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# The Pulpit and Socialism

by Eugene V. Debs

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Rev. Myron W. Reed is a very distinguished clergyman of the Presbyterian persuasion.<sup>1</sup> He is one of those divines who “finds tongues in trees, books in running brooks, sermons in stones.”

And good in many things, the average theologian fails to discover.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Mr. Reed's sermons is that he sees more in a text than the average orthodox preacher. In a recent sermon, he had for his text “And I Saw a New Heaven and a New Earth” — and proceeded to show that if socialists do not yet see what was unfolded to the enraptured vision of St. John, they are working industriously in that direction. Mr. Reed thinks there is even now a pressing necessity for a new heaven and a new earth in the United States. He says, “there ought to be a new earth, and what ought to be will be. No one will assert that this is the ideal social system — this one that we are living under. Isaiah would not be satisfied with it, nor Plato. We are not satisfied with it. It is a makeshift.”

Mr. Reed points out that in New York City, “more than 800,000 people exist on a square mile.” Does Mr. Reed think that with a “new earth,” people would be less gregarious and more disposed to scatter? if so, then there should be a new set of people to inhabit the new earth: otherwise, we should see a reproduction of great cities, tenement houses, squalor and degradation, such as the world now complains of, and which might be remedied in a year if people would go to the country, where there is only one to twenty persons to the square mile. Mr. Reed remarks that “prophets and poets,” as did St. John, “have seen” this “new heaven and new earth,” that “Plato looked away and saw Atlantis;” the same may be said of Lord Bacon,

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<sup>1</sup> **Myron Winslow Reed** (1836-1899), was the preeminent Christian socialist of the American West during the 1880s and 1890s. He is the subject of a biography by James Denton, *Rocky Mountain Radical: Myron W. Reed, Christian Socialist* (University of New Mexico Press, 1997).

he too saw Atlantis, the dream of the ancients and located it in the middle of the Atlantic ocean, and he refers to Sir Thomas More who, in his utopia, saw the new earth, an imaginary coast, or island, also in mid ocean, like Atlantis, where everything was very much like heaven, as fancy paints it.

Manifestly, things are not just right in this world, and in so far as the United States is concerned, the question arises, who's to blame? Mr. Reed points out that during one recent year, 23,000 evictions took place in the city of New York, and thousands of evictions take place in great cities every year, and yet the people continue to crowd to the great cities; they go from the country to the cities, they prefer the tenement houses with their filth and poisoned air to the delights of country life, and if we had a new earth, upon which the creator would build a four room cottage on every ten acres, the people, at least half of them, would go to the cities.

A New York paper, of recent date, names localities near New York where female help, as cooks, and for laundry work, housekeepers, etc., are in active demand, but cannot be obtained, because the girls want society, amusements, etc., and therefore remain where there are 800,000 people to the square mile and evictions mount up into the thousands annually.

Mr. Reed remarks: "What a summer we had. War up in Idaho and Wyoming and down in Tennessee, and at Buffalo and Homestead. These little wars cost millions. Nothing was settled by them. Lockouts and strikes will continue. It is no wonder that we hear prophets and poets saying: 'I see a new heaven and a new earth.'<sup>2</sup> They are very much needed."

Why do such things occur in the United States? Ah, because the people who have the ballot permit them. Who is going to create the new earth? God? Is this one a failure? Every one says the earth as it is is "very beautiful," and God said, after He had completed it, that it was "good." The trouble has been with man. He is a failure — particularly in the United States of America — and yet, if we accept statistics, he has done fairly well. What is required to improve the condition of man in the United States of America? Here a man, if he is not a criminal nor insane, is a citizen — a sovereign citizen. He has the ballot — a wonderful weapon. He can make and unmake constitu-

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<sup>2</sup> This quote by Reed and further references below by Debs trace back to *2nd Peter*, chapter 3, verse 13: "Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness."

tions and laws. If there is anything wrong he can right it. If an officer is incapable, or a rascal, the ballot can turn him out. If the laws hedge up our present opportunities, the laws can be repealed. What more is wanted? Here we have *free* speech, *free* books and newspapers. For five cents a man can purchase a newspaper every day that will take all his leisure to read it through, and with free libraries he can become familiar with the mind treasures of the world. What more does a man want? The free school is here, multiplied thousands of them, which, like springs of pure water, are inviting all to drink, slake thirst for knowledge and go on their way rejoicing. What better earth does Mr. Reed or any other socialist want? What other “divinity” is demanded to “shape the ends” of the country, or of the government, or of individuals? Before socialism in its present form was heard of, the United States struck all the fetters from mind and soul, and men stood redeemed and disenthralled, free, absolutely free to work out their own destiny upon what was a new earth, not the vagary of Plato or Sir Thomas More or any other dreamer.

Mr. Reed says, “poverty and ignorance get together and crime is born,” but he does not say what the result is when wealth and education get together. He does not define the terms “poverty” and “ignorance.” A man receiving \$1.00 a day is poor, compared with men whose incomes reach \$1,000 a day, or \$100 a day, or \$60, \$20, or \$10 a day. A man may be said to be ignorant who can simply read and write, compared with a graduate of Harvard or Yale, or Dr. Briggs’ theological seminary. People representing that description of “poverty and ignorance” are to be found by the thousands in the United States — men who are poor and ignorant, as compared with rich and educated. This sort of “poverty and ignorance” get together. It is found in all the work shops in all the factories and mines in the land, but *crime is not* therefore *born*. From the days of Plato, St. John the divine, the prophets, and the poets, crime was born when the rich and the educated got together, and what was true in the far away days, when this earth was new, has been true all along the centuries, and is true now. The poor and uneducated have been the toilers, the builders, have constituted the army of progress and are now the hope of the world. In the ranks of the rich and the educated are those who rob the poor, as did the Pharisees, who “devoured widows’ houses.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Reference to *Matthew*, chapter 23, verse 14: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows’ houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.”

Christ gave them a “new heaven and a new earth,” but not the kind they wanted. A few concluded to form a community and have all things in common. It was the socialistic idea, but they mistook the meaning of Christianity and exhibited profound ignorance of human nature. Ananias concluded to join the community, went in with a lie on his lips and was carried out dead. And his wife followed suit, and the first society was wrecked, and all subsequent schemes of the sort have proven failures.<sup>4</sup>

We return to the proposition that in the United States of America we have the “new earth and the new heaven.” Not the dream of Plato and Sir Thomas More, nor the thing which John saw while on the Isle of Patmos,<sup>5</sup> but a country extending from ocean to ocean, a country of boundless resources, capable of supporting a thousand millions of people, and this country is the new earth and the new heaven of workingmen, if they can be made to understand the fact. They can improve and embellish it until all of its square miles shall resemble the poet’s wildest fancies of fairy land. Already this is a government of the people, by the people and for the people. The workingmen are in the majority, and therefore this is their country and their government, their new earth and new heaven. They can have such constitutions and such laws as they desire, and such Presidents, congress, legislatures and officers as they wish. They can maintain their individuality, be free and independent, and have just the kind of a new earth and a new heaven they may deem best for their happiness.

Mr. Reed in his sermon advocating socialism, says, “I am as ready to buy meat of the United States as to buy it of Mr. Armour.” Evidently it is the socialistic idea to have the United States turn butcher and supply the people with meat, turn grocer and retail soap and soda, turn gardner and furnish vegetables, organize a dairy and peddle butter and milk, and so on to the end of the chapter, and this would be a realization of Plato’s dream and the vision of St. John; Atlantis and Utopia, castles of moonshine which prophets and poets have built as their imaginations have dictated.

Workingmen are in the majority, and if they will unify upon common sense lines and use the ballot to enthrone justice, the new earth and the new heaven will come — and come to stay. Wages will

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<sup>4</sup> A tendentious reference to *Acts*, chapter 5, verses 1 to 11, in which Ananias and Sapphira sold a possession but failed to provide the full proceeds to Peter and were promptly stricken dead for daring to “lie to the Holy Ghost.”

<sup>5</sup> Allusion to *Revelation*, chapter 1.

be just — homes will be beautiful and vocal with songs of contentment. The government will not reduce the man to a thing as in Sparta, under Lycurgus. Man will still be man, and not a part of the rolling stock of the government. Courts will inspire confidence, and judges will not be clothed in robes smirched in the filth of apostasy. Already we are reaching out for the new earth and the new heaven — not an Atlantis nor a Utopia, a land of butterflies and buttercups, rainbows and moonshine, but a country in which fact supersedes fiction, and honest wages reasonable hours of work, just laws and high-minded judges hold sway.

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport*

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