

# How Occupy Wall Street Got Religion

## TIES TO FRIENDLY CHURCHES SPUR MOVEMENT'S REBIRTH

BY NATHAN SCHNEIDER

A year ago around this time, Occupy Wall Street was celebrating Advent — the season when Christians anticipate the birth of Jesus at Christmas. In front of Trinity Church, right at the top of Wall Street along Broadway, Occupiers set up a little model tent with the statuettes of a nativity scene inside: Mary, Joseph and the Christ child in a manger, surrounded by animals. In the back, an angel held a tiny cardboard sign with a verse from Luke's Gospel: "There was no room for them in the inn." The reason for these activists' interest in the liturgical calendar, of course, was the movement's ongoing effort to convince Trinity to start acting less like a real estate corporation and more like a church, and to let the movement use a vacant property that Trinity owns.

A year later, even as a resilient few continue their 24-hour vigil on the sidewalk outside Trinity, churches and Occupiers are having a very different kind of Advent season together. Finding room in churches is no longer a problem for the movement.

The day after Hurricane Sandy struck New York in late October, Occupiers hustled to organize a massive popular relief effort, and Occupy Sandy came into being. By circumstance and necessity, it has mostly taken place in churches; they are the large public spaces available in affected areas, and they were the people willing to open their doors. Two churches on high ground in Brooklyn became organizing hubs, and others in the Rockaways, Coney Island, Staten Island and Red Hook became depots for getting supplies and support to devastated neighborhoods. To make this possible, Occupiers have had to win the locals' trust — by helping clean up the damaged churches and by showing their determination to help those whom the state-sponsored relief effort was leaving behind. When the time for worship services came around, they'd cleared the supplies off the pews.

"Occupy Sandy has been miraculous for us, really," said Bob Dennis, parish manager at St. Margaret Mary, a Catholic church in Staten Island. "They are doing exactly what Christ preached." Before this, the police and firemen living in his neighborhood hadn't had much good to say about Occupy Wall Street, but that has changed completely.

Religious leaders are organizing tours to show off the Occupy Sandy relief efforts of which they've been a part, and they're speaking out against the failures of city, state and federal government. Congregations are getting to know Occupiers one on one by working together in a relief effort that every day — as the profiteering developers draw nearer — is growing into an act of resistance.

And that's only one part of it. Months before Sandy, organizers with the Occupy Wall Street group Strike Debt made a concerted effort to reach out to religious allies for help

pennies on the dollar, and then abolishing them, organizers hoped to spread the spirit of jubilee — an ancient biblical practice of debt forgiveness.

The religious groups jumped at the chance to help. Occupy Faith organized an event in New York to celebrate the Rolling Jubilee's

yet. Occupy Wall Street has learned from the Egyptian Revolution before, and now, even if by accident, it is doing so again.

While Tahrir Square was still full of tents and tanks, and Hosni Mubarak was still in power, the editors of *Adbusters* magazine were already imagining a "Million Man

really were to happen in the United States? What would be the outcome?

I was thinking of this question recently while on an unrelated reporting mission at a massive evangelical Christian megachurch near the Rocky Mountains. Several thousand (mostly white, upper-middle-class) people were there that day, of all ages. They had come back after Sunday morning services for an afternoon series of talks on philosophy — far more people than attend your average Occupy action.

Every time I step foot in one of these places, it strikes me how they put radicals in the United States to shame. These churches organize real, life-giving mutual aid as the basis of an independent political discourse and power base. Church membership is far larger, for instance, than that of unions in this country.

If there were a sudden, Tahrir-like popular uprising right now, with riots in all the cities and so forth, I can't help but think that it would be organizations like the church I went to that would come out taking power in the end, even more so than they already do — just as the Islamists have in Egypt.

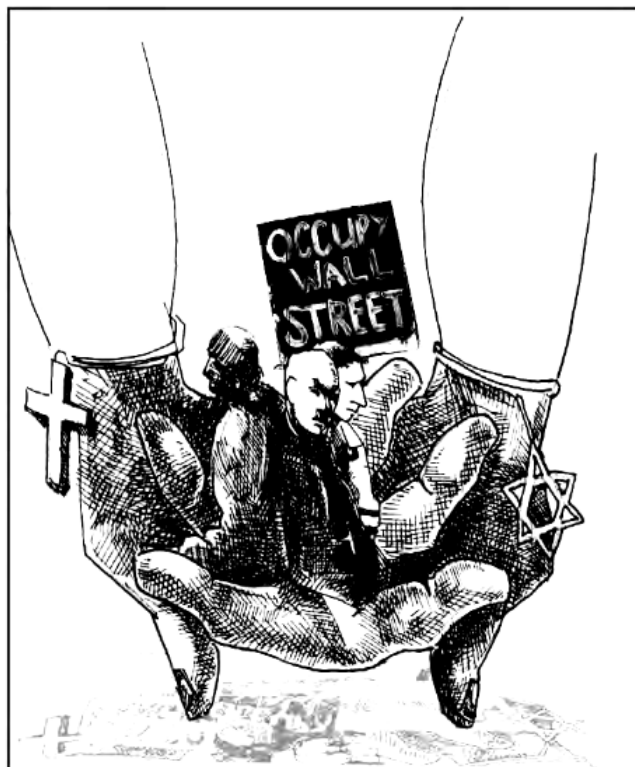
If the idea of occupying symbolic public space was the Egyptians' first lesson for Occupy Wall Street, this is the second: Win religion over before it beats you out.

Through religion, again and again, people in the United States have organized for power. Religion is also the means by which many imagine and work for a world more just than this one. Just about every successful popular movement in U.S. history has had to recognize this, from the American Revolution to labor, and from civil rights to today's campaigners for marriage equality — and now Occupy.

When I stop by the Occupy Sandy hub near my house — the Episcopal church of St. Luke and St. Matthew — and join the mayhem of volunteers carrying boxes this way and that, and poke my head into the upper room full of laptops and organizers around a long table, and see Occupiers in line for communion at Sunday services, I keep thinking of how Alcoholics Anonymous' 12-step program ends. The 12th step is where you cap off all the self-involved inner work you've been doing, and get over yourself for a bit, and heal yourself by helping someone else.

Anyone who has been around Occupy Wall Street during the year since its eviction from Zuccotti Park knows it has been in need of healing. Whether through flood-soaked churches, or on the debt market, this is how Occupy movement has always been at its best, and its most exciting, and its most necessary: When it shows people how to build their own power, and to strengthen their own communities, this movement finds itself.

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launch. Occupy Catholics (of which I am a part) took the opportunity to reclaim the Catholic concepts of jubilee and usury for the present economic crisis and released a statement in support of the Rolling Jubilee that has been signed by Catholics across the country.

The Rolling Jubilee idea has been hugely successful, raising more money more quickly than anyone anticipated — around \$10 million in debt is poised to be abolished. But now Strike Debt, too, has turned its attention to working with those affected by the hurricane. On Dec. 2, the group published "Shouldering the Costs," a report on the proliferation of debt in the aftermath of Sandy. The document was released with an event at — where else? — a church in Staten Island.

This newfound access to religious real estate is not merely a convenience for this

March on Wall Street," the idea that led to what would become their July 13, 2011, call to #occupywallstreet. More than a year after the occupation at Zuccotti Park began, though, and nearly two years after crowds first filled Tahrir, neither revolt very much resembles its origins. The Egyptian Revolution, first provoked by tech-savvy young activists, has now been hijacked as a coup for the Muslim Brotherhood, a conservative religious party; its only viable challenger is none other than Mubarak's *ancien regime*, minus only Mubarak himself. Occupy, meanwhile, has lost its encampments and, despite whatever evidence there is to the contrary, most of its enemies in power deem it no longer a threat.

Among many U.S. activists even today, the dream of creating a Tahrir-sized rupture in this country persists — of finally drawing enough people into the streets and causing