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**A New Great Awakening:  
The Tradition of Radical Christian Discipleship  
and the Current Transformational Moment  
in the United States**

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**Abstract:** This article argues that the USA has had a lasting tradition of radical Christian discipleship. The revival of interest in a radically understood socio-economic program of the Bible among the newly emerging intentional communities reflects the moral passion of the older faith-inspired reform movements that helped abolish slavery, introduce universal suffrage, and establish civil rights. The reformist goals of the radical Christian movement, sometimes hailed as another Great Awakening, resonate deeply with the demands of the Occupy Generation and its fundamental concern about values and identity. Like the young Occupiers, the faith-based activists for social justice challenge Americans to rethink who they are and who they want to be. Having defined the tradition of radical Christian discipleship, I then proceed to reclaim the legacy of two of its icons—Ammon Hennacy and Jim Corbett—as embodiments of two different facets of the phenomenon.

**Keywords:** radical Christian discipleship, justice, intentional communities of faith, Ammon Hennacy, Jim Corbett

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In the first decade of the third millennium, evangelical activist Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners Magazine* and founder of the intentional Sojourners Community, famously declared: “the monologue of the religious right is over and a new dialogue has begun” (qtd. in Scanlon). In the 2008 presidential campaign Wallis and numerous other “Obamagelicals” enthusiastically supported Barack Obama’s candidacy (Miller 157). Trying to dissociate faith-based activism from political partisanship that makes religion an adjunct of the state and hostage of political programs, Wallis, currently President Obama’s spiritual advisor, has built a non-denominational movement within Christianity. No longer confined to political “right” or “left” or assigned to liberal-progressive / conservative wing in the political spectrum, the movement, in the words of its co-leader, Tony Campolo, consists, mostly though not exclusively, of evangelicals

who are troubled by what is happening to poor people in America; who are disturbed over environmental policies that are contributing to global warming; who are dismayed over the increasing arrogance of power shown in our country's militarism; who are outraged because government funding is being reduced for schools where students, often from impoverished and dysfunctional homes, are testing poorly; who are upset with the fact that of the 22 industrialized nations America is next to last in the proportion of its national budget (less than two-tenths of 1 percent) that is designated to help the poor of third-world countries; and who are broken-hearted over discrimination against women, people of color, and those who suffer because of their sexual orientation. Because being evangelical is usually synonymous with being Republican in the popular mind, and calling ourselves 'progressive' might be taken as a value judgment by those who do share our views, we decided not to call ourselves 'progressive evangelicals.' We came up with a new name: Red-Letter Christians. ("What's a Red-Letter Christian?")

This name, a reference to those passages in the New Testament which are printed in red ink, signals a commitment to following the exact words of Jesus rather than worrying about dogmatic pronouncements and religious orthodoxy. In most evangelical Bibles the Sermon on the Mount is printed in red.

Red-Letter Christians are just one among dozens of newly emerging faith-based movements and communities that are rediscovering the radical socio-economic program of the Bible. Judging by the amount of discussion it generates on the internet, Christian radicalism—not to be confused with fundamentalism—has taken America by storm. This article is an attempt to document the existence and continuity of a largely ignored tradition of radical Christianity in the U.S. It also tries to spell out the political and cultural significance of its current renaissance for the new millennium.

In 1992, scholar of religion and philosophy Robert H. Craig announced the existence of an ignored, alternative tradition within American Christianity. In contrast to the dominant religious right, supportive of the political and economic *status quo* and viewed as representative of American Christianity as a whole, there have always been faith-inspired groups and individuals struggling for political and economic empowerment of the oppressed and the excluded. Although often at odds with official church doctrines, their transformative impact on American society is undeniable and should be reclaimed from the limbo of history. Long left out of the official history of American religions, groups of radical Christians belong among other formerly marginalized groups, like blacks or women, asserts Craig. Rendered invisible by dominant historical and ecclesiastical discourses, they were rarely allowed to speak for themselves; at best they were spoken for (Craig 2). The recovery of this repressed tradition as *tradition*

rather than a series of self-contained, inconsequential movements is of crucial importance if a more balanced vision of American society is to be achieved and if ordinary Americans are to become subjects of their own history.<sup>1</sup> “By telling the story of this country differently,” writes Craig, “we are holding up a mirror in which we see ourselves differently” (231). Consequently, his book *Religion and Radical Politics: An Alternative Christian Tradition* (1992) concentrates on those Americans who, empowered by the gospel stories, struggled for social and economic justice. Arguing that the stirrings of a new world order frequently come from within the religious consciousness, Craig’s survey covers a century of radical Christian politics in the U.S., starting with the nineteenth-century Christian Labor Union and ending with Civil Rights activism and the politics of nonviolence.

In a history of religion and social movements in the U.S. published a decade later, Dan McKanan similarly insists that there *is* a radical religious tradition in North America. To illustrate the continuity of this tradition, the author presents the grandson of the nineteenth-century abolitionist and Christian anarchist William Lloyd Garrison as a co-founder of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and documents how that organization, together with the radical activist Dorothy Day and her Catholic Worker movement, organized protests against civil defense drills in the 1950s and draft-card burning at the time of the Vietnam war. “The first man to go to prison for draft-card burning would later marry Starhawk,” adds McKanan, drawing further continuities between 1960s faith-based peace activism and the recent radical ecofeminist politics of neopaganism (3). In his book of 1992 Craig concurred: “For those who believe that the system needs change, it is extremely important to know that they have predecessors, even a tradition, with which they can identify as Christians and as Americans” (8).

An important aspect of this tradition is its anti-imperial bent. Before the fourth century, the followers of Jesus Christ were considered enemies of the Roman empire. Constantine the Great, however, ended their persecution, and the resulting “Constantinian shift” brought the church and the state into alignment. Since then, Christianity has often been a tool in the expansion of worldly empires, sanctioning the existing political order, justifying the conduct of wars of defense, and supporting the executions decreed legal by the political system. Lee C. Camp, author of *Mere Discipleship: Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World* (2003), discusses wars during which Christian communities gave allegiance to power—like the American Civil War or the Rwandan War—as examples of the “ongoing effect of the Constantinian cataract” (212). The moment Caesar became

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1 Within American historiography, Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* (1980) was a revolutionary attempt to present American history from the perspective of ordinary citizens. This book inspired similar attempts in other disciplines.

a member of the church, domination has become the central characteristic of the *locus imperi*, and redemptive violence—its dominant ethos, agrees Mennonite theologian Ched Myers (xxix). In his book subtitled *Discipleship Queries for First World Christians* (1994), the Los Angeles-based author claims:

My country exports war against the poor around the world, covertly from Nicaragua to Mozambique and overtly from Grenada to Iraq. My city built its prosperity manufacturing the military tools of that trade (...). My country seeds a home-grown war against its own poor, from Miami to Watts and from the Rio Grande Valley to Akwasasne. My country cultivates the seeds of oppression every day in Florence and Normandie and Pico-Union — and has reaped the bitter fruit of its harvest twice in the last quarter century. (*Who Will Roll Away the Stone?* 5)

Myers's assessment: "I live in a war zone where violence is a way of life" (*Who Will Roll Away the Stone?* 5) leads to the logical conclusion that radical discipleship requires a dis-location from the *locus imperi* and a reestablishment of solidarity with the victims of imperial politics: the poor and the oppressed—the addressees of the good news of the gospel. As a third-generation Korean Presbyterian, pastor of the Church of All Nations from the Twin Cities puts it, the way out of the empire is by following the "penniless, homeless, disreputable, Palestinian Jew" (Kim 181). The founder of Christianity blessed the poor, the righteous, the meek, the peacemakers, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for which he was excommunicated from the synagogue and executed by the state. Radical discipleship, therefore, is concerned with orthopraxis rather than orthodoxy. Having exposed the socio-political roots of the imperial condition and having reclaimed love, nonviolence, and sustainability as the roots of their faith traditions, radical followers of the executed God<sup>2</sup> dedicate themselves to doing the truth (*facere veritatem*<sup>3</sup>) in the diverse contexts of their lives.

While unconditional love and nonviolence are radical Christian practices well-established in the biblical context,<sup>4</sup> sustainability, the least obvious of the three, is intimately connected with the Exodus story and the establishment of Sabbath as a time of rest from the accumulation of wealth. According to the

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2 See Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001).

3 This concept, formulated by Augustine of Hippo in his *Confessions*, has become popularized by the weak theology of John Caputo. Jacques Derrida also used it in his *Circumfession* (1991).

4 "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:8); "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31); "But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also" (Matt. 5:39).

Book of Exodus, when the Hebrew people escaped from Egyptian bondage and wandered in the wilderness, God sent them manna every morning except Sabbath to sustain them on their way to the Promised Land.<sup>5</sup> The Israelites were instructed to gather enough manna for the day, neither too much, nor too little. Whatever was accumulated in excess of their immediate need would go bad the next morning. This story provides the basic coordinates of “sabbath” economics—the economy of sufficiency, which “stresses God’s abundance and provision,” as Matthew Colwell explains. “That abundance carries with it the accompanying instruction not to gather too much lest others go without” (“Practicing Sabbath Economics”). Still, in the contemporary world, where consumerism is the ethos of the day, the economy of sufficiency is practiced against the dominant model of “mammon” economy—the economy of excess and deprivation, which makes the elite one percent own ninety-nine percent of the world’s total wealth.<sup>6</sup> Myers, who often applies the economic lens to biblical exegesis,<sup>7</sup> outlines the following blueprint for sabbath economics: “I suggest that Christians should advocate re-visioning economics within the limits of the land; should recover the biblical wisdom of ‘retribalizing’ society through the anarchistic demand to decentralize power and decision-making; and should support a more bioregional politics of self-determination” (*Who Will Roll Away the Stone?* xxx).

These guidelines are being incorporated into the lifestyles of diverse radical communities of faith that locate themselves among the precariat and other people disenfranchised by recent forms of economic-racist exploitation. One such example would be the Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries, co-animated by Ched Myers, which defines itself as an “ecumenical experiment in discipleship, collaborative works of healing, justice, nonviolence and Oak Tree mutual aid” (“About Us”). Another would be the Simple Way, a thriving intentional community founded in 1998 by a young Baptist visionary Shane Claiborne. Living community life among the Philadelphia poor, sheltering the homeless, encouraging the use of homespun clothes and dumpster diving for food in resistance to society’s wasteful consumption patterns and economic injustice, the Simple Way is among U.S. most charismatic “new monastic” communities, a prophetic and revolutionary movement that can transform the structures of American society.

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5 “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction’” (Exodus 16:4).

6 “We are the ninety-nine percent” was the motto of the Occupy Wall Street movement.

7 Myers is the co-founder of the Sabbath Economics Collaborative and author of *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Church of the Saviour: Tell the Word Press, 2001).

The dynamic development of similar initiatives all over the country inspires Adam Bucko, an advocate for the homeless youth and co-author of *New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Life in the 21 Century* (2013), to envision an imminent fulfillment of Whitman's "spiritual democracy" in the streets of North America. Fascinated by the Occupy Wall Street movement, this spontaneous coalition of ordinary Americans outraged by corporate greed and dedicated to the politics of nonviolence and solidarity, Bucko salutes the Occupy Generation in his most recent publication, *Occupy Spirituality: A Radical Vision for a New Generation* (2013), which he co-authored with theologian Matthew Fox. The authors see young Americans as spiritual warriors capable of reinvesting American streets and institutions "with ecological values and the values of social justice that assure our sustainability as a species as well as the health and beauty of this planet" (xxii). Having outlined the glaring socio-economic injustices alive in the country, Bucko and Fox conclude that the moral outrage, justly felt by the young, needs to be disciplined by a lived spirituality if it is to bear lasting fruit (xxv). The young who are "on a spiritual as much as a political quest" (xxvi) need to rediscover the tradition of radical discipleship.

The second part of this article will focus on two iconic figures of radical discipleship that might serve as role models for the new Radical Generation of Americans: Ammon Hennacy (1893–1970) and Jim Corbett (1933–2001). The former was an important "angelic troublemaker"<sup>8</sup> of the twentieth century, closely associated with the Christian anarchist tradition of The Catholic Worker movement. Representing an older, mostly Roman Catholic-based activist tradition, he has been, for some obscure reason, omitted from the recently published encyclopedia of American dissidents.<sup>9</sup> My intention is to reclaim his place in the radical Christian tradition and suggest ways in which his radicalism has been carried on beyond 1970, the year of his death. Throughout his long and eventful life Hennacy was: draft dodger, social worker, tax resister, vegetarian, advocate of voluntary poverty and retributive justice, Christian anarchist, picketer for peace, founder of the Joe Hill House of Hospitality in Utah. As such, he is a perfect embodiment of the peacemaker for whom the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself has most radical connotations.

A different strand of radical Christianity is represented by Jim Corbett, best known for his faith-based opposition to the unjust immigration policy of the

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8 *A Peace of the Anarchy: Ammon Hennacy and Other Angelic Troublemakers in the USA* is a documentary that honors Hennacy's place in the tradition of radical activism (Lovar-chy-Shalom Productions 2004).

9 *American Dissidents: An Encyclopedia of Troublemakers, Subversives, and Prisoners of Conscience*. Ed. Kathlyn Gay. Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2012.

1980s and his articulation of sabbath economics as fostering land redemption and sustainable co-dwelling of humans with other species. Jim Corbett's legacy is twofold: on the one hand, it is carried on by the New Sanctuary movement which sprang into existence in 2007 to defend the dignity and humanity of immigrants threatened with ruthless deportation and separation from families and their U.S. born children; on the other, by Saguaro-Juniper Corporation, a community of associates who consider themselves stewards of the land, in accord with Corbett's interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures and his advocacy of a "sanctuary for all life." In mainstream Christianity Bible-based environmental activism is often seen as a contradiction in terms; the discovery of stewardship in the notoriously misunderstood command "to subdue the earth," supposedly implying a mandate to exploit the earth for profit, does not come easily. Although the environmental vision has a solid grounding in the Christian mystical tradition (from St. Francis of Assisi to Thomas Berry), Christian environmental activism is a relatively late development. For this reason Corbett's twofold faith-inspired vision and its relevance for the tradition of radical discipleship is worth reclaiming.

### **Ammon Hennacy and the One-Man Revolution in America**

Ammon Hennacy was a life-long embodiment of what he called the "one-man revolution."<sup>10</sup> Having discovered the revolutionary message of the Sermon on the Mount while serving time for resisting World War I military draft, and having become an anarchist under the influence of Leo Tolstoy's "The Kingdom of God is within You," Hennacy realized that "to change the world by bullets or ballots was a useless procedure... the only revolution worthwhile was the revolution within the heart. Each could make this by himself and not wait on the majority" (*Book of Ammon* 31).

Although Hennacy had been an anarchist in the indigenous American tradition<sup>11</sup> since 1918, it was in the 1930s that he came into contact with a Christian community that gave him the much needed support and an intellectual tradition to rely on. Founded in 1932 by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, the Catholic Worker movement drew inspiration from the social program of the Roman Catholic Church and from the personalist philosophy emanating from France. Members of

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10 He wrote a book entitled *The One-Man Revolution in America*, Hennacy's private history of U.S. anarchist radicalism.

11 James J. Martin claims that individual anarchism is "the only part of the radical movement native to America." *Men Against the State: The Expositors of Individualist Anarchism in America 1927-1908* (Colorado Springs: Ralph Myles Publisher Inc., 2007), p. ix.

the community adopted lives of sharing and voluntary poverty, opening Houses of Hospitality to provide lodging for the homeless, distributing free meals to the victims of the Great Depression, and starting agricultural farms to introduce city dwellers to the spiritual values of living on the land. In 1937 Dorothy Day's unqualified pacifism and her refusal to endorse General Franco in the Spanish War caused an outrage of patriotic, church-going Americans. Anarchism had enjoyed bad press in the country since the Haymarket affair in 1886. Only a pacifist anarchist could possibly be a worse American, and Dorothy, although a Catholic, was both a pacifist and an anarchist. To make matters worse, the other founder of the movement, Peter Maurin, claimed in private that "all thinking people are anarchists" (Hennacy, *Book of Ammon* 51), although he preferred to call himself a personalist. Hennacy was thrilled to meet his soul mates.

He started distributing Dorothy Day's magazine, the *Catholic Worker*, on the streets and in front of churches to help propagate the ideas of the nonviolent revolution. The two also took a firm stand against the new war draft. In May 1943, Hennacy published a non-resistant statement in the *Catholic Worker* and declared his readiness to renounce his job as a consequence. His readings in Tolstoy and his talks with Dorothy Day forced him to consider the injustice of the war tax.<sup>12</sup> Denouncing as unchristian the payment of taxes that helped finance wars, Day supported her fellow anarchist's decision not to pay the tax for 1943. Not surprisingly, Hennacy's employer was of a different opinion and fired him the following day. This is how Hennacy's life of voluntary poverty began.

In the autobiographical *The Book of Ammon*, Hennacy describes how the lack of property gave him freedom from the tax collector, while his embrace of vegetarianism rendered his life simple and ethical. "My ideas," he claims, "are above and beyond that noise counting which takes place at the ballot box, and the economic system which myself and other free spirits follow is above and beyond the market place" (*The Book of Ammon* 68). In May 1943 Hennacy lived on \$10 the entire month and sent the rest of his earnings to his estranged wife and daughters. Baking his bread, cooking vegetarian meals, traveling on foot, renouncing medical care and pension schemes, he was independent of the empire and a free spirit in the tradition of America's old pioneers. On Sundays in the summer, he would get up before 6 a.m., oversee the irrigation system in the orchard where he worked, and set out for a town or the nearest Indian reservation to distribute the *Catholic Worker*, socialize, and talk about conscientious objection to anyone who wanted to listen. Finally, having decided to be closer to the conscientious objectors among the nonviolent Hopi Indians, Hennacy moved to Arizona and

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12 No doubt Thoreau's was a powerful influence in this respect too, but Hennacy does not mention it explicitly in his *The Book of Ammon*.



worked on vegetable ranches or picked cotton with Mexican, Indian, Black, or Anglo “winos,” as if in anticipation of the intentional communities of today whose members move in with the destitute to share their lives. But Hennacy’s refusal to support the violence of the state in any form whatsoever, including the payment of the newly instituted withholding tax, drastically limited the range of jobs available to those which enabled him to collect his wages at the end of each working day and thus outwit the tax collector. He was constantly on the move.

Protesting the violence of the state, this follower of the “rebel” Jesus (Hennacy, *Book of Ammon* 153) would frequently resort to fasting on particular occasions, such as the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The first such fast took place on August 7, 1950.<sup>13</sup> True to the Gandhian principle of good will and frankness, the protester first informed the city authorities and the tax man about his plans. Then, armed in several tax refusal statements and posters, he started what was to become an annual tradition. Years later he was to claim that Americans had difficulties understanding fasting and that his main objective in reclaiming and publicizing that old monastic tradition was to purify the heart of negative emotions toward the tax collector and other agents of the state and “to wake up and encourage the timid pacifists and anarchists who did not dare oppose the powers that be” (Hennacy, *Book of Ammon* 241).

Hennacy spent much of the 1950s in Dorothy Day’s New York House of Hospitality helping to feed her “bums,” as he called them, agitating, co-editing the *Catholic Worker*, writing his autobiography, picketing, touring the country, getting in and out of prison, and leading the community into more active forms of protests. In June 1955 the first compulsory air raid drill was to take place in the state of New York. Believing the drill to be a preparation for war, Hennacy, Day, and twenty four other pacifists gathered in City Hall Park and refused to take cover. Arrested and faced with up to a year in jail, some protesters pled guilty on the anarchist principle “we did it once and we will do it again” (Hennacy, *Book of Ammon* 288). The press was divided in its evaluation of the event, but *Harpers* courageously praised especially “two of the group—Dorothy Day and Ammon Hennacy... [who] have a long and honorable tradition of being arrested for doing what ought to be done but no one else cares to. In meekly running for cover, the rest of us have only compounded the dishonesty of a Civil Defense program that is neither serious nor safe” (qtd. in Hennacy, *Book of Ammon* 288–89).

The air raid protest became a regular feature in the *Catholic Worker* picketing season. Their direct action against the drills continued to attract more and more anti-war demonstrators until, in 1961, 2000 protesters refused to take shelter, as

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13 The exact anniversary, 6 Aug, fell on Sunday and Hennacy believed he should start the fast on the first working day after that date (Hennacy, *Book of Ammon* 164).

a result of which, and following a massive media coverage of the event, the compulsory defense drill in New York was discontinued (Cooney). Hennacy's belief that the one-person revolution would encourage others to unite in their struggle for a peaceful world was justified once more.

Yet, Hennacy was not a "joiner." In 1961 he left New York to start a Joe Hill House of Hospitality in Utah. Named after a labor activist, songwriter for the Industrial Workers of the World, and a socialist martyr, the place provided hospitality to, mostly, local drunkards in need of rehabilitation. Ever the activist and agitator, Hennacy was now growing more introspective, examining his life in the context of other "one-person revolutions," and crediting especially Dorothy Day and Alexander Berkman with encouraging him on his revolutionary road (Hennacy, *One-Man Revolution* 334). As a matter of fact, the very idea of the one-person revolution may have been inspired by Dorothy Day's obsessive question: "how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us?" (Day, *Loaves and Fishes* 210).

Hennacy was not the only one inspired by Dorothy Day's example. The "long and honorable tradition of being arrested for doing what ought to be done but no one else cares to," so vividly epitomized by her and Hennacy, includes numerous activists who embraced the Sermon on the Mount as their loadstar and, at one point or another, came in contact with the Catholic Worker. The most famous among them are probably the Berrigan Brothers, leaders in the Civil Rights movement and protesters against the war in Vietnam. Philip (1923–2002), a Josephite priest, and Daniel (1921–), a Jesuit, made history on May 17, 1968 when they, along with seven other Roman Catholic activists, raided the Catonsville, Maryland, draft board. Dragging into an empty parking lot over 370 files of young men about to be drafted into the army, the Catonsville Nine, as the group was to be called, burnt the files using homemade napalm and then patiently waited for the police to arrive. Their intention was not only to demonstrate their pacifist stand and protest the wartime draft, but also to dramatize the atrocities American soldiers were committing against the Vietnamese civilians. During his court trial Daniel Berrigan made a devastating accusation of wars and the indiscriminate violence of the state which issues its citizens death certificates in the form of draft cards, forcing innocent people to be agents of injustice and violence. The following statement made history: To the "good friends" in the courtroom, outraged by the Catonsville Nine action, Daniel apologized "for the fracture of good order, the burning of paper instead of children" (Berrigan 18).

The Berrigans, in turn, inspired a wave of anti-war activities in the late 1960s and beyond. On January 25, 1971 they featured on the cover of *Time* magazine as "Rebel Priests." In 1980 the Berrigans started a peace initiative called the Plowshares Movement. The name was inspired by the Old Testament prophet

Isaiah's vision of the reign of the Messiah, when people "shall beat their swords into plowshares" (Is. 2:4). Together with six others, the Berrigans trespassed on the General Electric nuclear missile facility in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, and literally hammered on the cones of nuclear warheads. The "Plowshares Eight" set the pattern for numerous other Plowshares actions that followed. The fact that in 2015 the Plowshares Movement celebrates its thirty-fifth anniversary proves a determined resistance of radical Americans to the nuclear way of life and their belief that another world, free of nuclear threat, is possible.

Refusing allegiance to any human government, Christian anarchists struggle to implement a kingdom of peace and justice based on an alternative logic, the logic of unconditional love for all. The Sermon on the Mount and the commandment to love one's enemies constitute the core of radical Christianity. Ammon Hennacy, Dorothy Day, and other activists discussed in this part of the article started to construct a better world by fighting the revolution of the heart; they knew that only the transformed heart, filled with universal compassion for all victims of circumstance and violence alike, is able to further the cause of peace and justice in the wider world. Their refusal to accept killing in the name of law included activism on behalf of people on the death row. Their preoccupation with the dignity of every human being finds its logical continuity in contemporary restorative justice initiatives and the new abolitionist movement aimed at the death penalty. Groups like Journey of Hope, Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation, the Forgiveness Project and Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights protest against capital punishment on the ground that is it just another link in the vicious circle of violence and that, instead of healing, it produces new kinds of victims.

One of the best-known activists against the death penalty is Sr. Helen Pre-jean, a former spiritual advisor to a convicted murderer on the death row and author of the bestselling book *Dead Man Walking*. Having accompanied several other men to their deaths, Sr. Hellen was compelled to write *Death of Innocents: An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Executions* and co-found Ministry Against the Death Penalty. In a web post dated Feb. 4, 2015, Shane Claiborne quotes disturbing statistics illustrating the scandal of capital punishment. Every tenth person awaiting execution, he writes, is found innocent. "What if an airline crashed one of every 10 flights?," asks Claiborne. "Innocence has raised questions for many of us," continues the founder of the Simple Way, diagnosing the condition of the death penalty as "critical" ("Checking Pulse on the Death Penalty").

Today the exploration of connections between Christianity and anarchism is carried on through such networks as Jesus Radicals, a website created in 2000 to honor the first group of Wheaton College students participating at the School of Americas Watch in Fort Benning, Georgia. Co-created by Nekeisha Alexis-Baker, a Trinidadian-born Mennonite, and her partner Andy, it seeks to broaden the

Christian anarchist engagement beyond the terms defined by white heterosexual males, who “are primarily concerned with the anti-statist, anti-war and anti-capitalist aspects of anarchism” (Alexis-Barker) to include other radical Christian perspectives, complete with veganarchism and animal liberation frameworks. Resisting all forms of domination, Jesus Radicals and other radical Christians often live their daily lives in absolute opposition to imperial power. The personal once again becomes the political for people like Alexis-Baker, who lives her creed “through her vegan practice and advocacy, [and by] serving on the anti-racism team at AMBS, cultivating mutually supportive and empowering friendships, and living in interspecies community with her spouse and their carnivore roomies, cats Mocha and Cairo” (Alexis-Baker).

### **Jim Corbett and a Sanctuary for All Life**

In 1980 President Carter signed a Refugee Act that substantially raised the limit of refugees admitted annually to the U.S. and recognized the right to asylum of every person subject to persecution in their homelands. Still, the following year, the Reagan administration sought to introduce changes into American immigration that would reflect the government’s Cold War policy. Supporting pseudo-democracies and the “benevolent” U.S.-trained dictators installed in Central America to curtail the spread of communism south of the U.S. border, the government denied the status of refugees to those escaping from the Guatemalan / Salvadoran war zone. In the rhetoric of the White House, they were coming to the U.S. in search of economic advantages rather than fleeing life-threatening conditions in their homelands. Despite the risk of deportation, those who managed to sneak past the Border Patrol “opted for the uncertainty of hiding illegally in this country over the risk of perishing at the hands of death squads or guerrillas back home,” writes Juan Gonzalez in his *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (139).

When Jim Corbett, a Quaker with a philosophy degree from Harvard who was living the life of a goat-keeper in Tucson, Arizona, accidentally visited a detention center, he knew he could not afford a bystander status: hundreds of illegal aliens were awaiting deportation; they were dehydrated, hungry, and delirious with fear. What should a conscientious person do living in a country which denies them asylum; a country which had created the refugee problem by committing crimes against humanity with U.S. taxpayers’ money? Acting on an impulse, Corbett bonded several Salvadorans out of jail and secured legal assistance for them. The rancher also appealed to local churches for help, liquidated his assets, and ended up sharing his house with twenty refugees. In the long run, however, Corbett envisioned an informal network of secret routes and places of rest for refugees escaping perse-

cution through the Mexican-American border. Modeled on the nineteenth-century Underground Railroad that guided escaped slaves to safety in Canada, at the peak of its activity the Sanctuary Movement involved 45 faith communities, thousands of churches, several synagogues, and six hundred religious organizations across the U.S. (Guzder 107). Sanctuary, originally a church where fugitives were immune to arrest, was for Corbett a religious activity; it meant practicing solidarity with the dispossessed and the forgotten (Guzder 194). Having herded cattle and goats in southeastern Arizona, Corbett knew the Mexican-American borderlands well enough to guide illegal immigrants to safety. In three years he conducted an estimated 700 refugees across the Arizona desert. Arrested and sentenced to probation in 1986, he pledged there would be no change in the movement's work. Unlike Hennacy, though, he did not consider himself an anarchist, nor did he call his involvement with the Sanctuary Movement civil disobedience. He claimed civil initiative instead, which he understood as "active fulfillment and expression of the higher, natural law that is written on the heart," (Burklo). It was the U.S. government that was breaking international law, argued Corbett.

His determined defense of undocumented aliens helped launch a prophetic interfaith movement to carry out a political critique. Sheltering and in other ways providing help to those whose basic rights—to life, liberty, and dignity—were violated by the INS and who, in practice, were reduced to the status of slaves, Sanctuary activists resisted the oppressive apparatus of the state and led countless illegal aliens beyond the confines and provisions of the empire. In his book *Messianism Against Christology: Resistance Movements, Folk Arts, and Empire*, activist and historian of religions James W. Perkinson links Corbett's interest in pastoral nomadism and the survival skills he acquired as a goat herder in the Arizona desert to his ability to live independently of the economy of the empire in his "coyote" days (33). As Corbett himself believed, such economic independence, to be resorted to in case of emergency, is indispensable if an effective critique of systemic injustices is to be carried out by the emerging social movements; otherwise the critique will "be undercut by fear" (Perkinson 33).

Jim Corbett found a role model for himself and for the movement he co-founded in the semi-nomadic Israelites of the Hebrew Scriptures who lived off the land and away from the tyrannies of Babylon and Egypt. For the Quaker and activist, the identity of the pastoral-nomadic people was rooted "in the actuality of having gone 'feral'" (Corbett, *Sanctuary* 121). Anticipating anarcho-primitivism, Corbett had a vision of a sanctuary far transcending that for undocumented refugees: a sanctuary for all life. Having devoted most of his life to earth rights and land redemption, he drew on Jewish mysticism and the Biblical story of the Covenant to reclaim a way of life based on harmony with nature and honoring the sacredness of all life. In his posthumously published book Corbett explains:

I do not intend to argue here against personal, political, or cultural efforts to reduce the violence, but I do want to emphasize that active allegiance to the Peaceable Kingdom begins with land redemption that lays the foundation for a covenant community's practice of true justice. In exile where we belong to no wildland community, we remain inextricably entangled in technocratic civilization's global war of conquest, which means we can only choose to reduce the damage. No amount of resistance to our warmaking way of living will institute and cultivate a way to live peacefully, in community with untamed life. The fundamental obligation of the community that gives its allegiance to the Peaceable Kingdom is to redeem a home in the land where it can walk the covenanted way. (*Sanctuary* 120–21)

This is an important contribution to the philosophy of nonviolence and peacemaking. Although Corbett articulates a principle many peacemakers have usually followed, more or less instinctively, the force of his argument lies in the fact that faith-based land redemption and earth rights become the pivot upon which everything else turns. Equally importantly, this vision is grounded in the identity of God's chosen people. If the people of the Book are to be faithful to their biblical faith, they need to become humble stewards of the earth rather than its masters; they need to learn from the land and other species, argues Corbett. In his vision of sustainable co-dwelling with other species, the paradigm of discipleship replaces that of management. "If the cow-human symbiosis can outgrow the master-slave relation," he argues in his book subtitled *Cowballah* (a pun on the Jewish mystical book of Kabbalah and a cow herding lifestyle), "it could be a decisive opening for other interspecies partnerships and might also suggest ways to outgrow alienated livelihood relations that have succeeded chattel slavery, such as wage and market slaveries (Corbett, *Sanctuary* 86).

But the condition *sine qua non* is the recovery of the sabbath tradition, understood as a time of rest from the task of forcing the world to conform to human will. The Book of Leviticus commands the faithful to rest from work every seventh day and let the land return to the state of wilderness every jubilee year (seven times seven years) so that Israel can go "feral" and forage for food in a reenactment of its exile experience. The communion of all life can thus be reestablished. To Corbett, sabbath is the only alternative to conquest and a reminder that the people of Israel are rooted in their exit from bondage and idolatry; they are rooted in their exit from the warmaking way of living in the empire and always already on their way to the peaceable kingdom. In his review of *A Sanctuary for All Life: The Cowbalah of Jim Corbett*, Jim Burklo writes: "Corbett saw Jesus as a Jewish rabbi who announced 'jubilee'—the liberation of peasants from indenture, of Jews from Rome, of nature from human management. The Sermon on the Mount is a manifesto for the redemption not just of humanity,

but of the natural order, called for in the Torah.” The law of jubilee, as Corbett believed, was written on the hearts of all sentient life: humans as well as “cows, goats, javelinas, mescals, and saguaros” (Burklo).

Against the religious right’s appropriation of Christianity as a yardstick of patriotism, Corbett, in a truly radical spirit, sees an inalienable rift between what he calls “the cohesive powers of religio” and “the coercive powers of the state.” Likewise, his embrace of sabbath economics over against the economy of profit shows his belief in an economy that fosters community growth “rather than political subjugation or technocratic alienation” (Corbett, “Sanctuary, Basic Rights”). Significantly, it was the support of the goat-milking cooperative Corbett was part of that was most helpful in the initial stages of his struggle to build the Sanctuary Movement. Clearly, an economy based on personal interaction between people who care for each other, builds the kingdom of peace. The opposite, Corbett concludes—the economy of profit—builds the kingdom of war.

On the other hand, Corbett’s rejection of technocratic activity as the antithesis of *religio* echoes the classic Christian anarchist stance articulated by Jacques Ellul in his *The Technological Society* (1964). While technology facilitates the separation of human actions from their moral evaluation—a mechanism Zygmunt Bauman calls adiaphorisation—and thus allows, e.g., for the indiscriminate deportation of “illegal aliens” to countries where they face certain death, *religio* (from the Latin word *re-ligare*, to bind again) re-connects us with others so that we become aware of our all-pervading relationality: whatever happens to an element in the dense network of relationships that constitutes our being in the world happens to each one of us. “The communion that unites us,” writes Corbett “is sanctuary” (“Sanctuary, Basic Rights”).

But communion is also food and the sacrifice it is based on. As a “cow-wisperer” (Burklo) and lover of all forms of life, Corbett felt ambivalent about eating meat. On the other hand, in the nomadic-pastoral context animals are cared for, known as individuals, and loved, in contrast to the industrial farming of anonymous “livestock,” which is raised for meat as commodity. Corbett’s declaration: “I avoid eating anyone I have not known and cherished” (*Sanctuary for All Life* 104) may be a far-cry from the ideal of a radically understood nonviolent style of life, but it is a profoundly sane contribution to the philosophy of sustainability based on a communal vision of life. “When slaughter breaks the bond, the killing must be hallowed... All food is sacramental”—this is how the philosopher-turned-herder retrieves the forgotten meaning of sacrifice. “The hallowing of our food has to do with care of the land, care that the animals on the land flourish” (Corbett, *Sanctuary for All Life* 111).

Ultimately, Corbett’s quest for the recovery of humanity’s organic relationship with nature parallels the biblical vision of salvation: it is a “quest to recover [hu-

manity's] homeland in Eden: an unfarmed, fruitful oasis; an untamed paradise of living waters" (Corbett, *Sanctuary* 258). To achieve this vision on a local scale, Corbett helped found the Juniper-Saguaro Corporation, a group of land associates, or stewards of the land, bound by a covenant known as "A Bill of Rights for Human Occupancy and the Private Governance of Wildlands." Dedicated to cherishing diversity and promoting a biocentric ethic, the Corporation has established its land as a sabbatical place: a place where humans can live the covenant with the land and where one can come to meditate and learn.

Corbett's efforts to re-connect humans within their bioregional materiality dispels the widespread misperception concerning Christianity's supposedly God-sanctioned drive to mastery over the earth, which, according to Lynn White's influential thesis, was to be almost solely responsible for the catastrophe of environmental degradation.<sup>14</sup> Retrieving sabbath economics as a basis for the peaceable kingdom and insisting on the biblical grounding of land rights, the Arizona goatherder and philosopher exposed the religious and ethical roots of the environmental movement. Thanks to people like Corbett, ecology has now become an inseparable ingredient of all Christian justice concerns. Even though in mainstream Christianity ecojustice activists still constitute a contradiction in terms, as Deena Guzder reports in her book *Divine Rebels: American Christian Activists for Social Justice*, they are becoming increasingly more visible. Ched Myers sees the struggle of religious radicals in apocalyptic terms: "in the face of ecocide, the choice before us is stark: discipleship or denial" ("A Watershed Movement" 21). Ever on the cutting edge of radical discipleship, Myers has been exploring the idea of Watershed Discipleship as a way of integrating environmental justice, sustainability, political imagination, and ecclesial renewal. "The watershed paradigm," writes Myers, "is radically contextual yet intrinsically universal, inviting us as church to let our resident landscapes shape our imagination and material habits" ("A Watershed Moment" 24). Creation care, sustainable economy, and social justice become integral aspects of redeeming the place one knows and loves best. A re-placed ecclesiastical community—the new church that is emerging—can become an "eco-village" (Myers, "A Watershed Moment" 24). In the dissemination of watershed/bioregional literacy, radical activists are being helped by specially established programs, like the Eco-Stewards Program,<sup>15</sup> and such events as Carnival de Resistance.<sup>16</sup>

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14 Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155:3767, 10 March 1967.

15 "The Eco-Stewards Program is a grassroots organization building a community of young adults (ages 20–30) who want to explore the connection between their faith and the call to environmental stewardship." [ecostewardsprogram.wordpress.com](http://ecostewardsprogram.wordpress.com).

16 On the website [carnivalderesistance.com](http://carnivalderesistance.com) one can read: The Carnival de Resistance is



## Conclusions

The tradition of radical Christian discipleship—reclaimed in this article through the medium of a few representative stories of individual and communal resistance to the imperial politics of death, destruction, oppression, and injustice—is a tradition maintained *by* and *for* the people. Ever in opposition to (conscienceless) institutions and corporations, conscientious Americans have been putting their lives on the line to help build a better world “with liberty and justice for all.” Dissatisfied with the corrupted promise of the American Dream, radical Christians have been active proclaiming liberty to the captives and justice to the oppressed by faithfully living the gospel and struggling to affirm the forces of life over against those of death. In the face of the current mobilization of people of faith in America, Jim Wallis has voiced his belief that a new Great Awakening is underway.<sup>17</sup> The debates started by the economic crisis and by the protests staged by the Occupy Generation have revealed a fundamental concern about values and identity. The radical activists seem to be asking Americans who they are and who they want to be. Mikah Bales, founding member of Friends of Jesus, a new Quaker Christian community, and organizer with Occupy Our Homes DC, proclaims: “We’re in the midst of a tidal wave of change that is fundamentally re-shaping the character of the North American church. Millions of us are discovering the ideas of the radical discipleship movement, and a surprising number are embracing the call to abandon all—our comfort, our wealth, and even the Evangelical subculture—in order to follow Jesus” (Bales). Jim Wallis believes this “transformational moment” (2) is reshaping the whole country, not just the church. Frederic and Mary Ann Brusat, reviewers of *The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith & Politics in a Post-Religious Right America* (2008), assert that for Wallis the moment shares similarities with “the great social reform movements of the past that abolished slavery, established civil rights, extended voting rights, protected workers, and created a safety net for our most vulnerable citizens” (Brusat).

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focusing on reading and embodying the Judeo-Christian religion through an earth-friendly indigenous perspective, and as a resistance movement. We feel an enormous responsibility to be re-interpreting and reclaiming the deep meaning of our faith traditions- to understand them in a way that is liberatory, and about freedom, justice and restoration. We realize that justice and reconciliation are impossible without listening to the voices of the oppressed and their spiritual worldviews.”

17 Jim Wallis, *The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith & Politics in a Post-Religious Right America* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

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