie Presse*, 25 January 1905, in Victor L. Berger Papers, Reel 11, Frame 420. (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1995). The Victor L. Berger Papers will henceforth be cited as VBP.

¹⁸ See “Socialism and Religion,” in Father Bernard Vaughan, *Socialism from the Christian Standpoint: Ten Conferences* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912), 153-97.

with Church dogma. Although it has been shown previously that the Church did make official decrees against Socialism, Kress fails to use these in his argument, instead using the language of the Socialists.

Kress was well-versed in Socialist literature and quoted it frequently. Whether he always used quotes within their context is highly debatable, but he still knew and employed many of them in his arguments. He was known to use excerpts from numerous European Socialist conventions and authors, citing both famous and little-known ones.¹⁹ One example of his many references to Socialist leaders can be found in an article he wrote in response to Reverend Thompson after Kress returned to Ohio and his series of lectures in Milwaukee ended. He quoted a resolution from the 1898 convention of Austrian Socialists at Linz that met with “thundering applause” upon its adoption:

Socialism is directly contradictory to Roman clericalism, which is enslaved to unyielding authority, immutable dogmas and absolute intellectual thralldom. We doubt all authority, we know of no immutable dogma, we are the champions of right, liberty and conscience. Besides the struggle for the economic demands of the working class we also combat for the highest spiritual possessions. And this ancient struggle between light and darkness will be decided in favor of light, in favor of Socialism.²⁰

The Socialists at Linz left little room for debate, their opposition to the Catholic Church being very clear, Kress argued. Any refutations made by Thompson could only be false, as they went against the platform of Socialist parties.

Another example Kress used to prove Socialism’s inability to harmonize with the Church, and even Christianity in general was his perception of the Socialist belief of marriage. Kress argued that “Socialism means the substitution of free love for the marriage relation.”²¹ How exactly Kress discerned that Socialists promoted free love and was against marriage is not clearly understood, although he definitely was not the first to use it as part of an argument against Socialism. Quite possibly, it was the belief of Kress and others that Socialism was a form of anarchy that drove the idea of Socialism as promoting free love. Anarchists advocated the abolition of government and “the present social order” which controlled individuals and did not leave them to their own free will.²² Some opponents of Socialism, like Father Kress, wrongly believed that anarchists wanted the institution of marriage to be abolished as well, and because Kress

¹⁹ *Freie Presse*, 25 January 1905, in VBP, Reel 11, Frame 420. Unknown article, 19 April 1905, in VBP, Reel 11, Frame 422.

²⁰ Kress quotes from *Vorwaerts*, no. 126, from unknown article, 19 April 1905, in VBP, Reel 11, Frame 422.

²¹ *Milwaukee Journal*, 4 February 1905, in VBP, Reel 11, Frame 426.

²² Rev. Moritz Kaufmann, *Socialism and Christianity* (The Religious Tract Society, 1889), 3.

associated Socialism with anarchism, he thought this view was also advocated by Socialists, saying, “Socialist leaders and newspapers hold to the basic principles that underlie anarchy. They deny the existence of God. They say there is no future life.”²³

The Church would not promote any ideology that wanted to abolish organized government, and Kress made this clear during one of his lectures, saying, “There is as much difference between anarchists and Christians as there is between night and day.”²⁴ Kress also told the congregations that by promoting free love, Socialists were also encouraging the dissolution of the family unit, which served as a person’s moral foundation.²⁵

In light of Kress’s numerous accusations, the Social-Democratic Party faced the difficult task of trying to neutralize his inflammatory remarks and reach Christian voters if they had any hopes of having a significant presence in city politics. The party needed to persuade the public that it was not anti-Christian, by justifying that Socialism was reconcilable with Christianity, and especially Catholicism, as many Milwaukeeans were also Catholic.

Christianity and Socialism as Compatible

It was relatively impossible for the Social-Democratic Party to expect any substantial increase in representation in city politics without the support of the Christian vote. The resolution of the Christian-Socialist debate would be paramount to any future successes of the Social-Democratic Party. If Milwaukee was predominantly Catholic at the time of the 1910 election, at least some, if not many, Catholics must have voted Socialist.²⁶ Religious beliefs played an important role in voting patterns at the turn of the century, and while voting statistics on religious affiliation are not available for, or prior to, the 1910 election for specific wards and precincts, “many voting behavior studies have concluded that religion was the single most important determinant of party affiliation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.”²⁷ Historically, Catholics aligned with the Democratic Party, while Protestants voted Republican. The persuasive arguments of those who tried to convince the voting public that good Christians could indeed vote for the Social-Democratic Party can be used as an indicator of why Catholics decided to switch from the Church-supported Democratic Party to the Church-denounced Social-Democratic Party.

As Socialism grew in popularity, the conflicting views held about it and religion either changed or became less important. Some priests and ministers began advocating Socialism as not only congruent with Christianity, but as the ideology most congruent with Christianity. Socialist leaders, while sometimes still believing that religion was “the sigh of the oppressed creatures,” no longer

²³ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 30 January 1905, in VBP, Reel 11, Frame 421.

²⁴ Labeled “News,” 23 January 1905, in VBP, Reel 11, Frame 418.

²⁵ *Freie Presse*, 25 January 1905, in VBP, Reel 11, Frame 420. *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 28 January 1905, in VBP, in Reel 11, Frame 417.

²⁶ Ranney, 17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

openly denounced it, choosing instead to ignore the issue completely.²⁸ Religion played a central role in American life at the turn of the century, and Socialists realized they could not openly denounce religion and expect to gain enough votes to be elected to any office.²⁹

Reverend Carl Thompson, the prominent Social-Democratic Party leader and Congregational minister, debated Father Kress at length on many issues, but predominantly on the compatibility of Socialism and Christianity in a series of articles in the *Milwaukee Journal*. Thompson not only introduced many points to support his view, but also refuted Kress's claims. As a strong supporter of both Christianity and Socialism, he stated, "With all my heart I believe that Scientific Socialism is the greatest contribution to the cause of Christ that has been made in modern times."³⁰

In order to build a solid argument in his favor, Reverend Thompson had to acknowledge and invalidate Kress's use of Socialist writers, saying, "Father Kress asserts that Socialism is hostile to Christianity. But his argument consists solely in the assertion that certain Socialists say so."³¹ While Kress believed that using Socialist statements only strengthened his case, Thompson saw it as a weakness. Thompson used Kress's own arguments against him, citing Socialist leaders and conventions.

Believing that official party platforms and not individuals' opinions defined the true positions of Socialist intellectuals, Thompson wrote of the Erfurt Program of 1891, the official platform of the International Socialist Party:

The Erfurt Program, which is the utterance of the greatest and the most advanced of all the national Socialist movements in the world, states distinctly as follows: 'Religion is a private matter - ecclesiastical and religious bodies are to be regarded as private associations which order their affairs independently.'³²

What individual members of the party wrote and believed was unimportant, only official party platforms established the position of the party. The Erfurt platform, Thompson argued, promoted religious freedom and prohibited government involvement in religious matters. Kress responded with, "Platforms are constructed to catch votes and say as little as possible," instead of giving an opposing argument.³³ Thompson did not acknowledge Kress's quote of the convention at Linz in his own article, but chose instead to bring forth examples of other Socialist groups who do not dismiss religion, like the Erfurt Program.

Thompson argued that Socialism had nothing to say about marriage and

²⁸ Marx, *Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right*, quoted in Doherty, 42.

²⁹ Ranney, 6.

³⁰ *Milwaukee Journal*, 4 February 1905, in VBP, Reel 11, Frame 426.

³¹ *Milwaukee Journal*, 31 January 1905, in VBP, Reel 11, Frame 424.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Milwaukee Journal*, 1 February 1905, in VBP, Reel 11, Frame 425.

family, precisely because, as a political organization, it had nothing to do with these areas of one's private life. In an article on the Socialist position on marriage, he wrote, "Socialism has no more to say about marriage than the Republican or Democratic parties," which never faced these same allegations.³⁴ Socialism focused on public matters, not private ones. Thompson wrote that Father Kress was not looking at the true definition of Socialism, and therefore confounded its goals, saying:

Father Kress has been trying for weeks to make the people who hear him believe that Socialism is anarchy, free love, robbery, and, in short, everything bad...Socialism is an economic programme. It means that what the people collectively and socially use they shall collectively and socially own.³⁵

Kress tried to apply what he believed were Socialist principles to all areas of life, while Thompson argued that Socialism was fundamentally and only an "economic programme."

Toward the end of the series, Thompson took the lead as Kress resigned to name-calling and failed to disprove most of Thompson's points. In a later article, Kress calls Thompson an "Idaho jackrabbit" and refused to debate with him further if he would not argue only those points which Kress chose.³⁶ One of his strongest points, which Kress ignored for lack of an opposing argument, referred to the ever-present corruption in the current and previous municipal administrations, the ones that Father Kress supported:

Last spring in Milwaukee we had thirteen Republican and eleven Democratic officials under indictment of the grand jury for 'bribery, boodle, and horse stealing.' And these are the parties that Father Kress supports in his fight against Socialism!³⁷

It is around this point in the debate that Reverend Thompson's more logical and better supported arguments overshadowed Father Kress's name-calling and refusal to continue the debate. Social Democratic Party members interpreted the end of the debate as a clear victory for the party, as well as a vehicle to correctly explain its platforms and beliefs to the Milwaukee public.

Thompson was hardly the only minister to argue in favor of Socialism. One of the most influential to the movement at the turn of the twentieth century was Father Thomas Hagerty. Hagerty, one of the founders of the Industrial

³⁴ *Milwaukee Journal*, 4 February 1905, in VBP, Reel 11, Frame 426.

³⁵ *Milwaukee Journal*, 2 February 1905, in VBP, Reel 11, Frame 425-26.

³⁶ *Milwaukee Journal*, 10 February 1905, in VBP, Reel 11, Frame 428.

³⁷ *Milwaukee Journal*, 7 February 1905, in VBP, Reel 11, Frame 427.

Workers of the World, was instrumental in spreading Socialist ideas throughout the country, and particularly the West.³⁸ A spokesman for the rights of Mexican railroad workers, he translated Socialist writings from English, French, and German into Spanish to help mobilize the immigrant working class.³⁹ Once ordained, the Catholic Church placed him in four parishes in three different dioceses over a seven-year period; however, this was the extent to which the Church acted against him. The Church's actions suggest that his superiors did not want him preaching to their congregations and influencing parishioners with Socialist ideas.⁴⁰ Hagerty left his Las Vegas parish without permission in 1902 and never again preached in a congregation. Officially, the Church suspended him after he left, and he was disowned after the Archbishop heard him say to the railroad workers, "That railroad is yours; those large business blocks and office buildings down town that ring in big rent are yours; if you want them, go and take them."⁴¹

Although the Church tried to ignore Hagerty, Socialist leaders found him an essential part of their campaign. Hagerty could neutralize the anti-Socialist language of opponents, especially other priests and reverends. While most clergy found Socialism in complete opposition to Church teachings, "Hagerty showed an unusual ability to reconcile Marxist principles with Church dogma."⁴² He employed logical and creative arguments to captivate his audience, but also used many similar to Thompson. Hagerty believed that he could be a Catholic in good standing with God and a Socialist, because like Thompson, Hagerty concluded that Socialism was an economic program, and not one that took a position on religion. In 1902, he wrote to the *International Socialist Review*:

It is the utmost absurdity to speak of the incompatibility of Catholicism and Socialism. No one would dream of going into a meat market asking for a Catholic beefsteak, a Methodist mutton chop, or a Presbyterian ham. Religion has no more to do with Socialism than it has with meat and bread. Socialism is an economic science, not a system of dogmatic beliefs.⁴³

Another argument Hagerty shared with Thompson was his comparisons with the Democratic and Republican parties. While both parties were often divided along religious lines, the parties themselves did not discuss religious beliefs or try to change them. Similarly, Hagerty argued that neither did Socialism, writing that, "It is as much beyond the scope of Socialism to deal with

³⁸ Doherty, 39.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴¹ Quoted in Ray Stannard Baker, "The Reign of Lawlessness," *McClure's Magazine*, 23:49 (May 1904), quoted in Doherty, 43.

⁴² Doherty, 40.

⁴³ Letter from Thomas J. Hagerty to ed. A. M. Simons, *International Socialist Review*, 3:229 (October 1902), quoted in Doherty, 44.

divine revelation as it is beyond the range of the Republican Party to advance a new exegesis of the Davidic Psalms.”⁴⁴ A year later, Hagerty delivered the Labor Day address for the Social Democratic Party in Milwaukee.⁴⁵ Quite possibly, Thompson heard Hagerty’s speech and recycled his arguments less than eighteen months later during his debates with Father Kress.

As party membership grew, Hagerty pushed more for sudden revolution, while the party’s founders, including Milwaukee’s Victor Berger, encouraged gradual change. Hagerty outgrew his usefulness to the party’s leaders, but his arguments for Christianity and Socialism continued to be applied, especially as party leaders realized that “it was impossible to build a socialist society without the support of Roman Catholic workingmen.”⁴⁶

Socialist leaders often employed other tactics to win over the voting public. It is true that some party members held only contempt for religion, but instead of expressing their views and possibly alienating prospective voters, they chose to stay silent on the issue. Ignoring the debate and taking no stance on the issue allowed them to neither contradict their personal views nor lie to voters. Others chose to ignore the debate simply because they felt that no debate existed; Socialism was not related to, nor attempted to control, religion, so there was no reason to discuss it.⁴⁷

Most of the Social Democratic Party literature available from the early history of the party reveals nothing about religion, marriage, or parochial schools, all areas that the churches felt the Socialists were trying to control. A study of various party publications found only one pamphlet that mentioned religion at all, and it did so in only one sentence.⁴⁸ The pamphlet, listing party platforms, states that, “Socialists oppose: ...every attack upon labor’s rights, every kind of racial and religious discrimination, [and] fascism in any form - foreign or domestic.”⁴⁹ Here, the party does not involve itself in religious matters other than to protect the people’s religious freedom. While individual Socialist figures may have had strong personal opinions about religion and its relationship to Socialism, the Social Democratic Party, as a collective unit, opted to ignore any debates about religion in its official publications and platforms, presumably either because most

⁴⁴ Thomas J. Hagerty, *Catholic Workingmen and Their Relation to the Socialist Movement* (Chicago, 1904), 4, quoted in Doherty 49.

⁴⁵ *Social Democratic Herald*, 12 September 1903, in Doherty, 49.

⁴⁶ *Christian Socialist*, 5:4, November 1908, quoted in Doherty, 47.

⁴⁷ Thompson’s “Labor Measures” and Thompson’s “The Rising Tide of Socialism” ignore religion entirely. See next footnote for more.

⁴⁸ Socialist Party - Miscellaneous Publications Collection, includes “Preamble of the National Platform of the Socialist Party,” “Socialist Party Program for Wisconsin,” “Platform of the Socialist Party of Wisconsin,” May 1930, “Socialist Platform and State Candidates,” 1934, “Socialist Party - Milwaukee County Constitution and General Laws,” 28 March 1934, “The Aims of the Socialist Party,” 1934, “Socialist Candidates - Platform” brochure, 1942. Also Thompson, “Labor Measures of the Social-Democrats, Milwaukee Administration” and “The Rising Tide of Socialism,” 1911. “Constitution of Socialist Party of Wisconsin,” June 1932. “Local Platform of the Social Democratic Party as Adopted by the City Convention Held in Lincoln Hall,” 27 February 1904. “Platform of the Social-Democratic Party,” 1910. All items from the Pamphlet Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, WI.

⁴⁹ “Socialist Candidates - Platform” brochure, 1942.

members felt religion did not belong in politics or to avoid alienating voters.

Other groups, separate from the recognized Socialist parties, were created by people who deemed themselves Christian Socialists, spreading the belief that Socialism was not only compatible with Christianity, but that it was “the necessary expression of the Christian life.”⁵⁰ One such group, the Christian Socialist Fellowship, founded in 1906, published the periodical *Christian Socialist*, which “promoted membership in the [Socialist Party of America], reported party activities as well as its efforts to win support in the churches, [and] defended virtually every strike of the period.”⁵¹ Organizations such as the Social Crusade, later the Fellowship of the Socialist Spirit, and the Church Socialist League, along with the Christian Socialist Fellowship, wanted to bring their view of a Socialist Jesus into the churches.⁵²

Although Milwaukee’s Socialist group, the Social Democratic Party, largely ignored any debate with religion in their official platforms, its behavior was not indicative of the national group, the Socialist Party of America. National leader and five-time presidential candidate Eugene Debs actively encouraged and protected the participation of practicing Christians in the party’s ranks. He was close to Father Hagerty, Reverend Thompson, and the Christian Socialist Fellowship. Debs himself was not religious, and occasionally utilized harsh words against organized religion in general, believing the Roman Empire corrupted Christianity when it became the religion of the elite ruling class. He also criticized the Catholic Church for its delay to support women’s suffrage and justice for the poor, as well as for its extravagant furnishings.⁵³

However, Debs also saw Jesus as the quintessential Socialist leader; Debs believed that Jesus “hated and denounced the rich and cruel exploiter as passionately as he loved and sympathized with his poor and suffering victim” and was “the master proletarian revolutionist.”⁵⁴ Debs argued that only Socialism truly supported Christianity, saying

We know the economic conditions determine man’s conduct toward man, and that so long as he must fight him for a job or a fortune, he cannot love his neighbor. Christianity is impossible under Capitalism. Under Socialism, it will be natural.⁵⁵

On two separate, documented occasions, Debs even sided with the Christian

⁵⁰ Jacob H. Dorn, “The Oldest and Youngest of the Idealistic Forces,” 2, quoted in Jacob H. Dorn, “‘In Spiritual Communion’: Eugene V. Debs and the Socialist Christians,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, vol. 2, no. 3 (July 2003): 318.

⁵¹ Jacob H. Dorn, “‘In Spiritual Communion’: Eugene V. Debs and the Socialist Christians,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, vol. 2, no. 3 (July 2003): 318.

⁵² *Christian Socialist*, 1 March 1907, in Dorn, 322.

⁵³ Dorn, 309, 321.

⁵⁴ Eugene V. Debs, “Jesus, the Supreme Leader,” *Coming Nation*, March 1914, quoted in Dorn, 312.

⁵⁵ Lincoln Steffens, “Eugene V. Debs on What the Matter Is In America and What To Do About It,” *Everybody’s* (October 1908), quoted in Dorn, 313.

Socialists over the secular Socialists, of whom he considered himself a member.⁵⁶ Jacob Dorn argues that, while not a religious man himself, Debs “honored action and could overlook the lapses of judgment motivated by dedication to socialist principles,” of Socialists who were also practicing Christians.⁵⁷

Many of Debs’ contemporaries, including Father Kress, and even some present historians, portray Debs as a Socialist who was against all forms of religion. If he denounced the church hierarchy and organized religion, Debs also “appropriated Jesus and primitive Christianity into the revolutionary cause, and he embraced many avowed Christians who labored alongside him in that cause.”⁵⁸

Debs was hardly the only supporter of Christian participants in the Socialist movement. George Herron, a former minister who was also misquoted by Father Kress, spoke alongside Debs in Chicago at the Social Democratic national convention in September 1900, with singing led by Frederick Guy Strickland, a practicing minister in the Christian Church and later a Congressional candidate.⁵⁹ Some Christians became prominent leaders in the national party, many achieving political successes by being elected to public office. Reverend Carl Thompson, defender of Socialism during the Kress Controversy, became the information director for the party, with the intent to counter religious aggression and increase “outreach to working class Catholics.”⁶⁰ The first Socialist elected to state office in Massachusetts was Frederic MacCartney, a Unitarian minister who nominated Debs for president in 1900.⁶¹ J. Stitt Wilson and Lewis J. Duncan became mayor of Berkeley, California and Butte, Montana, respectively.⁶² In Wisconsin, state senator and minister Winfield Gaylord was well-known for advocating Christian Socialism, and Catholic Walter Roach ran for Lieutenant Governor.⁶³

Other Factors Influencing Christian Voters

Along with the growing number of organizations, publications, and speakers advocating the compatibility of Socialism and Christianity, the corruption of Milwaukee’s previous administrations also encouraged many voters to decide “that the Social-Democrats could be entrusted with the mayor’s office.”⁶⁴ The leadership of Mayor David Rose from 1898 to 1910 witnessed a government facing constant allegations of corruption that ultimately resulted in the indictment of seventy aldermen and supervisors for accepting bribes in 1903,

⁵⁶ Dorn, 319-20.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 320.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 323.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 316-17.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 310.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 315.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 317, 304.

⁶³ Ranney, 17. “The Socialist Campaigner,” 1946, Pamphlet Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, WI.

⁶⁴ Ranney, 2.

not long before the Kress Controversy took place in 1905.⁶⁵

The Rose administration also failed to fulfill needed municipal improvements and services on the outskirts of Milwaukee as the city grew. Catholic Poles switched their allegiance from Rose, a Democrat, to Emil Seidel, the Social-Democratic candidate in the 1910 election, partly because Mayor Rose had ignored their needs for water services.⁶⁶ A staggering 79 percent of voters in the Polish wards voted for the Social-Democratic Party, compared to a paltry 19 percent for the Democrats and 2 percent for the Republicans. Instead of voting Republican, the Poles elected Seidel and the Social-Democrats most likely because they promised to solve the problem, had a record of issuing city service improvements, and actively tried to neutralize anti-Socialist propaganda. After the 1910 election, Polish neighborhoods “not only received their water but were rapidly supplied with other city services, including sewers, street pavings, and extensions of streetcar service.”⁶⁷

The Catholic shift in political allegiance is even more staggering when viewed in the context of the period and the degree to which the Church was involved in Catholic “immigrants’ daily life and [was] the principle institution that carried on their native traditions.”⁶⁸ By the turn of the century, most Churches had developed into “ethnically layered institution[s].”⁶⁹ Catholicism was, “first and foremost, an immigrant’s faith,” and Catholics relied heavily on the neighborhood church as the center of their social and economic lives, as well as their religious ones.⁷⁰ Parishes held social events or fund-raisers almost every day of the week to help “build a sense of community.”⁷¹ Priests were often the most important and powerful figure in the neighborhood, as was the case of Father Patrick Durnin, who presided over the Irish neighborhood and St. Rose’s Church. In Milwaukee, the already homogeneous ethnic churches became reinforced by the neighborhoods’ isolationist attitudes towards other ethnic groups.⁷²

It is stunning, then, that Catholics blatantly disregarded their priests’ anti-Socialist sermons and overwhelmingly elected the Social-Democrats to office. If the church was, “with the exception of the family unit itself, the single most

⁶⁵ “Local Platform of the Social Democratic Party as Adopted by the City Convention Held in Lincoln Hall,” 27 February 1904, Pamphlet Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, WI. Also Still, 310.

⁶⁶ James J. Lorence, “The Milwaukee Connection: The Urban-Rural Link in Wisconsin Socialism, 1910-1920,” *Milwaukee History*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Winter 1980): 107.

⁶⁷ Kate Foss-Mollan, “Waiting for Water: Service Discrimination and Polish Neighborhoods in Milwaukee, 1870-1910,” *Michigan Historical Review*, vol. 25, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 44.

⁶⁸ Stephen J. Shaw, “The Cities and the Plains, a Home for God’s People: A History of the Catholic Parish in the Midwest,” in *The American Catholic Parish: A History from 1850 to the Present*, ed. Jay P. Dolan, vol. 2 (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987), 306.

⁶⁹ Dolores Liptak, *Immigrants and Their Church* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), 66.

⁷⁰ John Gurda, “The Church and the Neighborhood,” in *Milwaukee Catholicism: Essays on Church and Community*, ed. Steven M. Avella (Milwaukee: Knights of Columbus, 1991), 18.

⁷¹ Gurda, 4.

⁷² Jay Dolan, “Religion in the Immigrant Community, 1820-1920,” in *American Catholics*, ed. Joseph F. Kelly (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1989), 49.

important social institution in the lives of its members,” the Catholics must have felt that all other alternatives were exhausted or that the priests exaggerated the evils of Socialism.⁷³ For Milwaukee Catholics to break with tradition and the focal point of their lives was unprecedented and makes their political shift all the more dramatic. The 1910 election, and the Catholics’ support of the Social-Democratic Party, demonstrates the extent to which “the gap between cleric and lay had only widened.”⁷⁴

This political switch by Catholics had a profound effect on the results of Milwaukee elections. The elected Social-Democrats drastically grew in number from 1904 to 1910. In 1904, one year before the Kress Controversy, the Social-Democrats claimed nine city aldermen out of a possible 46, four county supervisors, four state assemblymen, and one state senator. By 1910, they held the mayor’s office, 21 out of 35 seats on the city council, and 14 offices in the State Legislature.⁷⁵ The 1910 election also brought the county government under Social-Democratic control for the first time, as well as placed the first Socialist U.S. senator in office, Victor Berger. Their returns could have been even more impressive had they had more candidates on the ballots; the entire Social-Democratic ticket was elected.⁷⁶

After finishing second to him in 1908, Social-Democratic candidate Emil Seidel was elected to the mayor’s office over incumbent and formally Catholic-supported Mayor Rose. Seidel defeated Rose by over 7,000 votes, a striking number when the total number of votes cast was under 50,000.⁷⁷ Carl Thompson perceived the election as a decisive victory for the party, and described the results as “the largest plurality that any political party had ever carried [Milwaukee] in its history.”⁷⁸

The Social-Democratic Party implemented many programs that are now commonplace in cities across the United States. One of its major goals for the decade preceding the 1910 victory was the establishment of the eight-hour workday for city employees, which is now the norm.⁷⁹ Some of the Social-Democrats’ other, now prevalent, platforms included: uniform lighting and street cleaning at the public’s expense, the abolition of child labor, and decent pay for city aldermen so that poorer citizens could become representatives without having to hold another job simultaneously.⁸⁰ They also encouraged recreational activities for the public by starting a program for monthly free music concerts and by greatly expanding the city’s park system.⁸¹ In one of the Social-Democratic

⁷³ Gurda, 19.

⁷⁴ Shaw, 304.

⁷⁵ Thompson, “Labor Measures,” 3. See also Victor Berger: Biographical Information, in VBP Table of Contents.

⁷⁶ Kenrick Kissell, “A brief history of the Socialists in Milwaukee,” date sometime after 1960, Pamphlet Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, WI.

⁷⁷ Ranney, 6. *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 6 April 1910, in Still, 318. Results for the 1910 mayoral race were as follows: 27, 608 for the Social-Democratic candidate (Seidel), 20, 530 for the Democratic candidate (Rose), and 11,346 for the Republican candidate.

⁷⁸ Thompson, “The Rising Tide.”

⁷⁹ “Local Platform of the Social Democratic Party.”

⁸⁰ Still, 285.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 305; Kissell.

Party's many firsts for the country, Daniel Hoan, Milwaukee's second Socialist mayor, drafted the first worker's compensation bill in North America for the Wisconsin Federation of Labor. The party also shaped Milwaukee's first municipal budget and curbed the excessive spending and debt of the previous administrations.⁸²

Conclusion

The successes of the Social-Democratic Party in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in the first decade of the twentieth century were unparalleled for a Socialist party in the United States. Its successes can be attributed partly to the increasingly persuasive arguments given by Carl Thompson and others in favor of the compatibility between Socialism and Christianity, coupled with the endless corruption of Mayor Rose's previous administration and the public's need for city services. If the Socialist parties were as anti-Christian as Father Kress alleged, they neither portrayed this nor encouraged it at the party level, and instead did their best to win Christian voters' support. Tensions decreased in the years following the 1910 election, and Catholics began to feel more comfortable openly supporting the Social-Democratic Party, saying, "We [the Catholics of Milwaukee] get along very well with Dan Hoan as Mayor... Dan is one of the best of the lot."⁸³ The rise of Socialism in Milwaukee is best demonstrated, as has been shown, by a close examination of the arguments made during the previously overlooked Kress Controversy of 1905. This controversy also provides an excellent case study of how both supporters and opponents of Christianity's compatibility with socialism argued their points at the local level.

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⁸² Kissell; "The Socialist Campaigner."

⁸³ Catholic Citizen, 10 April 1920, quoted in Zeidler, 44.