Son of God or "red son-of-a-bitch"? John Steinbeck, Woody Guthrie and left-wing folk christology

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Abstract

Demonstrably 'christlike' characters appear in many of John Steinbeck's novels: e.g., Joseph Wayne (To a God Unknown), Jim Nolan (In Dubious Battle), and Juan Chicoy (The Wayward Bus). Among these, however, one stands out: Jim Casy of 1939's The Grapes of Wrath. Disillusioned with conventional 'piety', and dismayed by the exploitation of his fellow workers in depression-era California, this recalcitrant preacher turns instead to socialism, activism, and union organization – resulting in imprisonment and, later, a martyr's death.

Although much scholarly work has been done on Jim Casy, very little of this has taken a genuinely theological perspective. In the figure of 'JC', however, Steinbeck implicitly answers the foundational question of christology: 'But who do you say that I am?' (Mk 8.29 // Mt 16.15 // Lk 9.20). In depicting Jesus as a political agitator, killed at the behest of economic powers, Steinbeck confronts both an exploitative social system, and the allegedly Christian society which condones and legitimates it.

Furthermore, this imago Christi was not unique to Steinbeck. Similarly left-wing depictions of Christ and 'christlike' figures occur in several strands of American culture in the early twentieth century. Prefiguring the Latin American liberation theologians by several decades, this folk christology, portraying a 'Comrade Jesus' executed by 'the bankers and the preachers', appears in poetry and popular song – most significantly, perhaps, in several important works by Woody Guthrie.

In this paper I shall explore Steinbeck and Guthrie's reclamation of Jesus on behalf of the oppressed, especially in light of the wider christological tradition of which they are the most eloquent representatives. On the basis of this exploration, some more general points will be made regarding the appropriation of Jesus as an exemplar for authentically faith-based social change.

The purpose of this paper is to present, and briefly discuss, evidence of a distinctive, left-wing christological tradition, present in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. Deeply rooted both in the gospel texts, and in experiences of social disparity and unrest (most obviously, of course, during the 1930s Depression), Jesus is envisaged here as a socialist; a socio-economic liberator, fighting for justice at the side of the poor and oppressed. This kind of Christ appears in novels, poems, journalism and popular songs from a wide range of writers in this period. While several others will be mentioned, the focus here is on just two: the Californian Nobel Prize-winning novelist John Steinbeck, and Oklahoma-born folksinger and songwriter Woody Guthrie. Both, as I hope to show, appropriate this vision of 'Christ the socialist' as an exemplar for contemporary social change.

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in April 1939, centres on the Joad family who, forced from their Oklahoma farm during the Depression, migrate to California in the hope of finding work. Accompanying the (initially) twelve Joads is Jim Casy, a family friend and ex-preacher. Although Casy has lost faith in individualistic notions of sin and guilt, he nevertheless feels drawn to share in the travails of his people (Steinbeck [1939] 1967, 96). After a treacherous journey, in which two Joads die and another absconds, they encounter the harsh reality of 1930s California: hundreds of thousands of migrant workers, all chasing the same, insufficient number of jobs, with wages well below the poverty line. Even when they *can* find work, they can barely afford food, let alone clothes or medicine. Moreover, as 'Okies' they are treated as subhuman, unwanted in the counties they work in, and frequently harassed by militia groups of sheriffs' deputies. At a pivotal point in the novel, Tom Joad (the family's eldest son) trips a deputy to prevent him framing a worker who is 'agitating trouble' (Steinbeck [1939] 1967, 273). Casy, however, takes the blame, and is promptly arrested. Much later, he reappears, manning a picket line and striking for higher wages – a calling he discovered while in prison. He has time enough only to impart his new-found gospel to Tom before being apprehended by strike-busting vigilantes:

> A sharp call, "There they are!" Two flashlight beams fell on the men, caught them, blinded them. "Stand where you are." The voices came out of the darkness. "That's him. That shiny bastard. That's him."
>
> Casy stared blindly at the light. He breathed heavily. "Listen," he said. "You fellas don' know what you're doin'. You're helpin' to starve kids."
>
> "Shut up, you red son-of-a-bitch."
>
> A short heavy man stepped into the light. A carried a new white pick handle.
>
> Casy went on, "You don' know what you're a –doin'."
>
> The heavy man swung with the pick handle. Casy dodged down into the swing. The heavy club crashed into the side of his head with a dull crunch of bone, and Casy fell sideways into the light.
>
> "Jesus, George. I think you killed him."
>
> "Put the light on him," said George. "Serve the son-of-a-bitch right." The flashlight beam dropped, searched and found Casy's crushed head. (Steinbeck [1939] 1967, 401-2)

Tom promptly kills Casy's killer and, converted by both his teaching and example, vows to continue his work, despite himself now being a fugitive.

That Jim Casy functions as a 'Christ-figure' in *The Grapes of Wrath* is not in dispute. As elsewhere in American literature, his initials (J. C.) are something of a giveaway – as also, for example, with Stephen Crane's Jim Conklin, William Faulkner's Joe Christmas, Stephen King's John Coffey, and indeed Juan Chicoy in Steinbeck's own *The Wayward Bus* (Cf. Hauck 1970, 498; Shockley 1956, 87; and Crockett 1962, 95). He has become disillusioned with the hypocrisies of contemporary piety. Suffering a crisis of faith, he has been tempted in the wilderness – a parallel to the life of Jesus that Casy draws himself, saying 'I been in the hills, thinkin', almost you might say like Jesus went into the wilderness to think His way out of a mess of troubles' (Steinbeck [1939] 1967, 82-3). Moreover, he sets out to California with *twelve* others, one of whom later 'betrays' the group, chasing the 'thirty pieces of silver' earned daily by Oklahoma tractor drivers (on the reckoning that thirty silver dimes equals three dollars – Fontenrose [1963] 2000, 82). In a certain sense, furthermore, he takes upon himself the sins of others by being arrested in the place of Tom (Shockley 1956, 87; Crockett 1962, 196). At his execution, quoted above, he is literally illuminated, while his assailants are said to be in 'the darkness' (Hauck 1970, 500; cf. Wyatt 1990, 23). He twice paraphrases Jesus' words in Luke's gospel (Lk 23.34) that his aggressors know not what they do: that is, 'You don' know what you're a-doin''. And after Casy's death, furthermore, Tom assumes a role that has been variously compared to that of St Paul (Cannon 1962), St Peter (Crockett 1962, 197-8), the Johannine

Paraclete (Bullivant 2005, 20), and/or the resurrected Christ (Crockett 1962, 198; Owens 1989, 41).

This is all well and good. The real question, however, is *why* Steinbeck has cast Casy in such an obviously Christlike role, and what does he mean by it? Depression-era America, like its modern-day counterpart, was a society seemingly awash with Christianity. It was also a society complicit in, as one of the book's first reviewers put it, 'the slow murder of half a million innocent and worthy American citizens' (Fadiman [1939] 1996, 154).[1] Frequently in *The Grapes of Wrath* sincere, pious Christians are depicted as being on the side of the oppressors, supporting the unjust social system, concerned only with the personal (usually sexual) transgressions of the victims themselves. Thus Lisbeth Sandry, a tellingly self-confessed 'Jesus-lover' and 'lamb'-blood Christian' (Steinbeck [1939] 1967, 321, 332), terrifies Tom's pregnant sister Rose of Sharon, by railing against the camp residents' Saturday night dances and plays, and warning her that two girls have already miscarried from participating in such (in her words) 'Sin an' delusion an' devil stuff' (Steinbeck [1939] 1967, 321). And as she tells Ma Joad,

> Went to a meetin' in Weedpatch las' night. Know what the preacher says? He says, 'They's wicketness in that camp.' [...] 'The poor is tryin' to be rich.' [...] 'They's dancin' an huggin' when they should be wailin' an' moanin' in sin.' [...] 'Ever'body that ain't here is a black sinner,' he says. (Steinbeck [1939] 1967, 332)

Elsewhere in the novel, another camp resident describes her family's experiences taking charity from the Salvation Army: 'We was hungry – they made us crawl for our dinner. They took our dignity. They – I hate 'em! [...] I ain't never seen my man beat before, but them – them Salvation Army done it to 'im' (Steinbeck [1939] 1967, 328-9). In contrast, Jim Casy's abovementioned stand for affirmative political action, and his views on personal transgressions – that is, 'Maybe it ain't a sin. Maybe it's just the way folks is. Maybe we been whippin' the hell out of ourselves for nothin'' (Steinbeck [1939] 1967, 23) – are clearly antithetical to both the above instantiations of Christianity. By so deliberately identifying Jesus with this 'red son-of-a-bitch', Steinbeck is pitting Christ both against the *Christians*, and against the allegedly *Christian* society of which they are a part. The message is, as often also in the gospels, intentionally not a subtle one. Lisbeth Sandry is a caricature, a *symbolic* enemy, just like the evangelists' Pharisees and Sadducees (cf. Crockett 1962, 195). Nevertheless, as again in the gospels, the point being made is a serious one. *Jesus*, Steinbeck says, him whom these Christians claim to hold most dear, would be firmly on the left, urging solidarity and social action.

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[1] It is worth noting that Steinbeck himself lived among these migrants in 1936, detailing his experiences in a series of shocking articles in the *San Francisco News* (Steinbeck [1936] 1988); see Parini 1994, 217-26; and Lisca 1958, 145.

This incarnation of Christ in the figure of Jim Casy has, needless to say, proven controversial. Upon the novel's publication, for example, the Rev. W. Lee Rector of Ardmore, Oklahoma denounced it – presumably with Casy utmost in mind – as being a 'heaven-shaming and Christ-insulting book', and one which 'As does Communism, [...] shrewdly inveighs against the rich, the preacher, and Christianity' (quoted in Shockley 1957, 238). More recently, writing in 1990, Stephen Railton has argued that 'Steinbeck shrewdly insinuates his revolutionary vision by presenting it in the familiar guise of Christianity' (Railton 1990, 40). He suggests also that 'it is crucial to note how un-Christian, anti-Christian are the values to which his death converts Tom' (Railton 1990, 38). Without delving too deeply into the veracity of these charges, this image of the left-wing Christ – this *liberation christology* – is, while certainly one-sided, by no means foreign to the gospel texts. The gospel Jesus, of course, commands a rich young man to 'go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor' (Mk 10.21), overthrows the tables of the profanizing moneychangers (Mk 11.15 // Mt 21.12 // Lk 19.45 // Jn 2.14-15), relates the parable of Dives and Lazarus (Lk 16.19-31), and asserts that the hungry, thirsty, sick and imprisoned are, in fact, himself (Mt 25.35-40). Furthermore, as the Catholic theologian and literary critic Terry Eagleton argues in his recent introduction to the gospels:

> Some aspects of the way Jesus is portrayed in these texts have an obvious radical resonance. He is presented as homeless, propertyless, peripatetic, socially marginal, disdainful of kinfolk, without a trade or occupation, a friend of outcasts and pariahs, averse to material possessions, without fear for his own safety, a thorn in the side of the Establishment and a scourge of the rich and powerful (Eagleton 2007, p. xxii)

A fact often overlooked by Steinbeck scholars, and indeed by religious historians, is that similar visions of Christ were not uncommon in America in the first few decades of the twentieth century. As noted in the introduction, if one looks hard enough, this left-wing christological tradition can be found expressed in novels, poems, journalism and popular song. To give just a few examples: Carl Sandburg, the acclaimed poet and later a close friend of Steinbeck,[2] published a poem in 1915 attacking the popular evangelist Billy Sunday which included the following lines:

> You come along... tearing your shirt... yelling about Jesus.
> Where do you get that stuff?
> What do you know about Jesus?

And:

> It was your crowd of bankers and business men and lawyers hired the sluggers and murderers who put Jesus out of the running.

And:

> You tell poor people they don't need any more money on payday and
> even if it's fierce to be out of a job, Jesus'll fix that right up all right, all right – all they gotta do is take Jesus the way you say.
> I'm telling you Jesus wouldn't stand for the stuff you're handing out. Jesus
> played it different. The bankers and lawyers of Jerusalem got their sluggers and murderers to go after Jesus just because Jesus wouldn't play their game. He didn't sit in with big thieves.[3]

Later defending himself in a letter to his publisher, Sandburg claimed 'I could furnish statements from Protestant ministers and Catholic priests that this poem has more of the historic Jesus or the ideal Christ in it, than does a Billy Sunday series of exhortations', and further accused the evangelist of being the (as he put it) 'antithesis [...] to Jesus of Nazareth' (Niven 1991, 271-2). Upon reading the poem years later, Sunday himself is said to have asked: 'Who is this Sandburg? [...] Isn't he a Red? He sounds to me like a Red' (Niven 1991, 265). In 1938 (the year *The Grapes of Wrath* was written) another American poet, Sarah N. Cleghorn, published 'Comrade Jesus'. Here Jesus himself appears as the, unsurprisingly, Christlike labour leader. To quote the first two stanzas:

> Thanks to Saint Matthew, who had been
> At mass meetings in Palestine,
> We know whose side was spoken for
> When Comrade Jesus had the floor.
>
> "Where sore they toil and hard they lie,
> Among the great unwashed, dwell I.
> The tramp, the convict, I am he;
> Cold-shoulder him, cold-shoulder me."[4]

And in 1939, the Georgian gospel duo Grady and Hazel Cole released the single *The Tramp on the Street* (Daniel 1992). The Coles' song (which would later be recorded by, among many others, Molly O'Day, Hank Williams, Ramblin' Jack Elliott and Joan Baez) begins with an appeal to the parable of Dives and Lazarus in Luke's gospel:

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[2] See Benson 1984, 462, 923-4.
[3] Sandburg [1915] 1970, 29-31. For a fuller discussion of this issue, see Bullivant 2008.
[4] Cleghorn 1932, 81; cf. Bullivant 2005, 20-1.

> Only a tramp was Lazarus that day,
> He who lay down at the rich man's gate.
> He begged for the crumbs from the rich man to eat;
> He was only a tramp found dead on the street.

In later verses, an explicit identification is made between Jesus and just such a 'tramp'.

> Jesus who died on Calvary's tree
> Shed his life's blood for you and me.
> They pierced his side, his hands, and his feet.
> Then they left him to die like a tramp on the street.
>
> If Jesus should come and knock at your door,
> For a place to come in or bread from your store,
> Would you welcome him in or turn him away?
> For God would reward you on the great Judgment Day.

Christ's radical solidarity with the poor and oppressed is, needless to say, a central feature of left-wing christology.

By far the most famous and, Steinbeck aside, arguably the most artistically successful, instance of this christological tradition in the songs Woody Guthrie.[5] In 1940, after having seen Henry Ford's film version of *The Grapes of the Wrath* and finding it to be 'best cussed pitcher I ever seen' (Guthrie [1940] 1975, 133) Guthrie set about composing his own version, the seventeen-verse epic 'The Ballad of Tom Joad'. Here, Preacher Casey (as Guthrie consistently misspells his name) retains his pivotal role. Indeed, Guthrie's précis of Casy's ideology is striking both in its perceptiveness and its brevity:

> "I preached for the Lord a mighty long time;
> Preached about the rich and the poor.
> Us workin' folks got to all get together,
> 'Cause we ain't got a chance any more,
> We ain't got a chance anymore."

Casy also appears in another song, written the same year, entitled 'Vigilante Man':

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[5] On this whole topic, and referencing more of his works than is possible here, see Jackson 2002, 229-33; and Knight 2005, 18-22. For another instance of the same, broad tradition, see Day [1952] 2005.

Preacher Casey was just a working man,
And he said, "Unite, all you working men."
Killed him in the river, some strange man,
Was that a vigilante man?

Of still more significance, and also in 1940, Guthrie penned yet another of his more famous songs: 'Jesus Christ'. Tellingly set to the tune of the outlaw ballad 'Jesse James', here 'the carpenter' (cf. Knight 2005, 22) is introduced with the words:

Jesus Christ was a man who traveled through the land,
A hard working man and brave.
He said to the rich "Give your goods to the poor."
But they laid Jesus Christ in His grave.

Succinctly emphasizing both Jesus' proletarian credentials and his radical economic policies, Guthrie sets the scene well for what is to follow. Verse four, for example, informs us:

He went to the sick, he went to the poor;
And he went to the hungry and the lame;
Said that the poor would one day win this world,
And so they laid Jesus Christ in His grave.

Likewise, verse six:

One day Jesus stopped at a rich man's door.
"What must I do to be saved?"
"You must take all your goods and give it to the poor",
And so they laid Jesus Christ in His grave.

In the song's original version it is a shadowy *they* who are said to have killed Jesus. This revised version, however, names 'the bankers and the preachers', 'the cops and the soldiers', and 'the landlord and the soldiers that he hired'. It is interesting to compare *these* culprits with the groups conspiring against the migrant workers in *The Grapes of Wrath* – that is, the same people doing to the Okies today what was done to Jesus two thousand years ago. Needless to say, this parallel was not lost on Guthrie. Thus the song concludes with these words:

This song was written in New York City,
Of rich man, preacher and slave,
But if Jesus was to preach like He preached in Galilee,
They would lay Jesus Christ in His grave.

Its contemporary relevance is further affirmed in his own commentary on the song, written for the anthology *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*:

> I wrote this song looking out of a rooming house window in New York City in the winter of 1940. I saw how the poor folks lived and then I saw how the rich folks lived and the poor folks down and out and cold and hungry, and the rich ones out drinking good whiskey and celebrating and wasting handfulls of money at gambling and women, and I got to thinking about what Jesus said and what if He was to walk into New York City and preach like He used to. They'd lock Him back in jail as sure as you're reading this. (Guthrie [1940] 1999)

Unsurprisingly, Guthrie's vision of Christ has been criticized on similar grounds as Jim Casy. Wayne Hampton, for example, complains at Guthrie having gone 'so far as to proletarianize Christ as "a carpenter true and brave"' (Hampton 1986, 130). Equally, Guthrie's biographer Joe Klein numbers 'his insistence that Jesus was a socialist outlaw' among 'his frequent ideological flights of fancy' (Klein 1980, 163). The same counter-arguments adduced above in Casy's defence apply likewise here. As James Knight has put it very recently: 'Yet how mistaken was Guthrie's interpretation of Jesus? On the one hand, it would be difficult to argue that Jesus was a Marxist or a socialist who fought for the rights of the proletariat. [...] At the same time, Guthrie has emphasized several significant elements from the Jesus tradition' (Knight 2005, 20). Indeed, there is little in Guthrie's 'Jesus Christ' which cannot be supported by one passage from the gospels or another.

I have spoken in this paper of a 'left-wing christological tradition' which, I hope that I have demonstrated, is observable in the USA in the first half of the twentieth century. Drawing heavily on certain strands of the gospel tradition, Jesus is depicted as a worker, a proto-socialist, urging solidarity among the poor and oppressed, assassinated by the political and economic authorities in collusion with popular religious leaders. This *christological response* to the gospel narratives, arising as it does out of the experience of grave social injustices, offers Jesus up as an exemplar for authentically faith-based social change. *What Would Jesus Do?* This now rather hackneyed, commercialized question, when viewed in this light, thus regains something of its original force.[6] In the title of this paper I posed a question, 'Son of God or 'red son-of-a-bitch'?' For Steinbeck, Guthrie, Cleghorn and Sandburg – if not, perhaps, for Billy Sunday – this is very much of a false dichotomy. Indeed, they might have been tempted to say that you cannot have one without the other. If that is true, then perhaps a son of God, if he does his job properly, cannot but be viewed as a 'red son-of-bitch'.

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[6] Cf. the title of Charles M. Sheldon's 1921 book: *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do In Solving the Problems of Present Political, Economic and Social Life?*

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