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Father Thomas J. Hagerty: A Forgotten Religious Communist by Roland Boer

In the usual roll call of religious communists, Father Thomas J. Hagerty -- one of the central figures involved in establishing the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, or the Wobblies) in 1905 -- seems to have slipped off the radar, with nary an entry on the Marxist Internet Archive and the **smallest comment on the IWW website**. As with many religious radicals, Hagerty sought to meld Christian commitment and radical communism.¹

At the height of his activism in 1903 and 1904, Hagerty drew admiration from all with whom he worked. According to Clarence Smith, Secretary of the American Labor Union, 'Father Hagerty is without a doubt the brainiest and certainly one of the most eloquent speakers in the labor and Socialist movement in the world'.² And he was an electrifying orator, as Eugene Debs, Socialist Party and later IWW leader, put it:

Tall, massive, erect, he would command attention anywhere. On the rostrum he is a striking figure, and when aroused is like a wounded lion at bay. He has ready language, logic, wit, sarcasm, and at times they roll like a torrent and thrill the multitude like a bugle call to charge.³

Yet, the story of Father Hagerty is a somewhat sad one: a short incandescent burst of radical activity for some three years -- 1902-1905 -- before disappearing into obscurity. His origins are similarly cloudy: he studied theology before becoming a pugnacious and active priest in New Mexico from 1895, serving in a number of parishes, saying mass, hearing confession, baptising children, burying the dead, before turning into a full-time militant in 1902.

Addressing rallies for the Socialist Party, editing newspapers, writing articles, he put all of his formidable energy into grassroots activism.

His crowning achievement was a direct and central role in the formation of the IWW. Hagerty had been one of the original six who had met in the autumn of 1904 and agreed to send out invitations to labour radicals in order to form a militant union. He was also at the centre of the conference in June 1905 that launched the IWW in Chicago. He was secretary of the union's constitution committee, helped frame the Industrial Union Manifesto, designed the most comprehensive diagram -- **Hagerty's Wheel of Fortune** -- mapping out the various trades and their relation, and he edited and wrote most of *The Voice of Labor*, the official newspaper of the American Labor Union for the six months of its frantic existence. Indeed, Hagerty is credited with writing the preamble to the IWW constitution, with its slogan that rang around the world, 'The working class and the employing class have nothing in common'.

As quickly as he had come, he was gone. By the middle of 1905,

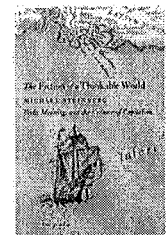


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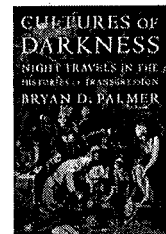
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Hagerty dropped out of political activism altogether and gave up his identity as a Roman Catholic priest, a status he had never lost during his militant years, despite church disapproval. One or two old comrades caught up with him in Chicago many years later and found him living in deep poverty, eventually reliant on soup kitchens, a few cents from passers-by, missions for a bed and free concerts to keep up his cultural interests.

But what is so appealing about Father Thomas J. Hagerty? I am less interested in his usefulness as a priest who could persuade Roman Catholic workers to join the movement, but rather in his effort to bridge the antagonism between the church and socialist leaders. He argued consistently in his speeches and articles that the church hierarchy had no business telling workers how to think and act politically. In line with this position, he would often write that religion and socialism dealt with different spheres of life, that religion and politics had no truck with one another: 'It is as much beyond the scope of Socialism to deal with divine revelation as it is beyond the range of the Republican Party to advance a new exegesis of the Davidic Psalms'.⁴ 'Socialism', he wrote elsewhere, 'is an economic science, not a system of dogmatic beliefs'.⁵ Given these two spheres, there was no problem in combining his Roman Catholic faith and radical socialism.

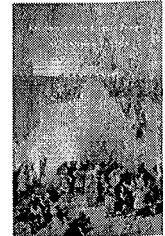
However, at other moments he sought to bring these two realms together in a somewhat different fashion, drawing on the church fathers -- Basil, Chrysostom, Gregory, Jerome -- to show that socialism was consistent with their teaching. And in response to yet another round of condemnations from the church hierarchy, he responded that any priest who might vote for the capitalist system would make it perfectly clear that 'he has voted for the continuance of the very things against which his Master of yore thundered in the highways of Palestine'.⁶

In line with this sentiment, let me quote a hymn that Hagerty may well have known. It comes from the 1900-1930 era of Christian Socialist gatherings -- processions, rent strikes and May Day masses -- in England, led by Father Conrad Noel, the 'Red Vicar of Thaxted', Percy Dearmer and Basil Jellicoe. If he had, I am sure he would have sung along lustily. It is called 'God is the Only Landlord to Whom Our Rents Are Due'.

1. You faithful saints and martyrs
 Who fought for truth and right,
 We ask your prayers and blessings
 To aid us in our fight.
 Your faith shall be our watchword,
 Your cause shall be our own --
 To fight against oppression
 Till it be overthrown.

Refrain:
 Lift up the people's banner
 And let the ancient cry
 For justice and for freedom
 Re-echo to the sky.

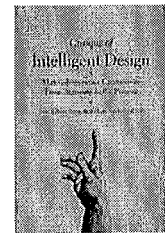
2. In many a golden story,
 On many a golden page,
 The poets in their poems
 Have sung the golden age,
 The age of love and beauty,
 The age of joy and peace,
 When everyone lived gladly



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And shared the earth's increase.

Refrain

3. Today the tyrants triumph
 And bind us for their gains,
 But Jesus Christ our Saviour
 Will free us from our chains,
 And love, the only master,
 Will strive with might and greed,
 Till might is right no longer,
 And right is might indeed.

Refrain

4. God is the only Landlord
 To whom our rents are due.
 God made the earth for everyone
 And not for just a few.
 The four parts of creation --
 Earth, water, air, and fire --
 God made and ranked and stationed
 For everyone's desire.

Refrain

5. God made the earth for freedom
 And God alone is Lord,
 And we will win our birthright
 By truth's eternal sword;
 And all the powers of darkness
 And all the hosts of pride
 Shall pass and be forgotten
 For God is by our side.

Refrain

6. Christ blessed the meek and told them
 That they the earth should own.
 And he will lead the battle
 From his eternal throne.
 O have no fear, my comrades,
 Cry out in holy mirth!
 For God to us has promised
 His Kingdom here on earth.

Refrain.

Was Hagerty's thought inconsistent? In one respect, yes, in the sense that the tension in his thought may well have played a role, along with sheer burnout, in leading him out of both socialist activism and the church. The fact that he fell out with the bulk of the IWW and fellow socialists through the sheer radicalism of his positions did not help matters, for he advocated immediate revolution, disdained democracy, the ballot box and those he called the 'slowcialists'. In another respect, the answer must be no; his two positions are not so inconsistent. They may have been in his own mind, but they do reflect an uncompromising honesty in Hagerty's effort to work through the relation between Christianity and politics. Let me put it this way: in many respects the wavering back and forth between complete separation of the two spheres of socialism and theology and his effort to see their connections embodies an ambivalence that runs through the long tradition of religious radicalism. For Hagerty could see that his own tradition lent itself all too readily to reaction and the support of exploitation; at these moments he sought to separate his socialist and Christian

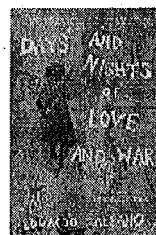
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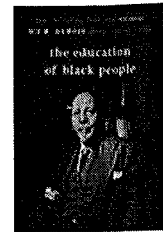
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commitments. But he could see equally well that the two had a good deal in common. It is a shame he was not able to resolve the tension for himself.

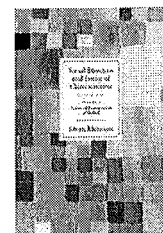
- 1 Since there is relatively little material available on Hagerty, I am reliant on the excellent article by Robert E. Doherty, 1962, '**Thomas J. Hagerty, The Church, and Socialism**', *Labor History*, 3, 1: 39-56.
- 2 Clarence Smith, 'Reverend Father Hagerty's Lecture Tour', *American Labor Union Journal*, January 1, 1903, quoted in Doherty 1962, p. 48.
- 3 Eugene Debs, 'A Valiant Foeman', *Social Democratic Herald*, August 15, 1903, quoted in Doherty 1962, p. 48.
- 4 Thomas J. Hagerty, *Economic Discontent and Its Remedies*, Terre Haute: Standard Publishing Company, 1902, p. 44. Hagerty preferred the speaker's lectern to extended writings. His other written work is *Why Physicians Should Be Socialists*, Terre Haute: Standard Publishing Company, 1902.
- 5 Hagerty, 'Thomas J. Hagerty to A.M. Simons', *International Socialist Review*, 3 (October 1902): 229.
- 6 Thomas J. Hagerty in the *Social Democratic Herald*, August 8, 1903, quoted in Doherty 1962, p. 50.

Roland Boer is Research Professor in Theology at the University of Newcastle, Australia. Visit his blog *Stalin's Moustache*: stalinsmoustache.wordpress.com.

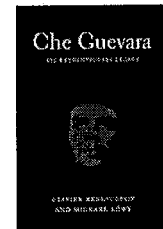
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