

The Spectre Haunting Sunday School: Communism and the Christian Student Movement in the Global '60s

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Panel 72: *Religious Socialisms and the Cold War*

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This paper will be tweeted during the week of the conference, on Friday June 19.

Abstract:

On January 22, 1964, an editorial in the *Presbyterian Journal* issued a grave warning following the largest international gathering of Christian youth in 1963: “We have never used that word “Communist” carelessly. We have not suggested that the cloak and dagger revolutionists were masquerading as Sunday school teachers. But of late, we have not been able to escape the overwhelming impression that Marxism has become virulent at certain levels of the ecumenical movement.” During the National Student Christian Federation (NSCF)’s 19th Ecumenical Student Conference at Ohio University, leaders from across Eastern Europe and the global south promoted interpretations of Jesus manifesting himself through the forces of revolution. The writer at the *Presbyterian Journal*, appalled at this reading of the gospel, called for ecclesiastical resistance to student engagement with these ideas: “Protest the financing of such travesties of the Gospel with money given to World Missions. Protest the sending of official leaders and participants at church expense! Alert pastors and youth leaders to those unsuspecting delegates who attend such meetings and who come back aglow with the challenge of ‘the revolution.’”

Indeed, this glow of revolution ignited a confrontation between the American Protestant Christian press and the ecumenical movement over the souls and politics of Christian youth in the heated years of the early 1960s. The editorial in the *Presbyterian Journal* represented just one of hundreds of articles, letters to the editors, reviews in church bulletins, missionary board pamphlets, and denominational newsletters all concerned with the radicalization of the international Christian student movement in the aftermath of this summit. The conference itself welcomed over 3000 delegates from 91 countries to address how the Church, and youth in particular, could serve as an active and relevant force amid contemporary global challenges. Under the theme “For the Life of the World,” the conference was designed with a global perspective in mind.

While faith leaders, social justice activists, and students engaged a diverse program of global issues, none proved as controversial as the remarks given by socialist Christian speakers on how Christians should engage with revolution. At the conference, Czechoslovakian minister Milan Opochenky encouraged international Christian students to accept and work alongside communism, saying that Czech Christians “believe our socialist world is a part of God’s world... we want to change that world as leaven in a loaf of bread causes it to rise.” Opochenky suggested that Christians could even help improve communism by embracing its tenets and infusing its revolutionary power with a moral source. Brazilian Reverend Rubem Alves

complimented this interpretation by advancing the notion that the socialist revolution was fulfilling divine will, saying “Revolution is the Act in which the Church follows in God’s steps.”

This presentation examines this event and series of controversies against the background of the transnational activism of the National Student Christian Federation (NSCF) and escalating tensions within U.S. mainline Protestant churches around student exposure to discussions around Marxism, decolonization, and radical student politics across universities in the United States. My study consults the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM) and the National Student Christian Federation’s (NSCF) archives at Yale Divinity Library as well as complimentary ecumenical material at the Union Theological Seminary.